

# The Historical Significance Of Śuddha Madhyama In The Rāga Sāraṅga

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## Abstract:

This article explores the historical significance of śuddha madhyama in the rāga Sāraṅga in Karnāṭak Music by tracing the unique role of gāndhāra in occupying the śuddha madhyama position in early sources. It examines how this distinctive feature appears consistently across North Indian treatises and early South Indian works, emphasizing its role in defining the traditional identity of the rāga. The study also considers the impact of the 72 mēla system on Sāraṅga, showing how its reclassification as a janya rāga required the reassignment of gāndhāra and resulted in śuddha madhyama emerging as a anya svara. Lakṣaṇa ślōka and the gīta of Muddu Vēṅkaṭamakhi in this rāga are specifically chosen and discussed as evidence of the persistence of older practices, demonstrating that traces of the original svara arrangement survived even after deliberate structural reorganization. By focusing on this specific svara, the article highlights how historical features can continue to influence rāga performance and perception, illustrating the interaction between tradition and systematic theoretical frameworks in shaping Karnāṭak music.

**Key Word:** Sāraṅga, Śuddhamadhyama gāndhāra, Samsthān, Mēla, Muddu Vēṅkaṭamakhi

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## I. Introduction

The rāga Sāraṅga, in the present-day Karnāṭak tradition, is a janya of the 65<sup>th</sup> mēla Kalyāṇi, known as Śāntakalyāṇi or Mēcakalyāṇi. This rāga is widely popular in the contemporary concert repertoire, having been adapted into compositions by Tyāgarāja as well as Muddusvāmi Dīkṣita among the musical trinity. This rāga is said to have the following āroha and avarōha:

S	R2	G3	M2	P	D2	N3	Ś		
Ś	N3	D2	P	M2	R2	G3	M1	R2	S

It is referred to as a bhāṣāṅga rāga due to the presence of a anya svara śuddha madhyama, occurring mandatorily in avarōha prayōga-s, that is, descending phrases. In order to understand the emergence of śuddha madhyama as a anya svara in Sāraṅga, it is important to look into the history and evolution of this rāga as documented in the early musical treatises.

## II. Lakṣaṇa Of Sāraṅga In Early Musical Treatises

The rāga Sāraṅga, in earlier periods, was classified as a samsthān in North Indian treatises such as Sadrāgacandrōdaya (SRC – Late 16<sup>th</sup> century), Rāgamāla (RMāla – Late 16<sup>th</sup> century), and Rāgamañjari (RM – Late 16<sup>th</sup> century) of Paṇḍarīkaviṭṭhala, Rasakaumudi (RK – Late 16<sup>th</sup> century) of Śrīkaṇṭha, Rāgavibōdha (RV – Early 17<sup>th</sup> century) of Sōmanatha, Saṅgīta Pārijāta (SP – 17<sup>th</sup> century) of Ahōbala and Rāgatattvavibōdha (RTV – 17<sup>th</sup> century) of Śrīkaṇṭha. The term samsthān denotes a parent scale in the early North Indian music tradition and is broadly equivalent to the concept of mēla in the South Indian system. As a samsthān or mēla, Sāraṅga is described in Saṅgīta Pārijāta (SP) of Ahōbala as possessing the following svara-s: śuddha ṛṣabha, atītvratama gāndhāra, tīvratara madhyama, tīvratara dhaivata, and tīvra niṣāda.

It is important to note that śuddha svara nomenclature differs between the North and South Indian music tradition. For instance, śuddha ṛṣabha in the contemporary South Indian system denotes R1, whereas in the North Indian system it corresponds to R2, that is, catuśruti ṛṣabha in present-day Karnāṭak terminology. Consequently, a śuddha scale in the Southern tradition would correspond to Kanakāṅgi or Kanakāmbari, which is the 1<sup>st</sup> mēla or rāgāṅga rāga in the 72 mēla scheme whereas a śuddha scale in the North Indian tradition would correspond to the 22<sup>nd</sup> mēla (Kharaharapriya or Śrī as per the South Indian system). Taking this distinction into account, the svara structure of Sāraṅga in SP can be interpreted as comprising catuśruti ṛṣabha, prati madhyama, ṣaṭśruti dhaivata, kaiśiki niṣāda, and a gāndhāra that occupies the position of śuddha madhyama as per the South Indian system. Therefore, the svara-s in the Sāraṅga Samsthān as per the details available in the early North Indian musicological works are:

S	R2	G (M1)	M2	P	D3	N3
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This structural feature of gāndhāra occupying the position of śuddha madhyama is consistently documented across sources from the early sixteenth century through later works such as Rāgalakṣaṇamu of Śāhaji in the late seventeenth century. Śāhaji describes Sāraṅga both as a mēḷa and as a dēśi rāga, indicating its North Indian origin and subsequent adaptation into the Southern system. Notably, even in this work, the distinctive position of gāndhāra and the use of ṣaṭśruti dhaivata are retained, showing that the lakṣaṇa of Sāraṅga remained stable for several centuries, with gāndhāra occupying the position of śuddha madhyama forming a key aspect of its structural identity.

