

# EXPLORING THE ROLE OF PALTAS AND THEIR CREATIVE DIMENSIONS IN HINDUSTANI VOCAL MUSIC

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## ABSTRACT

*A strong foundation is essential in the learning process of Hindustani classical music. From the traditional Gurukul system to contemporary methods of music education, several techniques have been employed to teach classical music. Among these, one of the most significant aspects of foundational learning is the practice of Paltas—sequential swara exercises. Though often regarded as the first step in classical music training, Paltas remain indispensable for a musician in developing pitch accuracy and technical control. They also help the music learner to understand the aspects of voice culture. This article highlights the role of Paltas in the learning process of Hindustani classical vocal music. It also explores the ways through which Paltas can be made more creative and innovative to achieve musical excellence. It also explains the role of the Alankaars in improvisation and development of the Raag.*

**Key Words:** Hindustani Classical music, Alankaar, Palta, Riyaz.

## Introduction

Basically there are seven Swaras. They are Sa (Shadja), Re (Rishabh), Ga (Gandhar), Ma (Madhyam), Pa (Pancham), Dha (Dhaivath), Ni (Nishad). These seven set of Swaras in series is known as Saptak. Out of these seven Swaras, there are five Swaras which can move above or below its actual positions. They are called Vikrit Swaras. The Swaras which can be Vikrit are Rishabh, Gandhar, Madhyam, Dhaivath and Nishad. So the total number of Swara sthanas, comes to twelve (7 Pure or Shudha Swaras and 5 modifiable or Vikrit Swaras). The entire music world is dependent on these twelve Swara sthanas. Every composition is created with the help of these note positions. Foundational learning in Hindustani classical vocal music basically begins with the introduction and study of these seven Swaras and twelve Swara sthanas. These notes form the basis for all the forms of music in Hindustani classical vocal music.

After getting introduced to the individual notes, the learner moves towards understanding Alankaars or Paltas. Palta is a “Sequential arrangement of Svaras in ascending and descending order” [1]. Unlike instrumental music, eyes have a very little role to play in vocal music as vocal music is all about visualizing the notes and its relativity. This makes the whole process of vocal music learning internal. The internal visualisation must be very strong in order to excel in vocal music. The ability to perform classical vocal music proficiently relies on both talent, which determines how well you sing and knowledge, which reflects how well you understand. Creativity forms the core of classical vocal music and this is one of the key aspects that sets it apart from light music, where the compositions are fixed. Alankaars or Paltas serve as a bridge for developing and nurturing a sense of creativity. Every element in the learning process has a purpose with its own characteristic features. Every element and form of music are special in their own way.

**Outcome of foundational learning:** One life time is not enough to comprehend classical music in total. As the saying goes “Happiness lies in pursuit not in the possession”, in the same way classical music is never truly possessed. It is an eternal and endless quest. It is this

unending pursuit that fills the musician with immense joy. The first step towards this quest is the foundational learning. Few of the outcomes of foundational learning are listed out below.

- Swar Shudhata that is tonal and note accuracy.
- Ability to identify the notes with its correct position.
- Understand the grammar of the Raag, Chalan (movement) and important phrases of the Raags.
- Ability to understand, improvise and explore the Raags creatively.
- Emotional and aesthetic depth.
- Strong and flexible voice.
- Incorporating ornamentation such as khatka, murki, meend etc. in your singing.
- Achieve control over rhythm and Taal.

To achieve the above outcomes Alankaars play a very special role. The emphasis during the phase of foundational learning is not on performance but on incorporating a strong sense of musical grammar and internal grasp with discipline. Guru plays a pivotal role in this phase. The Guru, through individualised tailored lesson plans, helps students achieve musical progress. The student through Riyaz which is “The corruption of the Arabic word Riyajat, which means perseverance, study, effort and learning” [2] tries to attain musical excellence.

### **Alankaars/Paltas and its importance**

The process of learning begins with individual note practise (Swar Sadhana) and gradually progresses to practise of Alankaars or Paltas. The Paltas are the sequential vocal exercises. These are the indispensable part of the learning process. Paltas helps you build strong foundation for further learning at intermediate and advanced levels. These Paltas are helpful in understanding the note positions and their relationships. They are the structured, fixed patterns of Swaras which are intended to be practised repetitively to gain flexibility, strength and clarity in the voice. They help in understanding how to accurately reach and connect to the desired notes. Paltas or Alankaars contains two parts namely Aaroha that is ascending order of the notes and Avaroha which is the descending order of the notes. A definite sequence is maintained throughout the Paltas in the Aaroha and in the Avaroha. Paltas enhance logical reasoning and musical predictability by encouraging students to anticipate the subsequent sequences of Swaras. Paltas also help the student to have the visualisation of the notes. Normally in the initial stages only Paltas with shudha Swaras are taught to the students. Later same Alankaar patterns in other different scales involving vikrit Swaras are taught. Vikrit Swaras are “Swaras which are away from their original, natural, or shudha positions” [3].

