

The Bifurcated Minor: A Comparative Analysis of Kīravāṇi in Carnatic and Kirwani in Hindustani Musical Traditions

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Abstract

This research article presents a comparative musicological examination of Raga Kīravāṇi (21st Melakarta in the South Indian Carnatic system) and its North Indian counterpart, Raga Kirwani, in the Hindustani classical tradition. While both traditions share an identical structural scale equivalent to the Western Harmonic Minor (S - R2 - G2 - M1 - P - D1 - N3 - $\dot{S}$), their architectural execution, phrasing trajectories (sancharas / chalan), and microtonal ornamentations (gamakas / andolan) diverge fundamentally. This paper argues that Carnatic Kīravāṇi acts as an integrated, structurally rigid heptatonic scale anchored by heavy, oscillatory kampita gamakas on the Gandhara and Dhaivata, yielding an interiorized Karuna (pathos) and Bhakti (devotional) Rasa. Conversely, Hindustani Kirwani functions as a highly fluid, melody-driven framework where the Gandhara and Dhaivata are frequently rendered as stationary (achal) notes or gentle, linear glides (meend), invoking a more romantic, expressive, and cinematic aesthetic (Shringar Rasa). Through notation-based case studies of seminal compositions—specifically tracking the evolution from traditional South Indian kritis to North Indian gat frameworks—this study establishes a comprehensive framework for understanding how identical scalar materials are transformed by separate performance cultures.

Keywords: Keeravani, Kirwani, Melakarta System, Hindustani-Carnatic Comparison, Gamaka Articulation, Meend, Rasa Evolution, Ethnomusicology.

Introduction

The historical split between the Carnatic (South Indian) and Hindustani (North Indian) classical music systems created a fascinating landscape of parallel musical structures (Bhatkhande, 1971). While both traditions share ancient roots in the core concepts of swara (pitch) and raga (melodic framework), they treat scalar geography through vastly different aesthetic lenses (Sambamoorthy, 1963). One of the most clear examples of this divergence is found in the cross-tradition pair: Raga Kīravāṇi and Raga Kirwani.

In the South, Kīravāṇi is celebrated as an ancient, foundational parent scale—the 21st Melakarta in the 72scale system formalized by Venkatamakhin (Sambamoorthy, 1963). In the North, Kirwani is not classified as a traditional parent Thaāt; rather, it was historically adopted from the Carnatic system during the 19th and 20th centuries through cross-cultural migration and assimilation (Meddegoda,

2016). It was subsequent instrumentalists who popularized its performance framework across North India, adapting its rigid boundaries into a vehicle for emotional flexibility. This paper explores how the same seven-note scale behaves under two totally different musical environments, tracing how the microtonally active South Indian system and the fluid, glide-centric North Indian system shape identical notes into unique emotional landscapes.

1. Structural Scale Alignment

To map out this cross-tradition pair, we must look at how their pitch definitions align mathematically across systems (Bhatkhande, 1971). Both traditions build this scale using a minor third ($G2 / g$), a minor sixth ($D1 / d$), and a sharp major seventh ($N3 / N$). The large acoustic leap between the 6th and 7th degrees creates an augmented second interval ($274 \setminus \{ \text{cents} \}$), which gives both versions of the raga their instantly recognizable, deeply emotional character (Sambamoorthy, 1963).

2. Microtonal Ornamentation: Gamaka vs. Meend

The real difference between Kīravāṇi and Kirwani is not found in the notes themselves, but in how the space between the notes is handled via ornamentation.

2.1 Carnatic Kīravāṇi: The Oscillating Wave (Kampita)

In Carnatic music, notes are rarely sung as flat, stationary pitches (Sambamoorthy, 1963). Raga Kīravāṇi is defined by its heavy use of the Kampita Gamaka (a deliberate microtonal oscillation) on its altered notes:

- The Oscillated Gandhara ($G2$): In phrases like $R2 - G2 - M1$, the $G2$ is rarely static. It is shaken dynamically, pulling its frequency slightly downward toward $R2$ and swinging upward toward $M1$.
- The Oscillated Dhaivata ($D1$): Similarly, the $D1$ is given a heavy, trembling shake that emphasizes its distance from the upper $N3$.

This intense oscillation ensures that Kīravāṇi sounds deeply rooted in the classic, heavy South Indian tradition. The notes are in constant motion, creating a complex, dark ure.

2.2 Hindustani Kirwani: The Linear Glide (Meend and Andolan)

Hindustani Kirwani treats the exact same notes with a completely different aesthetic, valuing purity of pitch (Shuddha Swara) and long, unbroken lines (Bhatkhande, 1971):

- **Stationary Stability (Achal):** In Kirwani, both the Komal Gandhar (g) and Komal Dhaivat (d) are frequently held perfectly flat and steady. This clean, steady tone highlights the melancholic beauty of the minor intervals.
- **The Meend (Sliding Continuous Glides):** Instead of shaking the notes, Hindustani musicians connect them using a Meend—a slow, continuous glide through the pitch frequencies (Bhatkhande, 1971). For example, a transition from m \to g or d \to P is rendered as an unbroken, curved slope of sound.
- **The Gentle Andolan:** When oscillation is applied, it is handled as a slow, gentle swing (andolan) rather than a rapid, percussive shake.

3. Melodic Development and Structural Progressions

Because these traditions handle improvisation differently, the way the melody unfolds over time differs significantly between the two ragas.