### III. The Advent Of The 72-Mēḷa Scheme And Its Effect On Sāraṅga

Until the time of Śāhaji, the 72 mēḷa scheme had not yet been formulated or established in the South Indian music tradition. Vēṅkaṭamakhi, in Caturdaṅḍīprakāśika (CDP), proposes the theoretical possibility of 72 mēḷa-s but explicitly describes only 19 that were prevalent in practice during his time. The fully developed 72 mēḷa scheme is attributed to his grandson Muddu Vēṅkaṭamakhi, whose Rāgalakṣaṇa (RL-MV), written in the early eighteenth century, formalizes this system using a systematic kaṭapayādi framework.

The logic underlying the 72 mēḷa scheme is straightforward. With three varieties each of ṣabha, gāndhāra, dhaivata, and niṣāda, and two varieties of madhyama, the total number of possible combinations is 72. This principle appears to have guided Muddu Vēṅkaṭamakhi in constructing a closed and internally consistent classificatory system. While certain rāga-s such as Tōḍi, Śaṅkarābharaṇam, and Pantuvarāḷi were retained from earlier traditions as mēḷa-s or rāgāṅga rāga-s, many others were either reorganized or newly conceptualized within this 72 mēḷa scheme.

Within this framework, the earlier form of Sāraṅga presents a significant theoretical difficulty. As discussed earlier, Sāraṅga in the early works includes a gāndhāra that occupies the position of śuddha madhyama, a svara position that does not correspond to any of the three recognized varieties of gāndhāra in the 72 mēḷa scheme. Consequently, such a rāga cannot be accommodated within the system without violating its foundational constraints. If Sāraṅga were to be retained as an independent mēḷa with its traditional lakṣaṇa, it would effectively require the introduction of an additional category for gāndhāra, consequently opening up the possibility of exceeding the fixed number of 72 mēḷa-s and undermining the foundational principle propounded by Vēṅkaṭamakhi regarding the 72 mēḷa scheme.

Muddu Vēṅkaṭamakhi addresses this issue by reclassifying Sāraṅga as a janya rāga under the 65th rāgāṅga rāga Śāntakalyāṇi, thereby enabling its placement within the 72 mēḷa scheme. In doing so, he alters its svara structure: gāndhāra becomes antara gāndhāra, and dhaivata becomes pañcaśruti dhaivata, corresponding to catuśruti dhaivata in the present day. This modification enables Sāraṅga to be incorporated into the 72 mēḷa system, but at the cost of abandoning its earlier lakṣaṇa. The result is a structural discontinuity in the historical identity of the rāga.

### IV. Persistence Of Earlier Lakṣaṇa: Evidence From Ślōka And Gīta

Despite this clear discontinuity in formal structure, elements of the earlier lakṣaṇa do not disappear entirely. Traces of the original svara configuration continue to be reflected in both textual descriptions and compositional material. This continuity becomes particularly evident in the lakṣaṇa ślōka of Sāraṅga as seen in Rāgalakṣaṇa of Muddu Vēṅkaṭamakhi. The ślōka is as follows:

सायंगेयस्तुसारङ्गः शुद्धमध्यमगान्वितः Sāyaṅgēyastusāraṅgaḥ śuddhamadhyamagānvitah

The phrase śuddhamadhyama gā in this lakṣaṇa ślōka suggests an awareness of the earlier usage of gāndhāra in the position of śuddha madhyama. This is particularly significant, as it indicates that Muddu Vēṅkaṭamakhi consciously acknowledged the older lakṣaṇa even while redefining the rāga within a new theoretical framework.

Further evidence of this dual awareness can be found in Saṅgīta Sampradāya Pradarśini (SSP) of Subbarāma Dīkṣita. SSP closely follows RL-MV in aspects such as rāga lakṣaṇa and rāgāṅga rāga classification. This work includes a gīta in Sāraṅga attributed to Vēṅkaṭamakhi, although it is plausible that this attribution refers to Muddu Vēṅkaṭamakhi and not Vēṅkaṭamakhi of Caturdaṅḍīprakāśika, given that Sāraṅga is not described in CDP.

A particularly significant feature of this gīta is the presence of mnemonic syllables such as ri, gē, mī, pa, dhu, and nu within the sāhitya. The explicit inclusion of such syllables is typically associated with rāgāṅga rāga lakṣaṇa gīta-s and is not generally found in gīta-s set in janya rāga-s. Their presence in the rāga Sāraṅga, which is treated only as a janya rāga by Muddu Vēṅkaṭamakhi, therefore, is unusual and calls for closer examination.

