



Raga Bhairavi in Hindustani Classical Music: Negotiating Raga Grammar, Performance Practice, and Aesthetic Identity

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Abstract: Raga Bhairavi provides an important case for examining the relationship between textual raga theory and living performance practice in Hindustani classical music. It is conventionally associated with Bhairavi Thaata and with komal Re, Ga, Dha, and Ni, but its identity cannot be adequately explained through its scalar structure or aroha-avaroha alone. This paper examines how Bhairavi retains recognizable identity despite variation in swara treatment, melodic movement, phraseology, ornamentation, improvisation, genre, and performance context. A qualitative musicological approach is adopted, combining historical-documentary analysis, textual comparison, and comparative consideration of recorded performance. The discussion draws on research concerning tonal hierarchy, intonation, melodic motifs, raga recognition, improvisation, rhythmic organization, gesture, and musical emotion. Existing empirical research demonstrates that characteristic melodic motifs contribute substantially to raga recognition and that trained musicians can identify such motifs despite variation in their acoustic realization (Ganguli & Rao, 2019; Rao et al., 2014). Research on performance contexts further indicates that raga motifs can undergo considerable variation while retaining categorical identity (Ganguli & Rao, 2021). The paper argues that Bhairavi is better understood as a dynamic melodic grammar than as a fixed scalar structure. Its identity emerges through the interaction of swara hierarchy, nyas, phraseology, chalan, ornamentation, genre, performer tradition, and performance context. The concept of negotiated continuity is proposed to describe the process through which performers preserve recognizable raga relationships while adapting them to different musical situations.

Keywords: Raga Bhairavi; Hindustani Classical Music; Raga Grammar; Performance Practice; Melodic Identity; Improvisation.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Raga is one of the fundamental concepts of Hindustani classical music, yet its definition cannot be reduced to a collection of pitches. Traditional descriptions commonly refer to swara material, aroha, avaroha, jati, vadi, samvadi, pakad, chalan, nyas, time theory, and aesthetic character. These categories provide an important vocabulary for describing raga, but they do not operate independently. In performance, their significance emerges through relationships among pitch, melodic movement, ornamentation, temporal organization, and expressive interpretation. Computational and musicological research similarly demonstrates that raga recognition involves information beyond static pitch distribution (Koduri et al., 2012; Rao & Rao, 2014).

Bhairavi is particularly useful for investigating this relationship between theory and practice. Its conventional form employs komal Re, Ga, Dha, and Ni with shuddha Sa, Ma, and Pa. Such a description establishes the basic tonal field, but it does not explain why a particular melodic passage is recognizable as Bhairavi. Two musical passages may contain similar pitches while differing substantially in melodic direction, phrase structure, emphasis, and ornamentation. Research on raga recognition confirms that melodic phrases and temporal relationships provide information that cannot be captured by pitch inventory alone (Gulati et al., 2016a, 2016b; Rao et al., 2014).

The importance of characteristic phraseology is particularly evident in research on raga motifs. Rao et al. (2014) demonstrated that characteristic melodic motifs are important cues for raga identification while also showing that their performed forms can vary. Ganguli and Rao (2019) found that trained musicians were able to recognize raga motifs



despite acoustic variation, suggesting that listeners develop categorical representations of characteristic melodic patterns. Ganguli and Rao (2021) extended this perspective by examining variability in raga motifs within performance contexts. Their findings are particularly relevant to Bhairavi because they demonstrate that variation in melodic realization does not necessarily eliminate raga identity.

This creates a central musicological problem. If a raga is understood only as a scale, the relationship between different performances becomes difficult to explain because the same pitch material can support different melodic identities. If every performance is considered completely individual, continuity between performances becomes equally difficult to explain. Hindustani performance practice suggests a position between these extremes. Performers work within inherited melodic conventions while exercising considerable freedom in phrase construction, ornamentation, tempo, improvisation, and expressive treatment.

The distinction between Bhairavi Thaata and Raga Bhairavi is therefore essential. A thaata is a classificatory framework, whereas a raga is a melodic and aesthetic entity realised through performance. The thaata can indicate the principal pitch organisation associated with a raga, but it does not provide a complete account of the raga's melodic grammar. Research on Hindustani music similarly identifies the importance of tonal organization, melodic phrases, and performance practice in understanding raga identity (Rao & Rao, 2014; Valla et al., 2017).

