
CARNATIC MUSIC THEORY YEAR I

BASED ON THE SYLLABUS FOLLOWED BY GOVERNMENT MUSIC
COLLEGES IN ANDHRA PRADESH AND TELANGANA FOR CERTIFICATE
EXAMS HELD BY POTTI SRIRAMULU TELUGU UNIVERSITY

ANANTH PATTABIRAMAN

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Preface

This text covers topics on Carnatic music required to clear the first year exams in Government music colleges in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. Also, this is the first of four modules of theory as per Certificate in Music (Carnatic) examinations conducted by Potti Sriramulu Telugu University. So, if you are a music student from one of the above mentioned colleges, or preparing to appear for the university exam as a private candidate, you'll find this useful.

Though attempts are made to keep this text up-to-date with changes in the syllabus, students are strongly advised to consult the college or university and make sure all necessary topics are covered.

This might also serve as an easy-to-follow introduction to Carnatic music for those who are generally interested in the system but not appearing for any particular examination.

I'm grateful to my late guru, veteran violinist, Vidwan. Peri Sriramamurthy, for his guidance in preparing this document.

Ananth Pattabiraman

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Ananth Pattabiraman is a musician. At *Kuyil*, a startup he co-founded, he makes mobile apps for Carnatic music.

Carnatic apps can be found at <https://kuyil.org>

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Technical Terms

Sangeetham

The Indian term for Music. A group of musical sounds, which are called swarams that give melody and pleasant feelings to the ears, is called Sangeetham. Ancient writers hold the view that vocal music, instrumental music and dance together constituted sangeetham. Later, dance was separated from the first two.

Shruti

It is an audible sound which can be heard distinctly. It is a musical sound which a well trained human ear is capable of distinguishing. It is the key note or *ādhāra shadjam*, based on which all other swarams are derived.

Swaram

It is a musical note which is pleasing to the ears. There are seven basic swarams, known as *Saptha Swarams*. They are:

1. Shadjam (shortly *Sa*, notated as *s*)
2. Rishabham (*Ri, r*)
3. Ghandaram (*Ga, g*)
4. Madhyamam (*Ma, m*)
5. Panchamam (*Pa, p*)
6. Dhaivatham (*Dha, d*)
7. Nishadham (*Ni, n*)

Arohanam

Series of Swarams in the ascending order of pitch.

Avarohanam

Series of swarams in the descending order of pitch.

Moorchana

Arohanam and Avarohanam together is called Moorchana.

Dwadasa Swaramsthanams

Out of the seven swarams, Shadjam (*Sa*) and Panchamam (*Pa*) are constant. They are called *achala swarams*. The remaining five swarams (*Ri, Ga, Ma, Dha, Ni*) admit varieties and they are called *chala swarams*. In combination, both achala and chala swarams yield 12 different musical pitches and they are called Dwadhasa Swaramsthanams.

The Dwadasa Swaramsthanams are:

1. Shadjam
2. Suddha Rishabam
3. Chatusruthi Rishabam
4. Sadharana Gandharam
5. Anthara Ghandaram
6. Suddha Madhyamam
7. Prathi Madhyamam
8. Panchamam
9. Suddha Dhaivatham
10. Chatusruthi Dhaivatham
11. Kaisika Nishadham
12. Kakali Nishadham

Sthāyi

A series of swarams—beginning with *Sa* and ending with *Ni*—is called sthayi. (Equivalent Western term: *Octave*)

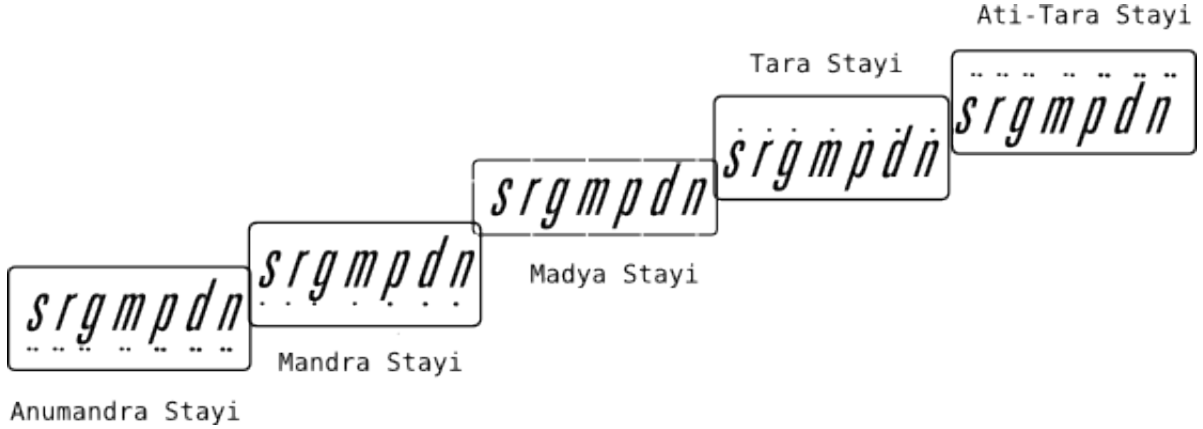
There are five sthayis:

