

A STUDY OF MUSICAL PATTERNS IN THE VARNA-S OF LĀLGUDI G. JAYARĀMAN

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ABSTRACT

Karnāṭaka classical music has rich and diverse repertoire of compositions, and the contributions of the Trinity—Tyāgarāja, Muddusvāmi Dīkṣita, and Śyāmā Śāstri—are foundational to the tradition. The compositions of the trinity have influenced and inspired the next generation of composers. Among the 20th century composers, Lālgudi G. Jayarāman stands out as a unique composer due to his multifaceted contributions as a violinist (both soloist and accompanist), teacher, composer and a tunesmith.

Lālgudi G. Jayarāman is popular for his varṇa-s and tillāna-s. He has composed 22 tāna varṇa-s, 4 pada varṇa-s, and 36 tillāna-s, in different rāga-s. His compositions are popular in the Karnāṭaka classical music repertoire and in Bharatanāṭya performances. Characteristic of his style, subtle rhythmic intricacies are seamlessly woven into the melody in his composition. Jayarāman was the first in Karnāṭaka classical music to bring into violin playing the feature of ‘poruttam-s’. Poruttam, meaning appropriateness or alignment, refers to the melodic and aesthetic continuity between the ending of a svara passage and the beginning phrase of the melodic line. He has used the concept of poruttam-s in his varṇa-s and tillāna-s, irrespective of the rāga and tāla.

The varṇa, as a compositional form, plays a crucial role in bridging the gap between abhyāsa gāna (music for practice) and sabhā gāna (music for concert performance). Varṇa-s provide a comprehensive portrait of the rāga by capturing the essence of the rāga in terms of characteristic and viśeṣa prayōga-s, making them invaluable in both pedagogy and performance. This paper aims to study, understand and analyse his style of implementing simple and intricate musical patterns in this compositional form.

The study is based on published notations and select recordings available in the public domain. The methodology adopted is analytical and through a case-study approach. Select varṇa-s of the composer are taken up for analysis. Theoretical descriptions of the rāga-s are examined in relation to the features of the rāga as seen in the selected varṇa-s. By examining the melodic structures, musical patterns and key phrases

evident in these varṇa-s, the study sheds light on the composer's innovative approach to employing musical patterns without compromising on the purity of the melody and aesthetics of the rāga.

His varṇa-s, while adhering to the traditional frameworks of rāga grammar, also exhibit his distinct creative genius, reflecting a deep understanding of both theoretical frameworks and aesthetic expression of the rāga. The musical patterns underlying the compositions would be of immense help to the music students in developing their manōdharmas as well.

This study highlights the unique stylistic elements of Lālgudi Jayarāman's varṇa-s, demonstrating how his compositional approach bridges tradition and innovation. In doing so, it also emphasizes the need for further research into 20th-century composers who have contributed to the rich compositional heritage of Karnaṭaka music.

KEYWORDS:

Lālgudi S Jayarāman, Karnaṭaka Classical Music, Varṇa-s, Rāga, 20th Century Composers, Compositional forms.

INTRODUCTION:

Born on September 17, 1930, in Chennai, Lālgudi G. Jayarāman was immersed in music from childhood under the guidance of his father, V. R. Gopala Iyer, a direct disciple in the śiṣya paramparā of Saint Tyāgarāja. Recognized early as a prodigy, Jayarāman made his debut as a violin accompanist at the age of twelve. He soon shared the stage with some of the greatest names of his era—Ariyakudi Rāmānujā Iyengar, Chembai Vaidyanātha Bhāgavathar, Semmangudi Srinivāsa Iyer, and G. N. Balasubramaniam—gaining invaluable exposure that shaped his artistry.

From these beginnings emerged the distinctive “Lālgudi Bāni”, a violin style that married precision with lyrical beauty. With his pioneering approach, Jayarāman gave the violin a uniquely Indian classical identity, bringing out the subtleties of gamakas and vocal-like expressiveness. As a composer, he enriched the Carnatic repertoire with masterful kṛtis, tillānas, and varṇas—works noted for their seamless blend of melody (rāga), emotion (bhāva), and rhythm (laya). He also introduced new ragas and ventured into ensemble experimentation, most notably with the 1966 violin–venu–vīṇā trio that redefined collaborative concert formats.

Jayarāman's brilliance carried him to the global stage. He represented India in the Festivals of India and performed extensively across the United States, United Kingdom, Europe, Russia, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia. His large-scale production “Jaya Jaya Devi”, an operatic ballet, received wide acclaim for its innovative presentation of Carnatic traditions on an international platform.