Bhairavi also provides an opportunity to examine the relationship between classical grammar and performance flexibility. It appears in different vocal and instrumental settings and has an established association with lighter genres and with the conclusion of many Hindustani concerts. Contemporary documentation describes it as an all-time raga and notes the conventional practice of concluding concerts with Bhairavi (Darbar, n.d.). These conventions should not be confused with the intrinsic grammatical definition of the raga.

The central argument of this paper is that Raga Bhairavi cannot be understood only through its scalar structure or aroha-avaroha. Its identity emerges through the interaction of swara hierarchy, characteristic phraseology, melodic movement, nyas, ornamentation, genre, performance context, and aesthetic interpretation. The paper therefore examines Bhairavi not as a fixed collection of notes but as a flexible melodic system whose continuity is maintained through performance.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

Existing scholarship on Hindustani classical music indicates that raga identity cannot be adequately explained through scalar organization alone. Early analytical and perceptual studies demonstrated that listeners and trained musicians respond to hierarchical relationships among swaras, suggesting that tonal prominence and melodic function are central to raga recognition (Castellano et al., 1984). Research on intonation further established that pitch treatment in North Indian classical music involves contextual variation rather than fixed equal-tempered values, making intonation an important component of melodic identity (Jairazbhoy & Stone, 1963). These perspectives provide a theoretical basis for examining Bhairavi through swara hierarchy, nyas, intonation, and melodic movement rather than only through its aroha and avaroha.

A substantial body of recent research has examined raga identification through melodic motifs and phrase structures. Rao et al. (2014) demonstrated the significance of melodic motifs in raga classification, while Ganguli and Rao (2019) showed that trained musicians perceive characteristic raga motifs as meaningful melodic units. Their later study further established that raga motifs exhibit variability across performance contexts, indicating that performers may modify melodic material while retaining recognizable raga characteristics (Ganguli & Rao, 2021). Computational studies using pitch distributions, time-delayed melodic representations, and phrase-based models similarly suggest that raga recognition depends on patterns of melodic movement and characteristic phrases rather than pitch collections alone (Koduri et al., 2012; Gulati et al., 2016). This body of research is particularly relevant to Bhairavi because its performance tradition permits considerable variation in phraseology, ornamentation, and treatment of additional swaras.

Performance studies also emphasize the relationship between musical grammar and the social and stylistic context of performance. Clayton and Leante (2015) examined hierarchy and performer roles in North Indian classical music, while McNeil (2017) highlighted the interaction between compositional ideas and improvisational processes in Hindustani raga performance. Napier (2019) further demonstrated that melodic organization in Hindustani alap involves structural relationships that extend beyond notational descriptions. Research on emotional response to Hindustani raga music has also shown that musical structure and culturally informed listening contribute to aesthetic experience (Mathur et al., 2015; Valla et al., 2017).

Despite these contributions, comparatively limited scholarship has examined Bhairavi specifically as a case through which theoretical grammar and actual performance practice can be systematically compared. The present study addresses this gap by analyzing Bhairavi as a negotiated musical identity in which swara hierarchy, phraseology, nyas,



ornamentation, genre, performance context, and aesthetic interpretation interact to sustain recognizability amid stylistic variation.

3. OBJECTIVES

The research problem concerns the apparent tension between the relatively stable theoretical representation of Bhairavi and the flexibility observed in its performance. Performances may differ in phraseology, ornamentation, laya, improvisational strategy, genre, register, and treatment of individual swaras. Some performances may also employ additional swaras, particularly in lighter or mixed forms. Such variation raises the question of which features are essential to Bhairavi identity and which can change without disrupting recognition of the raga.

The study therefore seeks to examine historical and modern descriptions of Bhairavi, analyze its theoretical lakshana, compare theoretical descriptions with performance practice, and investigate the influence of genre and performance context. The central research questions concern the historical description of Bhairavi, the musical features that define it beyond scalar structure, the ways performers conform to or modify conventional grammar, the influence of genre and tradition, and the mechanisms through which raga identity is maintained.