1. *Anu-mandra* sthayi
2. *Mandra* sthayi
3. *Madhya* sthayi
4. *Thara* sthayi
5. *Ati-Thara* sthayi

The sthayi in which we normally sing is the madhya sthayi. The swarams higher than nishadam of madhya sthayi form thara sthayi. So, swarams in thara sthayi sound higher in pitch than the same swarams in madhya sthayi. Immediately below madhya sthayi *Sa* are mandra sthayi swarams. They sound lower in pitch compared to madhya sthayi swarams.

Swarams in mandra, madhya and thara sthayis form the normal range of human voice. Swarams that are lower than mandra sthayi shadjam (anu-mandra sthayi), and higher than thara sthayi nishadam (ati-thara sthayi) are sometimes used in instrumental music.

While notating, thara sthayi swarams are written with a dot above them, and ati-thara sthayi swarams with two dots above them. To indicate mandra sthayi, a dot below the swaram is added. For anu-mandra sthayi, two dots below each swaram are added.



Purvānga

The group of first four swarams of the Saptha Swarams—*Sa, Ri, Ga, Ma*—is known as the Purvanga.

Uttharānga

The group of last three notes—*Pa, Dha, Ni*—is known as Uttharanga.

Dhāthu

The swara part of the musical composition is known as Dhathu.

Māthu

The sahitya part of a musical composition is known as Mathu.

Akshara Kāla

Unit time in music is called Akshara Kala.

Thrikāla

Kala is refers to the speed of the musical piece. There are three kālas:

1. *Prathama Kāla* – First degree of speed. One note is sung in one akshara kāla.
2. *Dwitiya Kāla* – Second degree of speed, twice faster than Prathama kala. Two notes are sung in one akshara kāla.
3. *Tritiya Kāla* – Third degree of speed, twice faster than Dwitiya Kala. Four notes are sung in one akshara kāla.

Thourya Trikam

Vocal Music, Instrumental Music and Dance, all the three combined together is referred to as Thouryathrikam.

Tāla

Musical time or measure.

Avartha

It is the completion of a tala angas or time measure.

Angas, Shadāngas

In order to facilitate easy and accurate method of reckoning musical time, six angas have been devised. They are known as Shadangas or six angas. They are

	Name of the Anga	Sign	Number of Aksharas
1.	Laghu	I	3/4/5/7/9
2.	Drutham	O	2
3.	Anudrutam	U	1
4.	Guru	8	8
5.	Plutam	 8	12
6.	Kakapadam	+	16

Of the thalanganas, only 3 are widely in use. They are called *Principle Thalanganas*. Here is the list of Principle Thalanganas along with their way of counting:

1. Anudrutam (U) – One beat of the palm on the lap
2. Drutam (O) – One beat + One wave (*usi* or *visarjitam*)
3. Laghu (I) – One beat + Count of the fingers

Jāti

Of the shadanganas, only laghu has variations in number of kriyas. It is called *laghu jāti bedha*. There are five jātis:

1. *Trisra* Jāti – 3 Kriyas
2. *Chaturasra* Jāti – 4 Kriyas
3. *Kanda* Jāti – 5 Kriyas
4. *Misra* Jāti – 7 Kriyas
5. *Sankeerna* Jāti – 9 Kriyas

Sapta Tālas

There are seven principle talas, they are called *Sapta Talas*. They are:

	Name of the Tala	Sign	Akshara Kala
1.	Dhruva Tala	IOII	14
2.	Matya Tala	IOI	10
3.	Rupaka Tala	OI	6
4.	Jampa Tala	I ₇ UO	10
5.	Tripata Tala	I ₃ OO	7
6.	Ata Tala	I ₅ I ₅ OO	14
7.	Eka Tala	I	4

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The System of 35 Talas

There are seven basic talas. All these seven talas are made of three basic *angas*:

- | | |
|----------------|---|
| 1. Laghu | I |
| 2. Drutham | O |
| 3. Anu-Drutham | U |