It is generally understood that mnemonic syllables denote different varieties of a svara. For instance, with ṣabha, ra denotes śuddha ṣabha, ri denotes catuśruti ṣabha, and ru denotes ṣaṭśruti ṣabha. Similarly, ga,

gi, and gu denote śuddha gāndhāra, sādharma gāndhāra, and antara gāndhāra respectively. There are generally only two varieties of madhyama, with ma and mi representing śuddha and prati madhyama respectively. Accordingly, the syllables in Sāraṅga as seen in the gīta (ri, gē, mī, pa, dhu, and nu) correspond to specific svara varieties: ri denotes catuśruti ṛṣabha (known as pañcaśruti ṛṣabha in RL-MV and SSP), mī denotes prati madhyama, dhu denotes ṣaṣṭruti dhaivata, and nu denotes kākali niṣāda. The syllable gē, which is not encountered in other contexts, may reasonably be interpreted as denoting gāndhāra in the historically recognized position of śuddha madhyama. If this interpretation is accepted, the gīta preserves the earlier svara structure of Sāraṅga, including its distinctive gāndhāra and the traditionally present higher variety of dhaivata in the form of ṣaṣṭruti dhaivata.

This results in an apparent contradiction. On the one hand, Sāraṅga is reclassified as a janya rāga within the 72 mēla system, with a revised svara structure. On the other hand, both the lakṣaṇa ślōka and the gīta retain clear traces of its earlier identity. This suggests that Muddu Vēṅkaṭamakhi was attempting to balance two competing priorities: the preservation of an established musical tradition and the enforcement of a newly systematic classificatory model.

As discussed at the beginning, in the present-day practice, Sāraṅga is rendered with antara gāndhāra, prati madhyama, and catuśruti dhaivata, with śuddha madhyama appearing as a anya svara. The presence of śuddha madhyama as a anya svara is recorded even in SSP by Subbarāma Dīkṣita and it is possible that this anya usage reflects the historical presence of gāndhāra in the position of śuddha madhyama. Following its reclassification under the 65<sup>th</sup> mēla, gāndhāra occupying the position of śuddha madhyama becomes theoretically impossible and instead, śuddha madhyama itself could have been deliberately introduced as an additional svara, particularly as a anya svara in this rāga. Thus, even in the modern form of Sāraṅga, traces of the earlier lakṣaṇa persist in performance practice.

## V. Terminological Reframing: From Dēśi To Rakti

Alongside these structural developments, Sāraṅga's reclassification under the 72-mēla scheme by Muddu Vēṅkaṭamakhi also involves a significant terminological and contextual shift. The earlier source Rāgalakṣaṇamu of Śāhaji identifies Sāraṅga as a Dēśi rāga, a designation that carries both historical and cultural implications. The term 'Dēśi' implies a rāga with origins outside the Karnāṭak tradition, often associated with North Indian practices or regional stylistic differences. This classification acknowledges Sāraṅga's North Indian roots and situates it within a broader historical continuum of rāga development, in which samsthān-s from the North were adapted into regional contexts while retaining distinct features such as gāndhāra in the position of śuddha madhyama and ṣaṣṭruti dhaivata.

Muddu Vēṅkaṭamakhi, in contrast, assigns Sāraṅga the status of a 'Rakti' rāga, emphasizing qualities such as aesthetic richness, expressive potential, and internal structural development within the Karnāṭak system. The term Rakti conveys not merely technical identity but a value-based assessment of musical content, highlighting the rāga's capacity for elaboration, improvisation, and emotive expression. It is also possible to relate this classification to the reconstructed svara structure of Sāraṅga within the 72-mēla framework. Following its reclassification, Sāraṅga adopts the svara structure of Śāntakalyāṇi (Kalyāṇi), a rāgāṅga rāga which is itself recognized by Muddu Vēṅkaṭamakhi in his Rāgalakṣaṇa as a Rakti rāga. In this context, the assignment of the Rakti label to Sāraṅga may reflect its alignment with the broader lakṣaṇa and expressive potential associated with Kalyāṇi.

By classifying Sāraṅga as Rakti, Muddu Vēṅkaṭamakhi effectively has repositioned the rāga as an indigenous entity within the Karnāṭak framework, integrating it into a theoretical system that prioritized consistency, completeness, and internal logic, while simultaneously reframing its cultural and stylistic identity.

This terminological shift is accompanied by a subtle recontextualization of the rāga's history. Whereas the Dēśi label by Śāhaji preserved the explicit acknowledgment of North Indian origin, the Rakti designation by Muddu Vēṅkaṭamakhi places Sāraṅga firmly within the South Indian tradition, subtly de-emphasizing its historical trajectory while foregrounding its theoretical and aesthetic relevance. Despite these changes, the layered presence of both older and newer elements demonstrates a nuanced approach: Muddu Vēṅkaṭamakhi did not seek to erase the historical identity of Sāraṅga entirely. The traditional lakṣaṇa, including traces of gāndhāra in the śuddha madhyama position, continues to coexist alongside the revised svara structure. This dual recognition allows the rāga to retain some aspects pertaining to its historical identity while conforming to the internal logic of the 72-mēla framework.