4. METHODOLOGY:

The study uses a qualitative musicological design combining historical-documentary analysis, textual comparison, and performance analysis. Historical sources are treated as representations of musical knowledge within particular periods rather than as universally applicable descriptions of present-day practice. This distinction is important because the meanings and classifications of raga names have changed across musical systems and historical periods.

The historical dimension of Bhairavi requires particular caution. Ramakrishna's historical study of Bhairava and Bhairavi shows that related ragas have been classified differently across historical theoretical traditions, making it inappropriate to assume that the modern Hindustani Bhairavi has remained unchanged (Ramakrishna, 2021). Pande's (2016) study of Rāgiṇī Bhairavī in Mewar miniature painting provides another historical perspective, demonstrating the presence of Bhairavi within earlier visual representations of musical modes.

The textual analysis considers swara material, aroha-avaroha, jati, vadi-samvadi, pakad, chalan, nyas, temporal associations, and ornamentation. Differences among descriptions are retained rather than artificially reconciled. This approach recognizes that theoretical texts represent particular systems of classification and particular historical understandings of raga.

The performance analysis focuses on the relationship between theoretical grammar and performed melodic behaviour. The relevant categories are swara material, swara hierarchy, nyas, phraseology, chalan, melodic contour, ornamentation, intonation, laya, improvisation, genre, performer tradition, and performance context. Detailed observations about specific recordings should be based on direct listening and transcription rather than on catalogue descriptions alone.

This distinction between metadata and musical evidence is important for research integrity. A recording catalogue can establish the performer, source, genre, or approximate date, but it cannot by itself demonstrate how a performer treats komal Dha, uses meend, or establishes a particular nyas. Such claims require direct analysis. The present study therefore avoids attributing precise musical details to recordings when the available evidence is insufficient.

Research in computational musicology supports this analytical framework. Srinivasamurthy et al. (2021) demonstrate the value of combining recordings with metadata and time-aligned annotations through the Saraga datasets. Such resources make it possible to examine melody, rhythm, and formal structure together. Similarly, Gulati et al. (2016a) showed that time-delayed melody surfaces can improve raga recognition by incorporating temporal relationships into melodic representation.

5. ANALYSIS:

Historical and Theoretical Descriptions of Bhairavi

The historical identity of Bhairavi cannot be established simply by projecting its modern form into earlier periods. Historical evidence indicates that Bhairavi and related raga categories have undergone changes in classification and interpretation. Ramakrishna (2021) traces such changes across different theoretical traditions, demonstrating the importance of historical context when discussing the evolution of Bhairavi.

In contemporary Hindustani practice, Bhairavi is conventionally associated with Bhairavi Thaāt. Its principal swaras are Sa, komal Re, komal Ga, shuddha Ma, Pa, komal Dha, and komal Ni. A basic theoretical representation is:

Aroha: S r g M P d n S'
Avaroha: S' n d P M g r S



This notation provides a useful description of pitch resources but does not fully establish the raga's identity. Contemporary documentation identifies Madhyam as vadi and Shadja as samvadi in one commonly used formulation and provides a number of characteristic phrases (Darbar, n.d.). Other theoretical traditions may differ in their treatment of vadi-samvadi relationships, demonstrating that these categories should be treated with appropriate caution.

The distinction between thaata and raga is especially important here. A thaata establishes a classificatory relationship among swaras, while a raga is distinguished through characteristic melodic behaviour. A raga can therefore share pitch material with another raga without becoming musically identical to it. Koduri et al. (2012) demonstrate the usefulness of pitch distributions in raga recognition, but subsequent research has increasingly emphasized phrase structure and temporal melodic information.

Tonal hierarchy is another important dimension. Castellano et al. (1984) demonstrated hierarchical relationships among tones in North Indian music, providing empirical support for the idea that swaras do not function as equivalent members of a pitch collection. The tonic provides a central reference, while other notes acquire different degrees of stability and prominence. Automatic tonic identification has likewise become an important component of computational analysis of Indian art music (Gulati et al., 2014).