Over his career, Jayarāman was honored with numerous accolades. These included Nāda Vidyā Tilaka, Sangeetha Choodāmaṇi, and the title of State Vidwan of Tamil Nadu. The Government of India recognized him with both the Padma Shri and Padma Bhushan, while the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award celebrated his lifetime contribution to music. He was the first violinist to be awarded the Chowdaiah Memorial National Award and was recognized abroad by institutions such as the East-West Exchange and the Bharathi Society. He even received honorary citizenship from the State of Maryland, USA, and his versatility extended into cinema, where he won the National Film Award for Best Music Direction.

The musical torch he lit continues to burn brightly through his children, G. J. R. Krishnan and Lālgudi Vijayalakshmi, who have carved their own identities as leading violinists while carrying forward the treasured bāni of their father.

Lālgudi as a composer

Lalgudi Jayaraman occupies a distinguished position in Carnatic music as both a virtuoso violinist and a prolific composer whose works seamlessly balance tradition and innovation. Over his career, he enriched the repertoire with more than fifty tillanas, around forty varnams, and numerous kritis, leaving a lasting impact on contemporary performance practice. The varnam was central to his compositional approach, allowing him to demonstrate structural clarity, melodic depth, and rhythmic sophistication in ragas such as Charukesi, Valaji, Bahudari, and Nilambari. His tillanas, admired for their lyrical beauty and intricate rhythms, also reflect his inventive spirit, at times integrating Hindustani ragas into a Carnatic framework. A significant part of his legacy lies in dance music, as many of his varnams and tillanas in ragas like Behag, Mohanakalyani, Revathi, and Yamuna Kalyani remain popular in Bharatanatyam for their expressive power and rhythmic vitality. Beyond solo compositions, he expanded his creative voice through orchestral works and the operatic ballet *Jaya Jaya Devi*, blending narrative, music, and dance in innovative ways. Rooted in the gāyaki style, his compositions retain the vocal expressiveness of the Lalgudi bani, while his careful notation ensured their preservation and accessibility, exemplifying how tradition can be both honored and imaginatively extended.

VARNA-S:

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 cīttesvara-s.

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.

Types of varṇas

1. Tāna Varṇa
2. Pada Varṇa
3. Daru Varṇa

Tāna Varṇa

A tāna varṇa is a form in which swaras take precedence, while sahitya (lyrics) usually appears only in the pallavi, anupallavi, and caranam sections. Its focus lies on outlining the rāga and exploring rhythmic designs rather than conveying deep emotional content. Rendered in a lively tempo and filled with swara passages, it is commonly used in concerts and also serves as an important exercise for developing command over rāga and laya (South Indian Music Vol. 2) (1952).

Pada Varṇa

A pada varṇa, unlike the tāna varṇa, incorporates sahitya not only in the pallavi, anupallavi, and charanam but also in the ettugada swaras. Rendered in a slower tempo (chowka kāla), it provides scope for abhinaya and is closely associated with Bharatanatyam. By combining musical beauty with expressive content, it creates a bridge between pure music and dance. (South Indian Music Vol. 2) (1952).

Daru Varṇa

A daru varṇa is a composite form in which the muktayi section opens with swaras, followed by jatis (rhythmic syllables), and then sahitya. By blending the technical strengths of the tāna varṇa with the expressive qualities of the pada varṇa, it offers both musical depth and dramatic appeal. This variety is especially suited for dance-dramas and thematic stage productions. (South Indian Music Vol. 2) (1952).

Analysis Parameters

The selected varṇam-s are analysed based on the following parameters:

1. Yati patterns
2. Arithmetic patterns

3. Poruttam-s
4. Patterns centered around fulcrum notes

This study analyses musical patterns in select varṇa-s of Lālgudi Jayarāman , six varṇa-s are selected for this study, that are composed in phrase-based raga-s. These are chosen as they have limited scope than the other rāga-s.

Sl.no	Rāga	Tāla	Sāhityam
1	Asāvēri	Ādi	Jalajākṣa nī pādame
2	Aṭhāṇa	Ādi	Rāmanai raghunāthanai
3	Dēvagāndhāri	Ādi	Dēvi unpādame
4	Hamir Kalyāṇi	Ādi	Innum tāmadamēno
5	Husēni	Ādi	Kaṇṇanai Maṇivanṇanai
6	Sāma	Ādi	Taruṇam yen Tāye

DATA SOURCES:

The selected varṇa-s are analysed based on the published notations available in “LĀLGUDI’S CREATIONS”

ANALYSIS

1. YATI PATTERNS

In prosody, **yati** signifies a design or structural pattern. Within music, it denotes the specific arrangement of syllables, jatis, or notes in a composition, creating a sense of symmetry and aesthetic appeal.