In effect, the reclassification and terminological shift highlight a careful negotiation between continuity and systematization. Muddu Vēṅkaṭamakhi's treatment of Sāraṅga illustrates that terminological decisions in rāga classification are not merely semantic but also carry theoretical, historical, and aesthetic implications, shaping how a rāga is performed, remembered, and understood across generations. The rāga thus embodies both a continuity with earlier practice and an adaptation to a codified classificatory vision, showing that historical identity and theoretical rigor were not mutually exclusive in the evolving Karnāṭak tradition.

## VI. Key Observations

The key observations with regard to the historical evolution of Sāraṅga and the implication of its reclassification under the 72 mēḷa schema are as follows:

- The historical lakṣaṇa of Sāraṅga consistently features gāndhāra occupying the śuddha madhyama position. This structural identity is documented in Northern samsthāns, early Southern adaptations, and mnemonic gīta-s, demonstrating its centrality to the rāga's traditional form.
- Despite subsequent adaptations in the Southern system, early sources from the sixteenth to seventeenth centuries, including Śāhaji's Rāgalakṣaṇamu, preserve the combination of catuśruti ṛṣabha, gāndhāra in śuddha madhyama, ṣaṭśruti dhaivata, and kaiśiki niṣāda, highlighting the rāga's enduring svara framework.
- The formalization of the 72-mēḷa system by Muddu Vēṅkaṭamakhi necessitated the reclassification of Sāraṅga as a janya rāga under Śāntakalyāṇi. This required shifting śuddhamadhyama gāndhāra to antara gāndhāra and ṣaṭśruti dhaivata to pañcaśruti dhaivata, demonstrating the tension between systematic classification and preservation of historical identity.
- Following reclassification under the 72-mēḷa scheme, the position formerly occupied by gāndhāra was replaced by śuddha madhyama as a anya svara in the modern version of Sāraṅga, which otherwise employs prati madhyama as its natural svara. This represents a significant structural shift while preserving a historical connection to the older lakṣaṇa, in which gāndhāra in the śuddha madhyama position is systematically replaced by śuddha madhyama itself.
- The transition from Dēśi to Rakti classification reflects a broader shift in cultural and aesthetic framing. While Sāraṅga is formally integrated into the Karnāṭak system, these designations reveal Muddu Vēṅkaṭamakhi's effort to balance historical memory with theoretical consistency, allowing older structural features to coexist with new categorizations.

## VII. Conclusion

The historical trajectory of Sāraṅga demonstrates how rāga identity, lakṣaṇa, and systematic classification intersected in the development of this rāga in Karnāṭak music. Originally, Sāraṅga included gāndhāra occupying the position of śuddha madhyama, a distinctive feature preserved across early North Indian treatises and later Southern adaptations such as Śāhaji's Rāgalakṣaṇamu. This placement of gāndhāra underscores the rāga's North Indian lineage and its earlier svara structure, which remained stable for several centuries.

The formalization of the 72-mēḷa scheme by Muddu Vēṅkaṭamakhi presented a theoretical challenge because the traditional placement of gāndhāra in the śuddha madhyama position did not conform to any of the recognized gāndhāra varieties in the scheme. To accommodate Sāraṅga within the 72-mēḷa system, Muddu Vēṅkaṭamakhi reclassified it as a janya rāga under Śāntakalyāṇi and revised its svara structure, with gāndhāra rendered as antara gāndhāra and dhaivata as pañcaśruti dhaivata.

Despite this reclassification, the rāga retained traces of its earlier identity. The lakṣaṇa ślōka in RL-MV explicitly references śuddhamadhyama gā, reflecting the historical presence of gāndhāra in that position. Similarly, mnemonic syllables in gīta-s indicate the older svara structure, suggesting that the original gāndhāra continues to be remembered in performance and pedagogy. In contemporary practice, śuddha madhyama appears as a anya svara in Sāraṅga, indirectly preserving its historical identity even as the rāga conforms to the 72-mēḷa framework.

This layered continuity highlights that Muddu Vēṅkaṭamakhi's approach was not a simple replacement of the older Sāraṅga with a new construct. Rather, it reflects a careful balancing of systematic classification with historical memory, allowing both the older lakṣaṇa and the revised theoretical model to coexist. The history of Sāraṅga thus illustrates that even within specifically codified structures, elements of earlier practice, particularly the interplay of gāndhāra and śuddha madhyama in this instance, persist and maintain a tangible link to the rāga's deep-rooted historical identity.

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