

## ***GNB: Gamakas No Bar***

V. N. Muthukumar and M. V. Ramana  
Princeton University  
NJ 08544

*Published in Sangeetham, Vol. 18 (2001). Sangeetham is published by the Carnatic Music Association of North America ([www.cmana.org](http://www.cmana.org))*

It has often been asserted that the music of the late, great master, G. N. Balasubramaniam (GNB), was devoid of gamakas. This point is usually made in the context of explaining the differences between the various banis in Karnatic music. Among the examples given often is the "GNB bani", which is described as being based on the extensive use of brikas, and not using gamakas. Contrasted to this are styles such as the "Veena Dhanammal bani", as expounded by singers like Brinda and Mukta, which is said to be "gamaka laden" and eschewing "fast" music. While the Dhanammal bani does indeed make plentiful use of gamakas, the notion that GNB did not use gamakas is erroneous.

This is borne out, both by an analysis of the criticism per se, and of the available recordings of the maestro. We are fortunate in that there are a reasonably large number of recordings of GNB, though often of mixed or poor quality. In analyzing these recordings, it is necessary to realise that there are some limitations. First and foremost is that most of these recordings are from the late fifties or the earlier half of the sixties, just prior to his death. His physical capabilities were, therefore, naturally somewhat impaired and he may have adjusted his music accordingly. There seem to be no recordings of his concerts during his peak. This was also the period when he was most prolific as a composer - an activity that perhaps attracted most of his attention and creative abilities. Since he followed a policy of not singing his own compositions, that creativity may not have been in evidence in his concerts of this period. Finally, many rasikas who have listened to GNB during his younger days aver that there were many kritis and ragas that he used to

sing frequently, but which he stopped singing during his later days. We shall return to this point later in this article.

But first let us consider the basic assertion, viz., that GNB's music was devoid of gamakas. The fundamental mistake in the assertion is that it is based on a very restrictive definition of the term gamaka. The word gamaka can be derived from the root "gam" or the verb "gachcha", to go. According to the renowned vainika, Smt. Vidya Shankar, gamakas were initially understood to be "the oscillations given to a swara and the form a swara assumes in the blending of the colours of other srutis". Musicological literature defines several kinds of gamakas. Sarangadeva, author of the 13th century work, Sangita Ratnakara, listed 15 kinds of gamakas. Subsequently, however, this has been standardized to 10 kinds - the so-called dasavida gamakas. These are: kampita, sphurita, pratyahata, nokku, khandippu, ravai, jaru, odukkai, orikkai, vali. For a definition of these ten kinds of gamakas see, for example, Smt. Vidya Shankar, "The Art and Science of Karnatic Music," (Madras: Music Academy, 1983), chapter 16.

On the other hand, what most people mean when they say gamaka is just kampitam (andolan in Hindustani Music). It is true that GNB does not use this a lot but he does use it sparingly and to good effect. An example is his handling of the gandhara in Todi, where he illustrates both the plain version and the oscillating version. There are also many kritis where GNB does use kampita amply - an example is his rendition of Brovavamma in Manji. Even if one were to dismiss these as exceptions, there is no doubt that GNB used other gamakas, such as jaru, orikkai and nokku, in profusion. In fact, when it comes to jarus, one can hardly think of any Karnatic vocalist who has employed them so frequently and to such splendid effect. Examples are GNB's handling of ragas like Saveri, Atana and Bhairavi. This fact alone is sufficient to invalidate the original claim. Further, GNB's compositions offer firm evidence of his thorough knowledge of gamakas and his felicity in handling them. These songs incorporate different kinds of gamakas. For example, during a seminar at Sastry Hall (Madras) on GNB's music in 1995, the late Calcutta K. S. Krishnamurthy pointed out that Mamakuleswaram (Todi, Eka tala) includes all the ten kinds of gamakas. (For a report of that program, see [http://www.geocities.com/m\\_v\\_ramana/gnbprog.html](http://www.geocities.com/m_v_ramana/gnbprog.html))

A closely related error is to start from the original assumption that GNB does not utilize gamakas and go on to claim that for the most part, GNB, and for that matter, musicians belonging to his school, sing only “scalar” ragas that are largely free of gamakas (where gamakas are again defined narrowly as just kampitam). Even the available recordings clearly demonstrate that this claim is false. To do so, we focus on two elements of his music: (a) the ragas he sang elaborately and (b) the ragas he used in his viruttam singing.

(a) Among the lengthy alapanas before kritis and pallavis, GNB often chose ragas like Sahana, Natakurinji, Ritigaula, Begada, Yadukulakamboji and Saveri. He, of course, revelled in major ragas like Todi, Kamboji, Kalyani and Bhairavi. These are all laden with gamakas and any attempt to present them bereft of these graces would fall flat. That was clearly not the case with GNB's elaborations of these ragas. Further, in contrast to present day trends, he actually did *not* choose “scalar” ragas like Hamsanandi or Gaudamalhar or Hamsadhvani for pallavis.