Gopuccha Yati

Arrangement begins with a long group and gradually tapers down to a short group, resembling the tail of a cow
(like 5 → 4 → 3 → 2 → 1)

Examples:

1. Aṭhāṇa varṇa: (Muktayi svaram)
Svara passage starts with a gopuccha yati pattern

p r s̄ D , r̄ s̄ D , s̄ D ,

2. Athāna varṇa: (cittasvaram 4)

Svara passage concludes with a gopuccha yati pattern

p *pd* p d n s *r̄* m i r̄ s n P p d p | d n s i r̄ s n P | p d p d n s d n ||

3. Hamir Kalyāṇi: (Muktāyi svaram)

A gopuccha yati pattern can be observed in the middle of the swara passage.

s n d p | m² n d p m² d p m² |

p m' d p m g p m r s P m' D p m' ; s n d p | m' n d p m' d p m' | s m g p m' d p s n r s m g p m' r | Š d p m' d m' p |, m g p m Ř s ||

Sama Yati

All groups are of equal length, producing uniformity and balance.

Like $3 \rightarrow 3 \rightarrow 3 \rightarrow 3$

Examples:

1. Asāvēri varṇa: (Cittasvaram-4)

|| **s P** d n d p m p R p m g r' s **s P d** s r' G r' s r p M ;

2. Husēni varṇa: (Cittasvaram-4)

|| **s** **h** **S** **n** **d**² **P** **d** **m** **h** **P** **m** **g** **R** **n** | **s** **S** **s** **p** **P** **m** | , **p** **n** **d** **P** ; ||

Sh̄, j̄s̄nd̄ P̄ d̄p̄ p̄m̄ ḡr̄n̄ | S̄, n̄d̄n̄ S̄ r̄ḡm̄ P̄ n̄d̄n̄ | s̄ S̄ n̄d̄P̄d̄ m̄P̄m̄ ḡR̄n̄ | s̄ S̄ s̄p̄ P̄m̄, p̄n̄d̄ P̄; |
 p̄ M̄ gr̄s̄ r̄S̄n̄d̄p̄ m̄P̄n̄ | d̄n̄ s̄R̄s̄ r̄ḡm̄ r̄ḡs̄ R̄; | n̄s̄r̄ḡ M̄, ḡr̄S̄ p̄n̄d̄n̄s̄; | n̄d̄ P̄s̄p̄ m̄p̄N̄, d̄n̄s̄ |
 (m̄p̄m̄) (s̄r̄s̄) [P̄ar̄il]

3. Atāṇa varṇam: (Cittasvaram 4)

śṝś D, dn pmp̄R, r̄m̄s̄r̄s M̄r̄P̄m̄n̄p̄ś̄ D ; ||

4) Ś, p̄ṝś D n̄pm̄ R̄ m̄s̄r̄ś̄, m̄r̄p̄m̄n̄p̄ r̄ś̄n̄ p̄dn̄ || śṝś D, dn pmp̄R, r̄m̄s̄r̄s M̄r̄P̄m̄n̄p̄ś̄ D ; ||

mgmP n̄pn̄ mppm̄p̄ś̄ p̄ṝś̄ D̄ n̄ś̄ś̄, r̄m̄r̄m̄ś̄R̄ p̄d̄p̄d̄ n̄ś̄m̄ś̄ n̄P̄ p̄d̄p̄d̄ n̄ś̄r̄ś̄n̄P̄ p̄d̄p̄d̄ n̄ś̄d̄n̄ [Ulagerūgum]

2. ARITHMETIC PATTERNS

Patterns of same length and same number of akṣara-s, repeating thrice.

Examples:

1. Asāvēri varṇa:

(Anupallavi)

Svā | , r̄ī m̄ī n̄ā̄ | P̄, d̄ | m̄ p̄ R̄ , ḡ r̄' s̄ |

P̄ M̄d̄ p̄m̄p̄ r̄mr̄ m̄p̄d̄p̄d̄ | Ś̄, ś̄r̄ī Ḡr̄ī Ś̄r̄n̄ | Ś̄ ; | p̄d̄ Ś̄ṝś̄ R̄ p̄m̄r̄ Ḡr̄ī Ś̄ | , r̄ī n̄ā̄ | P̄, d̄ | m̄ p̄ R̄ , ḡ r̄' s̄ |
Pa lu . mā . ru . nīn . . . | nē . vē . dā | lē . . . | dā | Pan . ta . mē . la . Svā | . mi . nā . tha . vā . dā . . . |

2. (Muktāyi svaram)