Intonation further complicates the scale-based description. Jairazbhoy and Stone (1963) demonstrated the contextual nature of intonation in North Indian classical music. A komal swara therefore cannot necessarily be treated as a fixed frequency independent of melodic context. Its musical function depends upon how it is approached, sustained, connected, and resolved.

These observations suggest that Bhairavi's theoretical lakshana should be understood as a framework for musical behaviour rather than as a complete performance prescription. Swara material identifies the tonal field, while hierarchy, nyas, phraseology, chalan, and ornamentation establish the more specific character of the raga.

Bhairavi: From Scalar Framework to Melodic Grammar

The importance of swara hierarchy becomes apparent when considering nyas. A note that functions as a point of repose does not have the same structural role as a note that appears briefly during a transition. Tonal hierarchy research provides empirical support for this distinction (Castellano et al., 1984). In Bhairavi, therefore, the analysis of melodic repose is necessary for understanding how performers distribute structural weight across the raga.

Pakad and characteristic phraseology provide another layer of identity. Rao et al. (2014) demonstrate that raga motifs can function as powerful indicators of raga category while exhibiting variation in their actual performance. This finding is important because a pakad is often represented in pedagogical notation as though it were a fixed sequence. Performance practice shows that the same characteristic relationship may be rendered with different durations, articulations, ornaments, and rhythmic placements.

Ganguli and Rao (2019) provide perceptual evidence for this flexibility. Their study of trained musicians found that listeners could identify raga motifs despite certain acoustic variations. The implication is that listeners do not require an exact acoustic copy of a phrase to recognise its raga identity. Instead, they respond to a more abstract melodic configuration.

Ganguli and Rao (2021) further demonstrate that raga motifs vary within actual performance contexts. This is directly relevant to Bhairavi because it provides a basis for distinguishing between a stable melodic schema and its variable surface realization. The identity of the phrase lies not necessarily in the exact reproduction of every pitch and duration but in the preservation of characteristic melodic relationships.

Chalan extends this principle from individual motifs to broader melodic movement. Research using time-delayed melody surfaces demonstrates that the temporal organization of melodic material contains information relevant to raga recognition (Gulati et al., 2016a). Phrase-based recognition similarly demonstrates the importance of temporal melodic structures (Gulati et al., 2016b). Such research parallels traditional musicological attention to chalan, in which the manner of movement through the raga is as important as the individual swaras.

Ornamentation adds another dimension. Meend, kan swara, murki, gamak, and andolan affect the perceptual relationship between neighboring tones. Intonation research demonstrates that Indian classical pitch cannot always be understood as a set of fixed frequencies (Jairazbhoy & Stone, 1963). The expressive treatment of a swara is therefore part of its musical identity.

Recent research on gesture provides further support for a performance-centred approach. Nadkarni et al. (2024) found relationships between gestural information, stable notes, and melodic motifs in Indian vocal performances. Raga knowledge is consequently not only encoded in textual descriptions but also embodied through learned performance practices.



Bhairavi's melodic grammar should therefore be understood as a network of relationships among pitch, movement, repose, ornamentation, and temporal organization. The scale provides the starting point, but the raga emerges through the manner in which those resources are organized.

Bhairavi in Performance Practice and Aesthetic Context

Performance context affects the realization of raga grammar. In khayal, the relationship between composition and improvisation allows performers to elaborate inherited melodic material in highly individual ways. McNeil (2017) argues that Hindustani creativity is better understood through concepts such as badhat, vistaar, and upaj than through a simple opposition between composition and improvisation. This perspective is useful for Bhairavi because variation can be understood as the expansion of inherited melodic resources rather than as departure from grammar.

Dhrupad provides a different performance environment. Napier (2019) identifies differences in the structural organization of alap across Hindustani performance traditions while also demonstrating patterns of consistency and flexibility. Such findings suggest that genre affects the temporal and structural presentation of raga without necessarily eliminating its underlying identity.

Bhairavi also has an important association with thumri and lighter forms. Contemporary documentation notes its extensive use beyond strict khayal presentation and its association with lighter performance contexts (Darbar, n.d.). These contexts may permit greater melodic flexibility, but such flexibility should not be treated automatically as a weakening of raga identity. It may instead represent adaptation to the aesthetic and expressive requirements of the genre.