(b) As most fans of his music knew, GNB was very fond of singing elaborate ragamalika viruttams. In singing these, GNB usually selected Sanskrit slokas, but elaborated the raga in alapana style. It seems as though he employed viruttams as a proxy for alapanas in multiple ragas. These ragas indicate his preferences and favourites and give us grounds to surmise which ragas he may have sung elaborately, during which we do not have recordings. In addition to the ragas mentioned in (a), GNB sang gamaka laden ragas like Nayaki, Dhanyasi, Kharaharapriya,<sup>1</sup> Yadukulakamboji, Ahiri, Anandabhairavi and Begada. (The ragas he sang in viruttams in 10 concerts are listed as an appendix.)

---

<sup>1</sup> As an aside it may be worth laying to rest the canard that GNB never sang Kharaharapriya. One of the viruttams includes a short but splendid foray into Kharaharapriya that could serve as a glimpse of how he conceived the raga. We also have on reliable authority that he did sing it elaborately during many an occasion in his younger days. Lalgudi Jayaraman mentions an instance when GNB sang an elaborate Kharaharapriya in Rasika Ranjani Sabha, Madras. Sivaramakrishnan, an ardent GNB fan, remembers a concert at Calcutta in 1950 where GNB sang a memorable RTP in Kharaharapriya at the end of which he appended Sivan's Kharaharapriya kriti, Dayavillaya Dayalo. It is possible that he stopped singing Kharaharapriya along with ragas like Dhanyasi, which he revelled in during his earlier years. It is also possible that the absence of any kritis or RTPs in Kharaharapriya in the available recordings is an artifact of the limited number of even his latter day concerts that were recorded and preserved.

This point can be bolstered by analyzing the lists of songs he sang at the Madras Music Academy (published in the annual brochure). All of these concerts include weighty pieces in "gamaka laden" ragas like Manji (Brovavamma, Syama Sastry, 1937 & 39), Kedaragaula (Nilakantam, Dikshitar, 1941), Surati (Balasubramanyam, Dikshitar, 1947), Darbar (Mundu Venuka, Thyagaraja, 1951), Dhanyasi (Sangita Jnanamu, Thyagaraja, 1944), Varali (Ne Pogada, Thyagaraja, 1956), Sriranjani (Parvata Rajakumari, Dikshitar, 1949) and so on. We don't know from just the listings if he sang alapanas to these songs. But they certainly indicate the kinds of ragas GNB handled. As an aside it is interesting to note that GNB sang, perhaps introduced, several rare compositions, some of which are still uncommon. Examples are Thyagaraja's Sarvantaryami in Bhairavi (1949) and Evidamulanaina in Sankarabharanam (1947) and Kavi Kunjara Bharati's Ivan Aro in Kamboji (1938).

To conclude, there can be no doubt that GNB was one of the greatest musicians of the twentieth century. Though his popularity may have had to do with his voice or even his appearance in movies, the greatness of his art has little to do with these elements. Rather, it is his keen analytic intellect that underlies his music. Even the style he chose to sing in, an amalgamation of the music of several great musicians of his time and earlier, as opposed to a faithful reproduction of the style of one of his gurus, is evidence of his intellectual acumen. For someone who went through the trouble of evolving such a style, he must have undoubtedly given much thought to the question of which aspects of the vast panoply of Karnatic music to emphasize. It is obvious, that his conception of Karnatic music had more to do with the grandeur of its ragas than, say, the intricacies of tala. This is not because he was incapable of dealing with the latter; indeed many of his pallavis are deceptively simple. (As the late vidwan S. Balachander recognised and wrote in his usual hyperbolic style, "Except for 'Mudikondan' Venkatrama Iyer, G.N.B., Alathur Brothers and a very few more, the majority of the others took no care, interest or efforts in learning, striving and maintaining the proper 'Laya-personified' and 'Thaala-interwoven' intelligent ...intricate...involving, intellectual...inspiring and inimitable PALLAVI singing." See [http://www.geocities.com/m\\_v\\_ramana/balachander.html](http://www.geocities.com/m_v_ramana/balachander.html))

But as a musician GNB had to make choices about how to elaborate these ragas. And in the matter of Gamakas, he chose not to over-emphasize kampita, once again not

because he was incapable of doing so. Not for him the endless oscillations between the rishabha and madhyama when singing Todi's gandhara or between the panchama and the shadja when singing Madhyamavati's nishada. He was content to give a mere glimpse of it. It is this choice, and the basic error of assuming that the word gamaka just means kampita, that is responsible for the unfortunate misrepresentation of GNB's music.

### **Acknowledgements**

We thank G.B.Rajasekar for making available to us, the list of songs sung by GNB in the Music Academy, Madras.

### **Appendix: List of Viruttams**

1. Kharaharapriya, Rishabhapriya, Sindhubhairavi, Ranjani
2. Anandabhairavi, Hamir Kalyani, Ranjani, Surati
3. Hamsanandi, Gavati, Ahiri, Durga
4. Yadukulakambodhi, Saveri, Begada, Gurjari Todi
5. Anandabhairavi, Kedaragaula, Hamsanandi
6. Saveri, Nayaki, Kannada, Paras
7. Begada, Dhanyasi, Saveri, Kedaragaula
8. Hamsanandi, Dhanyasi, Yadukulakambodhi, Saveri & Sindhubhairavi, Hamirkalyani, Bagesri, Ranjani (two ragamalika slokams in the same concert on request)
9. Sahana, Kalyani, Ranjani, Sriraga
10. Huseni, Kannada, Sindhubhairavi