ś̄ṝm̄r̄ Ḡ | r̄' s̄ n̄ś̄ p̄D̄p̄m̄ p̄m̄r̄ Ḡr̄' s̄ |
r̄p̄m̄p̄ m̄ḡr̄' s̄ r̄m̄r̄M̄ p̄D̄ | P̄, m̄p̄d̄p̄ n̄ | d̄p̄ | P̄m̄ḡr̄' s̄ | r̄m̄p̄ m̄p̄d̄ p̄d̄ Ś̄r̄ | ś̄ṝm̄r̄ Ḡ | r̄' s̄ n̄ś̄ p̄D̄p̄m̄ p̄m̄r̄ Ḡr̄' s̄ |

3. Husēni varṇa: (Cittasvaram-4)

| n̄ś̄r̄ḡ M̄ , ḡr̄ Ś̄ p̄n̄d̄n̄ś̄ | ; | n̄d̄ P̄s̄p̄ | m̄p̄N̄ , d̄n̄ś̄ |
(m̄p̄m̄) (ś̄ṝś̄) [P̄ār̄il]

Ś̄, r̄ś̄n̄d̄ P̄d̄p̄ p̄m̄ ḡr̄n̄ | S̄, n̄d̄īn̄ S̄ r̄ḡm̄ P̄n̄d̄n̄ | ī Ś̄ n̄d̄P̄d̄ m̄P̄m̄ ḡR̄n̄ | s̄ S̄ s̄p̄ P̄m̄ | , p̄n̄d̄ P̄ ; |
p̄M̄ ḡr̄s̄ r̄ś̄n̄d̄p̄ m̄P̄n̄ | d̄n̄ ī R̄ś̄ r̄ḡ m̄ r̄ḡs̄ R̄ ; | n̄ś̄r̄ḡ M̄ , ḡr̄ Ś̄ p̄n̄d̄n̄ś̄ | ; | n̄d̄ P̄s̄p̄ | m̄p̄N̄ , d̄n̄ś̄ | [P̄ār̄il]
(m̄p̄m̄) (ś̄ṝś̄)

3. PORUTTAM-S

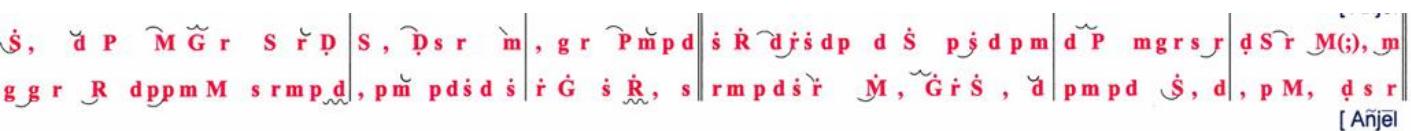
Poruttam refers to the technique in kalpana svara singing where recurring patterns are crafted to echo the structure of the refrain. These motifs are systematically woven into the improvisation, mirroring either the melodic outline, the rhythmic framework, or both, of the refrain. Several factors shape its application: which part of the refrain is chosen as the recurring element, whether the focus is solely on rhythm or on both melody and rhythm, and at what point in the cycle of repetition the refrain is incorporated—for instance, as a substitute for the third or fourth recurrence of the svara pattern. This approach not only adds coherence but also offers fresh interpretive possibilities. The creative use of poruttam has been a hallmark in the performances of stalwarts such as G. N.

Balasubramaniam, the Alathur Brothers, M. L. Vasanthakumari, S. Kalyanaraman, and T. R. Subramaniam. (Srilatha 2018)

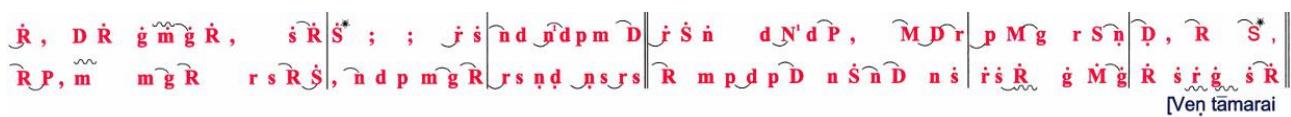
Poruttam is a melodic device within makuṭam (cadence), where the closing segment of a repeated pattern dovetails with the opening of the eduppu, creating a seamless melodic link. In such cases, the third repetition of a phrase may remain incomplete, merging directly into the refrain. Although the term poruttam is relatively modern, the technique itself dates back over two centuries, appearing in works such as Śyāma Śāstrī's Tōḍi svarajati. Its effect is especially striking in instrumental music, where sahitya does not interfere, while in vocal renditions the clarity of text can reduce its impact unless the listener is attentive. Poruttam functions as a counterpart to svarākṣara, the latter being more effective in singing than on instruments. Both features, however, are valued by knowledgeable listeners and musicians. Performers such as M. Bālamuralikrishna and T. R. Subramaniam have creatively combined the two, and Lalgudi Jayaraman is noted for his imaginative, though sometimes elaborate, use of poruttam. (Ramanathan 2020)