In the beginning straight Paltas are learnt followed by complex combination of phrases. In the beginning stages the student is made to sing the Paltas using the note syllables such as Sa, Re, Ga, Ma etc. Once the Swaras are fixed, the student is encouraged to perform the same Alankaars in Aakaar. Singing in Aakaar is the most important component in the learning process of Hindustani classical music. A majority of Raag exploration is carried out through Aakaar singing. Some Alankaars are then sometimes taught in pairs like SS, RR, GG, MM, and so on. Normally the Paltas are set to a particular Taal (rhythmic pattern) and are meant to be performed with Tabla accompaniment, thereby helping the students to understand the rhythmic aspect also. Paltas are taught in different Taals such as Teentaal, Ektaal, Dadra,

Keherwa, Jhaptal etc. to help students develop rhythmic precision, adaptability, and a deeper understanding of how melodic patterns interact with various rhythmic cycles. This gives a deeper understanding of the Taal and Laya aspects by enabling students to internalize rhythm patterns and maintain consistent tempo control. Practising Paltas in various Taals trains the learner to align melodic phrases accurately within the rhythmic framework, enhancing coordination between melody and rhythm. This continuous engagement with different time cycles refines the student's sense of timing, balance, and musical discipline. Ultimately, it cultivates rhythmic awareness, precision, and the ability to improvise within the structural boundaries of a composition.

Once the note positions are fixed in the slower tempo, the student practises the same Alankaars in different speeds for e.g. Dugun (double speed), Tigun (triple speed), and Chaugun (quadruple) Layas. With the practice of Paltas in faster tempo, students develop the ability to handle notes accurately at higher speeds while maintaining their correct pitch and placement. The Alankaars or Paltas not only helps you know the correct note positions, it also helps you to gain the vocal strength to perform complex combination of notes with ease. Paltas are like the foundation to the whole learning process. These Paltas are taught in both the systems of Indian music namely Hindustani and Carnatic music. The Paltas are the basis for further learning. In all other forms of music learning, like in instrumental music learning, we have the privilege to see the notes. Like in Harmonium, Flute, Sitar etc. the learner can see the notes and play. But in vocal music, you don't have the privilege to see the notes. We need to have a strong visualisation to sing the desired notes with accuracy. Therefore vocal music is completely different form of music. The Paltas help you sing the individual notes and group of notes with precision.

Taan is an important component of many forms of music, especially Khyal music. These Paltas help to build the foundation for singing Swara Taans and Aakaar Taans. Paltas are also taught and performed with the scale of the Raag and it helps to understand the Raag Swaroop (identity) and its characteristic features. Though Paltas are introduced in the initial stages of learning, they continue to be practised throughout a musician's lifetime. Paltas with complex combinations of notes are practised at the advanced stages.

Paltas are essential foundational exercises that prepare students for singing other basic forms Hindustani Classical music such as Sargam Geet, Lakshan Geet etc. Consistent practice of Paltas builds proficiency in Swaras, enhances voice control, and ensures pitch accuracy, the skills vital for delivering these forms of music with clarity and precision. The diverse note sequences and rhythmic patterns in Paltas foster vocal agility and flexibility, facilitating seamless Swara transitions. Breath control plays a vital role in the delivery of Paltas, and it enhances vocal stamina, stability, and tonal consistency. Performance of Paltas enhances the concentration, auditory memory and problem solving ability. As the Paltas require predictability, the brain learns to anticipate and adapt, fostering the development of cognitive skills. Ultimately, Paltas act as the critical bridge between elementary Swara training and the advanced melodic and conceptual demands of other forms of music. Few generic Alankaars and Raag specific Alankaars are given below.

## **Generic Alankaars**

Aaroha: SRG, RGM, GMP, MPD, PDN, DNS

Avaroha: SND, NDP, DPM, PMG, MGR, GRS.

Aaroha: SRGM, RGMP, GMPD, MPDN, PDNS

Avaroha: SNDP, NDPM, DPMG, PMGR, MGRS.

## **Raag specific Alankaars in Raag Bhupali**

Aaroha: SRG, RGP, GPD, PDS

Avaroha: SDP, DPG, PGR, GRS

Aaroha: SRGP, RGPD, GPDS

Avaroha: SDPG, DPGR, PGRS.

## **Creative in the context of Paltas**

The very formation of these Paltas is based on the creativity aspect. The sequencing of Swaras and maintaining that sequence consistently through both Aaroha and Avaroha is achievable only through the performer's creativity and musical insight. This creativity activates both analytical and intuitive layers of the brain. Creativity in classical music isn't about straying from tradition, rather, it's about deepening one's grasp of it. Specifically with Paltas, innovation means musicians must use the established set of Swaras (notes) inventively to generate new experiences in rhythm, melody, or emotion. This involves actively searching for subtle patterns, finding different ways to sequence the notes, and incorporating elements of spontaneous improvisation, all while remaining strictly faithful to the structural rules of notes. Through creative manipulation, the student begins to internalize the dynamic relationship between Swars.