Here are the sapta talas with their symbol denoting their respective angas:

- | | |
|-------------------------|------|
| 1. <i>Druva</i> Talam | IOII |
| 2. <i>Matya</i> Talam | IOI |
| 3. <i>Rupaka</i> Talam | OI |
| 4. <i>Jampa</i> Talam | IUO |
| 5. <i>Tripata</i> Talam | IOO |
| 6. <i>Ata</i> Talam | IIOO |
| 7. <i>Eka</i> Talam | I |

Among the three angas, drutham and anu-drutham are fixed. They have fixed number of *aksharas* (drutham – 2 aksharas, anu-drutham – 1 aksharam)

However, laghu varies in the number of aksharas depending upon its *jāti*. There are five *jāti*s of laghu with their corresponding akshara kalas:

- | | | |
|---------------------------------|--------------|-------------------------|
| 1. <i>Trisra Jāti</i> Laghu | (3 aksharas) | (Symbol) I ₃ |
| 2. <i>Chaturasra Jāti</i> Laghu | (4 aksharas) | I ₄ |
| 3. <i>Kanda Jāti</i> Laghu | (5 aksharas) | I ₅ |
| 4. <i>Misra Jāti</i> Laghu | (7 aksharas) | I ₇ |
| 5. <i>Sankeerana Jāti</i> Laghu | (9 aksharas) | I ₉ |

Because of this *jāti bedam* of laghu, each of the sapta talas produce five thalas, by varying the *jāti* of the laghu present. For e.g.:

- | | | |
|---|---|-----------------|
| 1. <i>Trisra Jāti</i> Rupaka Thalam | - | OI ₃ |
| 2. <i>Chaturasra Jāti</i> Rupaka Thalam | - | OI ₄ |
| 3. <i>Kanda Jāti</i> Rupaka Thalam | - | OI ₅ |
| 4. <i>Misra Jāti</i> Rupaka Thalam | - | OI ₇ |
| 5. <i>Sankeerna Jāti</i> Rupaka Thalam | - | OI ₉ |

In a similar manner seven talas of five jati each yield $7 \times 5 = 35$ Talas.¹

Tāla	Symbol	Jati				
		Trisram (3)	Chaturasram (4)	Kandam (5)	Misram (7)	Sankeeranam (9)
Druva	IOII	11	14	17	24	29
Matya	IOI	8	10	12	16	20
Rupaka	OI	5	6	7	9	11
Jampa	IUO	6	7	8	10	12
Tripata	IOO	7	8	9	11	13
Ata	IIOO	10	12	14	18	22
Eka	I	3	4	5	7	9

Table of 35 Talas with their respective akshara kāla-s

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¹ If more than one laghu is present in the thala, all the laghus will have the same jaati.

Geetham

Introduction

Geetham generally means a song. The union of *dhātu* and *mātu* is known as geetham, i.e., the union of music and words (swaram and sahityam). Geethams are the simplest of melodies. The term geetham literally means a song, but in Carnatic music it signifies a particular type of composition.

The music of the geetham is simple melodic extension of the raga in which it is composed. Its tempo is uniform. It is a continuous composition without any sections pallavi, anupallavi and charanam. The geetham is sung without repetition from the beginning to end. Some geethams have two sections (*khandikas*) and some have three. Some geethams are concluded by repeating a portion of the opening part.

Geethams are learned after a course in the preliminary swara exercises and alankaras. There are geethams in all the sapta talas and their varieties. Geethams are of two kinds. They are:

1. *Sanchari* geetham (aka *Sāmānya* / *Sadharana* / *Lakshya* geetham)
2. *Lakshana* geetham

Sanchari Geetham

Sanchari Geethams (also known as *Sāmānya* or *Sadharana Geethams*) are usually in praise of God, musical luminaries and āhāryas. E.g.: The *Sapta Tala Geetham* in *Nata Raga* “*Gana Vidya Durandara*” in praise of Venkata Subbayya by Pydala Gurusurthy Sastry. Geethams are set in medium tempo. There are no sangatis or variations and the flow of music is natural. Neither intricate combinations nor terse sancharis are found in its music. The swarupa is well brought out in each case. For each note of the *dhātu* there is usually a syllable in the *sāhitya* (lyrics).