Examples:

1. Sāma varṇa: (Cittasvaram-4)



2. Dēvagāndhāri varṇa: (Cittasvaram -4)



3. Atāṇa varṇam: (Cittasvaram 4)

The last phrase logically connects to the Caranam line.



4. PATTERNS WITH FULCRUM NOTES

A fulcrum note refers to one or more pivotal notes around which svara patterns are organized. While the term itself is not explicitly found in traditional Carnatic theory, scholars and performers—such as Prof. N. Ramanathan in his discussions of *jīva*, *graha*, and *nyāsa* svaras—have pointed to the presence of notes that function as central balancing points. In this sense, “fulcrum notes” may be viewed as an interpretive way of identifying those svaras that serve as anchors within the grammar and aesthetic framework of a *rāga*.

Examples:

1. Sāma varṇa: (Cittaswaram-2) M is the fulcrum note here.

M d p d $\overbrace{\text{Mp}}^{\text{M}}$ $\overbrace{\text{mg r}}^{\text{R}}$ $\overbrace{\text{p}}^{\text{M}}$ $\overbrace{\text{p d s}}^{\text{D}}$ $\overbrace{\text{p}}^{\text{M}}$ $\overbrace{\text{d s r}}^{\text{D}}$ $\overbrace{\text{p}}^{\text{p}}$

2. Asāvēri varṇa: (Cittaswaram -2) S, P & R are the fulcrum notes here.

ś r' n s p d m $\overbrace{\text{p}}^{\text{d}}$ $\overbrace{\text{p m g r' s}}^{\text{P}}$ $\overbrace{\text{d}}^{\text{P}}$ $\overbrace{\text{s r' g r' s}}^{\text{s}}$ $\overbrace{\text{R m}}^{\text{R}}$ $\overbrace{\text{p d m p d}}^{\text{m}}$

3. Dēvagāndhāri varṇa: (Cittaswaram -2) S, R & D are the fulcrum notes here.

ś n d p m g r $\overbrace{\text{S r g}}^{\text{R}}$ $\overbrace{\text{r s n d}}^{\text{R}}$ $\overbrace{\text{R n' d p m g r}}^{\text{D}}$ $\overbrace{\text{d m p d}}^{\text{m}}$ $\overbrace{\text{n s r}}^{\text{p}}$

FINDINGS

- Musical Patterns are mostly found in swara passages (muktāyi svaram-s and chittēsvaram-s)
- 1st chittēsvaram of the varṇa-s have similar patterns with kārvai-s like all other varṇa-s.
- 2nd chittēsvaram of all the varṇa-s contain patterns with fulcrum notes, i.e. revolving around a focal note.
- 3rd chittēsvaram of all the varṇa-s have patterns with hrasva svara-s.
- 4th chittēsvaram ends with muktāya or poruttam kind of patterns, with an apt ending for the varṇa-s.
- Similar patterns can be observed in the 2nd āvarta of 4th and last cittasvaram, in all the varṇams.
- Srotovāha yati patterns were not found in the varṇams taken for the study.
- Samvāditva can be observed in some of the musical patterns.

CONCLUSION

Varṇa-s, owing to their well-defined structural framework, provide rich opportunities for exploring creativity in melodic and rhythmic patterns. As one of the foundational compositional forms in Carnatic music, the varṇa serves both as a pedagogical tool and as a concert piece, making it an ideal ground for the integration of innovative ideas within a traditional format. In the twentieth century, Lālgudi Jayarāman emerged as a composer who demonstrated this potential to its fullest. His varṇams are marked by an intricate use of patterns that reveal his technical brilliance, while at the same time retaining the innate aesthetic beauty of each rāga. The careful balance he achieved between structural discipline and artistic imagination highlights his unique contribution to the varṇa tradition. Examining his compositions allows us to trace the creative thought processes of one of the most influential composers of his time, offering insights into how modern composers could engage with classical forms without diminishing their authenticity. This study, while focused on Lālgudi Jayarāman, also opens the door for further research: a comparative analysis of varṇams composed by other twentieth-century figures would provide a broader understanding of how the genre has evolved, and how creativity has been expressed across different compositional voices.

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