The practice of performing Bhairavi toward the end of a concert is similarly better understood as a convention than as an intrinsic rule. Contemporary documentation identifies Bhairavi as an all-time raga and records its customary use for concluding a performance (Darbar, n.d.). Its position in the concert may influence the audience's expectations and the performer's expressive choices, but concert placement does not define the raga's melodic grammar.

Aesthetic interpretation also requires contextual treatment. Mathur et al. (2015) found that musical structure contributes to emotional responses to Hindustani raga music, while Valla et al. (2017) reviewed the relationship between musical structure and emotion in North Indian classical music. Midya et al. (2019) further demonstrated that cultural familiarity influences the acoustic cues used in musical emotion. Bhairavi should therefore not be assigned a single fixed emotional meaning. Its aesthetic effect depends on melodic treatment, tempo, text, genre, performer, listener, and cultural context.

Comparative Performance Analysis

The comparison of Bhairavi performances demonstrates that raga identity cannot be located in one isolated musical feature. The conventional pitch framework provides continuity, but the manner in which performers organise and articulate those pitches creates significant stylistic differences.

The first dimension is swara treatment. The conventional Bhairavi framework establishes komal Re, Ga, Dha, and Ni as its principal altered swaras. In performance, their significance depends upon melodic context, duration, approach, and resolution. Consequently, the same nominal swara can contribute differently to raga identity in different performances.

The second dimension is phraseology. The research of Rao et al. (2014) and Ganguli and Rao (2019) suggests that characteristic motifs are relatively stable at the level of perceptual category while remaining variable in acoustic detail. This provides an important explanation for why different performers can sound recognizably Bhairavi even when their phrase construction is not identical.

The third dimension is nayas and melodic repose. Tonal hierarchy research indicates that listeners perceive different degrees of stability among tones (Castellano et al., 1984). Performance therefore involves choices concerning where melodic tension is created and where it is released. These choices contribute to the raga's identity even though they may not be fully represented in an aroha-avaroha.

The fourth dimension is ornamentation. Meend, kan, murki, gamak, and andolan affect the way melodic relationships are perceived. Because Indian classical intonation is context-sensitive, ornamentation can influence the effective identity of a swara rather than simply decorate an already established pitch (Jairazbhoy & Stone, 1963).

The fifth dimension is laya. Srinivasamurthy et al. (2017) demonstrate that tempo and rhythmic elaboration vary considerably in Hindustani performance. This variability suggests that laya should not be regarded as a rigid marker of Bhairavi identity. Instead, it provides a temporal environment within which the raga's melodic grammar is developed.

The sixth dimension is genre. A khayal performance, a thumri, a devotional rendering, and an instrumental presentation may emphasize different aspects of the same raga. Performance studies demonstrate that Hindustani music is shaped by relationships among performers, roles, and performance contexts (Clayton & Leante, 2015). Bhairavi's identity therefore operates within a social and musical environment.



The question of additional swaras is particularly important. Contemporary descriptions acknowledge considerable flexibility in Bhairavi performance and the presence of mixed or lighter treatments (Darbar, n.d.). Yet the use of additional swaras should not be transformed into the formal definition of Bhairavi. The analytical issue is whether such notes are integrated into recognizable Bhairavi phraseology and melodic movement.

This distinction is also important when Bhairavi is compared with related ragas. Sindhu Bhairavi should not be treated as synonymous with Bhairavi, despite their related names and overlapping performance contexts. Bilaskhani Todi may share some pitch resources with Bhairavi, but its characteristic melodic behaviour differentiates it. Such comparisons reinforce the central proposition that pitch material alone cannot determine raga identity.

The evidence therefore suggests that some features of Bhairavi are relatively stable while others are highly flexible. Tonal orientation, characteristic phrase relationships, melodic repose, and patterns of movement provide continuity. Ornamentation, tempo, phrase ordering, register, genre, and contextual emphasis provide opportunities for individual interpretation.

This relationship between continuity and variation is best described as negotiated continuity. The performer does not simply reproduce a fixed theoretical model. Instead, inherited relationships are negotiated within the demands of a particular musical situation.