3.1 Carnatic Sancharas (Structured Architecture)

Carnatic Kīravāṇi is anchored by its position as a Melakarta parent scale (Sambamoorthy, 1963). Because it is a Sampoorṇa (seven-note) scale, its phrases generally move in a balanced, predictable fashion. Improvised sections follow a strict, phrase-by-phrase structure, mapping out the lower register (Mandra), middle register (Madhya), and higher register (Tara) sequentially (Sambamoorthy, 1963). The phrases are compact and rely heavily on zig-zag, percussive swara patterns to build rhythmic energy.

3.2 Hindustani Chalan (Melodic Contours and Omissions)

Because Hindustani music treats Kirwani as an adopted framework rather than a strict parent scale, musicians approach it with much more structural flexibility (Meddegoda, 2016). The raga is guided by its Chalan (characteristic melodic path), which frequently leaves out notes in the ascending line to build suspense (Bhatkhande, 1971). By skipping the Komal Gandhar (g) on the way up, Hindustani music creates an elegant asymmetry. The melody steps over the minor third to land on the perfect fourth (m), creating a spacious, open atmosphere before cascading back down through the full scale.

4. Compositional Case Studies: Kritis vs. Gats

The structural differences between the two traditions show up clearly when comparing their core musical compositions.

4.1 Carnatic Kīravāṇi: Saint Tyagaraja's "Kaligiyunte"

In the Carnatic repertoire, Kīravāṇi is best exemplified by Tyagaraja's devotional composition "Kaligiyunte" (Sambamoorthy, 1963). The piece relies on sangathis—systematic melodic variations that gradually increase the density of the notes while keeping the rhythm steady. The phrase P - M1 - G2 - R2 - S is woven together tightly with kampita gamakas. The music matches the lyrical themes of spiritual surrender, using the constant movement of the notes to evoke a state of intense, prayerful devotion (Bhrugubanda, 2016; Mudhan, 2014).

4.2 Hindustani Kirwani: The Instrumental Gat Framework

Because Kirwani historically lacked ancient vocal Dhrupad or Khayal compositions in the classical core, its greatest expressions are found in instrumental Gats (rhythmic instrumental themes) played on instruments like the sitar, sarod, or violin (Mudhan, 2014). In a slow instrumental theme set to Teen Tala (16 beats), the performance focuses on long, sustaining tones. The Sitar uses Meend to pull the note from the perfect fourth (m) down to the minor third (g), letting the frequency ring out with long resonance. In the fast-tempo conclusion, instrumentalists exploit the wide augmented second leap (d \to N) to create dazzling, high-speed plucking patterns (jhala) that highlight the brilliant, sparkling side of the scale.

5. Sanchara vs. Chalan Phrase Matrix

This matrix shows side-by-side how the two traditions handle the exact same musical movements:

Melodic Phrasing Goal	Carnatic Kīravāṇi (M1)	Hindustani Kirwani (m)	Musicological Disparity
Lower Tetrachord Rise	S \ R2 \ G2 \ M1 (Oscillated G2)	S \ R \ m \ g (Skips g in ascent, glides back down)	Carnatic uses a linear, shaken ascent. Hindustani uses an asymmetric path with smooth glides.
Descending Resolution	P \ M1 \ G2 \ R2 \ S	P \ {m \ g} \ R \ S (Slow, slurred Meend cascade)	Carnatic emphasizes rhythmic pulse; Hindustani emphasizes a continuous curve of sound.

Emphasizing the 6th	M1 \ P \ D1 \ D1 \ P (Heavy shake on D1)	m \ P \ d \ (d \ P) (Held flat on d, slow slide to P)	Kīravāṇi treats D1 with a shaky, unstable ure; Kirwani treats d as a soulful, resting sigh.
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6. Comparative Rasa Theory (Emotional Landscapes)

The emotional framework (Rasa) of these two ragas shows how much performance style influences the human mind.

- Kīravāṇi (Karuna & Bhakti Rasa): In the Carnatic tradition, the constant microtonal shaking of the notes creates a heavy, introspective mood. The music feels like an internal confession—a prayer of vulnerability, gentle sorrow, and deep devotional surrender (Bhakti) (Bhrugubanda, 2016; Mudhan, 2014). It is meditative and solemn.
- Kirwani (Shringar & Karuna Rasa): In the Hindustani tradition, holding the pitches perfectly steady and using long, graceful glides shifts the mood toward Shringar Rasa (romantic longing, love, and expressive beauty). Kirwani sounds cinematic, elegant, and poetic (Mudhan, 2014). It captures the bittersweet ache of longing, making it highly popular in semi-classical Thumris and modern film scores.

7. Conclusion

This comparative analysis proves that a raga's identity is not determined by its raw scalar structure alone, but by the performance culture that shapes it. When looking at the notes on paper, Carnatic Kīravāṇi and Hindustani Kirwani are identical twins, both built on the Harmonic Minor scale. Yet, in performance, they display two completely different musical personalities. Carnatic Kīravāṇi uses structured, seven-note lines and percussive, oscillating waves to create a deeply devotional, interiorized prayer. Hindustani Kirwani uses flexible, asymmetric paths and long, smooth glides to unleash a highly expressive, romantic narrative. Ultimately, this study highlights the unique genius of both traditions, proving that whether a scale moves in waves or slides in glides, it can be unlocked to create profound and beautiful art.

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