Normally, the sequence of Swaras in the Aaroha is sung first, followed by the corresponding sequence in the Avaroha. To inject creativity into Palta practice, the most successful technique involves introducing criss-cross alankaars. These patterns are defined by notes that interlace, moving back and forth between ascending and descending directions to establish an internal dialogue in the musical scale. This requires students to go beyond the usual straight forward Paltaas in the Aaroha and Avaroha. It prompts the learner to interweave both movements into a single, complex pattern. In this technique of Palta singing, one piece is taken from the Aaroha and one from the Avaroha. Thereby, when the Palta is sung, the Aaroha and Avaroha criss-crosses each other. When Paltas are sung in a straightforward manner, it becomes easier for the student to visualize the placement of each note and establish clear, direct relationships between them.

When Paltas are practiced in a straightforward manner, the distance between the phrases of notes in the *Aaroha* and *Avaroha* remains close, making it easier for the learner to visualize and connect the phrases. However, when the same Paltas are sung in a criss-cross pattern, the distance between note phrases often increases, making the exercise more complex and challenging for the student. It even becomes more challenging and complex when sung in Aakaar and further when they are practised in different Layas such as Dugun (double speed), Tigun (Triple speed), and Chaugun (Quadruple speed) etc.

Criss-cross alankaars are vital because they break the predictability of simple, linear scale exercises. This forces the mind and ear to become fluent in handling complex musical shifts. Because the singer must constantly adapt to quickly changing tonal directions, these patterns significantly boost musical agility. More importantly, they promote mental flexibility and ability to create, a crucial attribute for improvisation and exploration in Raag development.

From a pedagogical point of view, this technique helps learner to think beyond the predictable. When Paltas are practiced with specific Raags using the criss-cross technique, it enhances the learner's understanding of Raag grammar. The student is required to preserve the Raag *swaroop* even while exploring non-linear note sequences, thereby deepening both technical control and note-positioning awareness.

Another creative method is to start the Palta from a note other than the tonic (Sa) or the beginning of the ascending scale (Aaroha). This middle-entry technique allows the student to explore the Saptak's internal structure and how notes relate to each other from unusual positions. For instance, a Palta might start on Ga or Pa instead of Sa, tracing its path both up and down while strictly maintaining the note positioning. This practice cultivates a strong sense of relative tonality, significantly improving the student's awareness of the function of every note in relation to the tonic and the surrounding swaras. This enhances the learner's creativity and elevates their ability to visualize notes with greater clarity and depth.

The above two techniques are just the examples of making the Paltas more creative. There can be number of other techniques to make the Paltas more challenging and playful. Through the above two techniques of Palta singing, the singer is no longer bound to straight forward phrases of notes. By making the same Paltas more challenging, the learner begins to perceive the whole Saptak or a scale as a web of inter-connected tonal relationships.

Such exercises helps learners to build a strong visualisation thereby improving their ability to improvise and explore the Raag through Alaaps and Taans. Normally the Paltas are sung with plain notes. But the intelligent inclusion of ornamentation works such as Khatka ("A swift execution of a note, repeated twice – first with the grace note of the svara higher than the principal note, immediately followed by the grace note of the svara lower than the principal note" [4]), Murki ("A knot of swaras delivered very fast" [5]), Meend ("A musical glide, in various speeds and intensities." [6]) etc. further enhances the beauty and the musicality of these Paltas.

## Conclusion

Among the many elements in the Hindustani classical vocal learning process, Alankaars or the Paltas hold a special place. Apart from being tools for preparatory training, they also guide the learner towards mastery of Swaras, rhythm and the understanding ability of the Raag at an advanced level. In classical vocal music, having a strong foundational learning is of prime importance. This element of music learning is indispensable in a learner's musical journey. Alankaars or Paltas strengthen the visualization of notes with precision, which is an essential requirement for the further effective exploration and expansion of a Raag. They instil discipline, nurture creativity, and develop a strong sense of respect for the note positioning and the purity of the Raag.

Without this, higher stages of Hindustani classical vocal learning like Khyal, Dhrupad, Tarana etc. becomes difficult to understand. Paltas act as a bridge for advanced learning. While

traditional Paltas provide the technical foundation, creative ideas in the delivery of Paltas such as criss-cross alankaars, middle-entry techniques, rhythmic variations, and Raag-based Paltas elevate the learner to experience musical intelligence. Therefore, Paltas are not an optional component but indispensable stepping stone, in a music learner's vocal music journey.

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