6. DISCUSSION:

The analysis demonstrates that Bhairavi's identity operates through several interconnected levels. The scalar level establishes its principal tonal resources, but raga recognition research shows that pitch distribution alone is insufficient (Koduri et al., 2012). Temporal and phrase-based representations provide additional information about raga identity (Gulati et al., 2016, 2016).

The hierarchical level explains the different structural roles of swaras. Castellano et al. (1984) demonstrate that tonal relationships are perceived hierarchically, supporting the importance of tonic orientation, swara prominence, and nyas. Bhairavi therefore cannot be understood simply as an unordered collection of seven notes.

The phraseological level is equally important. Rao et al. (2014) show that characteristic motifs function as cues to raga identity, while Ganguli and Rao (2019) demonstrate that trained listeners recognize motifs despite certain acoustic variation. Ganguli and Rao (2021) further show that such variation occurs within real performance contexts. These findings provide strong evidence for understanding raga identity as a relationship between stable melodic schemas and flexible realizations.

The temporal and gestural dimensions extend this argument. Raga melody is shaped by duration, sequencing, ornamentation, and movement. Computational studies of melody and corpus-based research on tempo demonstrate that temporal organization is an important component of Hindustani performance (Gulati et al., 2016a; Srinivasamurthy et al., 2017). Research on gesture further indicates that raga knowledge can be embodied in performance (Nadkarni et al., 2024).

The final dimension is social and contextual. Performers do not present raga in an abstract space. They perform within genres, traditions, compositions, concert conventions, and relationships with accompanists and audiences. McNeil (2017) and Clayton and Leante (2015) demonstrate the importance of culturally structured performance practices in shaping musical action.

These dimensions explain how Bhairavi can accommodate variation without losing recognizability. The concept of negotiated continuity captures this relationship more effectively than either a rigid theory of preservation or an unrestricted concept of improvisational freedom. Performers inherit a framework of recognizable melodic relationships and negotiate their realization according to musical context.

This approach also avoids the problematic distinction between “pure” and “impure” Bhairavi. A performance that introduces an additional swara is not automatically outside the raga, just as a performance using only the conventional pitch collection is not automatically an adequate representation of Bhairavi. The decisive issue is the organization and interpretation of the melodic material.

7. CONCLUSION

Raga Bhairavi demonstrates why Hindustani raga cannot be adequately understood through scalar structure alone. Its conventional association with komal Re, Ga, Dha, and Ni establish an important tonal framework, but the raga's identity emerges through the interaction of swara hierarchy, nyas, phraseology, chalan, melodic movement, ornamentation, laya, genre, and performance context.

The distinction between Bhairavi Thaata and Raga Bhairavi is central to this understanding. Thaata provides a classificatory framework, while raga is a performed melodic and aesthetic system. Aroha and avaroha therefore describe an important aspect of Bhairavi without exhausting its identity.



Research on melodic motifs offers particularly strong support for this position. Characteristic phrases provide important cues to raga identity while allowing variation in acoustic realization (Rao et al., 2014). Trained musicians can recognize such motifs across certain forms of variation (Ganguli & Rao, 2019), and performance research demonstrates that motif variability is a normal feature of raga performance (Ganguli & Rao, 2021).

The use of additional swaras should consequently be investigated as a matter of performance practice rather than treated as the formal definition of Bhairavi. Its association with concert closure should likewise be understood as a convention rather than an intrinsic grammatical rule.

The concept of negotiated continuity provides a useful framework for interpreting these findings. Meanwhile the Raaga Bhairavi improves the academic integrability in terms of the physics and the other once side was called as a metaphysics. And the other one called as a Bhairavi remains recognizable because performers preserve certain melodic relationships while adapting their realization to genre, composition, instrument, voice, tempo, tradition, and performance context. Its continuity therefore depends not upon exact repetition but upon the preservation of recognizable relationships.

The broader implication is that raga research should integrate theoretical descriptions with empirical examination of performance. A serious account of Bhairavi must therefore move beyond pitch lists toward phraseology, tonal hierarchy, melodic movement, intonation, ornamentation, temporal structure, genre, embodiment, and aesthetic interpretation. Bhairavi illustrates that theoretical stability and performance flexibility are not opposing conditions. They are mutually dependent dimensions of raga identity.

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