Sometimes meaningless phrases are found interspersed in it. There are called Matrika Padas or Geethamlankara phrases. E.g.: *aa yiya yiya* in *Arabi Geetham* “*Rere Sri Rama*”. These phrases lend a characteristic beauty to the sahitya of geethams. They are introduced for ornamentation only. These syllables remind one of similar syllables occurring in *sāma-gānam*. There are instances of famous Sanskrit slokas which have been cleverly introduced as sahityas for sanchari geethams. The geetham in Bhairavi Raga *Sri*

Ramachandra and the geetham in Nata Raga *Amari Kimari* are well known examples.

In a geetham the number of swarams present in an āvartha is equal to the number of aksharas forming the avartha. The dheerga swaram being reckoned as two swarams will have two aksharas in the sahitya. The same is true for dheergam of three aksharas long. So, a geetham in *chaturasra jāti dhruva tāla* should not be taken as *trisa jāti triputa tāla* considering two swarams for each count. Likewise a geetham in *chaturasra jāti rupaka tāla* should not be taken as *trisa jāti eka tāla* with two swarams for each count and so on. This will not be in keeping with the rhythmical construction of the composition.

Geethams are compositions in *ati chitra tama mārgam*. They are in *ekākshara kalam* (one swara per count of tāla). Purandara Dasa's introductory geethams in praise of Vigneswara, Maheswara and Vishnu are sometimes referred to as *Pillari Geethams*. The significant introduction of vowels in the very first geetham is noteworthy and justifies the genius of the composer. *Pydala Gurumurthy Sastry* was a prolific composer of geethams after Purandara Dasa. He is referred to as "*Veyyi Geethamla*" *Pydala Gurumurthy Sastry*. After him no noteworthy composer has composed sanchari geethams.

Gānakrama: Order of Singing a Sanchari Geetham

Geethams are sung from the beginning to the end without repeating the avarthas. If a geetham consists of two sections (Kandikas) as in Kalyani *Kamala Jādala*, the second section is sung after the first.

Types of Sanchari Geethams

There are different categories of Sanchari Geetham:

Pillari Geetham

Geethams written in praise of Gods like Vigneswara, Mahesara, Mahavishnu etc. are called Pillari Geetham. E.g. *Sri Gananadha* in Malahari Ragam, Rupaka Talam.

Gana Raga Geetham

Geethams written in *gana ragams* like *Nata*, *Gowla*, *Arabi*, *Sri Ragam*, *Varāli* are called gana raga geethams. E.g. *Re Re Sri Rama* in Arabi Ragam, Triputa Talam.

Rakthi Raga Geetham

Geethams set to *rakthi ragams* like *Mohanam* and *Kalyani* are called Rakthi Raga Geethams. E.g. *Vara Veena* in Mohana Ragam, Rupaka Talam.

Raga Malika Geetham

In a same geetham, if more than one ragam is used, it is called a raga malika geetham. This type of Geethams are not in use today.

Notable composers who wrote sanchari geethams:

- Purandara Dasa
- Paidala Gurumurthy Sastry
- Govindhacharya
- Venkata Makhi
- Rama Mathya

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Lakshana Geetham

In a Lakshana Geetham, sahyam will describe the lakshna of the ragam in which the geetham is set to. There will be a small *deiva sthuthi* too.

Lakshna geethams describe


1. whether the ragam is a *melakartha* ragam or *janya* (derived) ragam. If it is a janya ragam, it describes the melakartha it is based on,
2. whether the ragam is a *bāshānga* or *upānga* ragam,
3. whether the ragam is *audava*, *shādava*, or *sampoorna* ragam,
4. the *ārohana* and *avarohana* of the ragam,
5. whether there is any *vakram* or *varjam* in the moorchana of the ragam,
6. the *jiva* (essential note), *nyasa* (ending note) and *graha* (starting) swarams of the ragam.

Lakshna geethams for many ragams are available.


Notable composers of lakshana geethams:

1. Venkatamakhi²
2. Paidala Gurumurthy Sastry




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² Subbarama Dikshitar's Sangeetha Sampradaya Pradarshini contains many of the lakshana geethams by Venkatamakhi. See: <http://ibiblio.org/guruguha/ssp.htm>

Swara Pallavi

Introduction

A *Swara Pallavi* (also known as *Jathi Swaram*) is a kind of composition which has only the *dhāthu* part (swarams) with no *sāhityam*. They are taught after geethams but before varanams. These are scholarly compositions and their dhathu has the *raga bhāvam*. Usually swara pallavis are set to *madhyama kalam* (medium tempo) and set to adi or chapu talas.

Swara pallavis can have 2 or 3 parts in the following manner:

1. Pallavi – Anu pallavi – Charanam
2. Pallavi – Charanam

Swara pallavis usually have 4 to 8 charanams. In some charanams, *mridanga jathis* are heard, hence the name *jathi swaram*.

Compositional structure of a swara pallavi is same as that of *swara jathi*. The only difference between them is, a swarajathi has the *māthu* part (sahityam) whereas a swara pallavi doesn't have any lyrics.

Gānakrama: Order of singing of a Swara Pallavi

Pallavi is sung first, followed by the charanams. At the end of each charanam, pallavi is sung again. So the order of singing is like this—

Pallavi
Charanam 1 – Pallavi
Charanam 2 – Pallavi
etc.

Notable composers who wrote swara pallavis include

- Srimān Sriramacharyulu
- Swathi Thirunāl
- Ponnayya Pillai

Biographies

Paidala Gurumurthy Sastry

Paidala Gurumurthy Sastry belonged to the 18th century. He lived in a village called *Kayattaru* in Tirunelveli district, Tamil Nadu. He was a Telugu Brahmin belonging to the Murikinati sect.

He was well versed in the four Vedas and was an expert in music and literature. He was a contemporary to *Ramaswamy Dikshitar* and a disciple of *Sri Sonti Venkata Subbyar*. He was a great scholar in both *lakshya* and *lakshana* (theory and practice) in music. He has composed many geethams, lakshana geethams, prabhandams and keerthanas. He has composed 1000 geethams and is known as *Veyyi Geetham Paidala Gurumurthy Sastry*. He was the most notable composer to compose geethams after *Purandara Dasa*. His mudra is *Gurumurthy*. He was honoured by *Manali Chinnaiah Mudaliar* many times in Madras for his scholarship in music and literature.

He composed *Gana Vidya Durandhara*—a saptageetham in Nata ragam—in praise of Venkata Swamy. All his compositions are in Sanskrit. The sahityas are in praise of God. His keerthana *Neeraja nayana* in Dhanyasi ragam, *Sadapathim* in Mohana ragam and the lakshana geetham *Kamsasura* in Shahana ragam are very popular among his compositions. Among his disciples is *Kanchipuram Gudala Seshayya Sastry* who wrote many well-known keerthanas and swarajatis.

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Purandara Dasa

Purandara Dasa was a composer lived in the 15th -16th (1486-1564) century. He was the first person to systematize the learning of Carnatic music. He composed *saralis*, *jantas*, *alankaras*, *geethams* and *devar namas*. In recognition of his foundational contributions, he is known as *adhi guru* and *karnataka sangeetha pithamaha*.

Purandara Dasa was born as the only son of *Varadhappa Naik*, a diamond merchant, and *Kamala Bai*. He was born in *Purandaragudda* near Hampi in Bellary district, Karnataka. His original name was *Srinivasa* and he was fondly called as *Sinappa*. He was brought up with all comforts and great care. He was a scholar in Sanskrit and literature. He married *Saraswathi Bai* at the age of 16. He lost his parents at the age of 20. He took over the responsibility of his father's business. He was very successful and he became very wealthy in a short period of time. He came to be known as *Navkoti Narayan*.

As his wealth grew up, he became merciless. But his wife was just the opposite. Once a poor brahmin came to him and asked for some money to perform the thread ceremony for this son. When he refused to help, the brahmin went to Dasa's wife and sought her help. She gave him her nose ring and the brahmin took it to Dasa's shop to sell it. Dasa realized that the ring was similar to that of his wife's. He rushed back home and demanded his wife to show the ring.

Saraswathi Bai didn't have the ring any more and she couldn't tell the truth to her husband. With a troubled mind, she decided to kill herself by drinking poison. Surprisingly, the ring was there in the bowl where poison was supposed to be there. She gave it to Purandara Dasa and told him the whole story.

Amazed to hear the story, Dasa sent his servants to find the poor man. The servants couldn't find him anywhere. It was at this time that Dasa composed his first song *Mosa Poyidhe* (Kannada) in Atana ragam.

This incident changed him completely. He went on a pilgrimage from the Himalayas to Kanyakumari three times. He gave all his wealth to charity. He taught Vedas and Upanishads to people. Vyasaraaya Pitathipathi *Swamiji Satyadharm Tirtha* gave him the name *Purandaradasa*.

Purandara Dasa composed sarali, janta, alankaras and pillari geethams to facilitate the learning of Carnatic music in a systematic way. He was the root cause in introducing Mayamalava Gowla ragam in all these 15 *abyasa ganams*. He has also composed thana varnams and padha varnams. He has also composed over 47,500 devar namas in Kannada. He was the first person to compose in Kannada. His mudra is *Purandara Vittala*.

~ End ~

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