Ragamala paintings inevitably attract an interdisciplinary examination. It would not be far-fetched to suggest that ragamala paintings, chitrakathis, pabuji-ka-pad, and the yamapattakas or pats from Puri, etc. are representative Indian attempts to bring together the visual and aural modalities and to evolve art forms that combine music, painting, and literature or drama. Three categories of arts—performing, fine, and literary—join forces here and the situation becomes challengingly complex. Ragamala paintings display a capacity to raise questions germane to many areas of Indian studies such as iconography, literature, prosody, mythology, and folklore. The present inquiry, however, draws on the three music-related disciplines of musicology, musical aesthetics, and cultural musicology. I do not claim that the approach registers a radical departure. The available literature on ragamala paintings would clearly refute such a claim. For example, ragamala paintings have been perceptively analyzed to tackle the musicological problem of raga-classification. They have also been repeatedly discussed in the context of the rasa theory vis-à-vis music. Finally, the relevance and causation of the paintings have interested many students of the broader cultural framework of this country. In other words, the aim of my presentation can only be to assert a continued relevance of the audio-visual experience that ragamalas impart.

The questions that the three disciplines raise are of a kind that demand renewed attention from each generation. This is inevitable as these disciplines are directly related to the performing tradition of music. For example, the musicological questions have a bearing on the technique and grammar of music-making. On the other hand, musical aesthetics shoulders the responsibility for judging the quality and value of the experience involved. Cultural musicology regards music and culture as mutual dependents and hence accepts the necessity of considering all musical events afresh when cultural changes are perceived as such. In sum, the scene is likely to remain exciting so far as ragamala paintings are concerned!

Experts agree that ragamala paintings, though barely 400 years old, have musicological antecedents. The most notable has been the role allotted to the human figure as an icon, as an active agent employed to concretize musical speculations. In this context the all-pervasive Purusha concept claims a conceptual priority. At its most abstract and metaphysical level, the concept is linked with the act of creation. As Dr Kapila Vatsyayan has pointed out, "The Absolute

* This article is based on a talk for the Mohite-Parikh Centre for Visual Arts, delivered at the National Centre for the Performing Arts, Bombay.
Primordial (Purusha) gives rise to the individual archetype (purusha)”, which is instrumental in creating all the products of the bhutas—i.e. beings—through the aid of sounds and words. The ancient sankhya philosophers held that Purusha is witness to the creative activities of Prakriti. He is tata-stha while the stream of creation flows on and by. A little more direct is the tradition of comparing music to the human body and stating equivalences between musical notes and bodily organs, etc. (e.g. sa = soul, re = head, ga = arms, ma = chest). At yet another level, music is understood as one limb of the larger conception of the arts seen as the Body of Man with many interrelated systems. Finally, musicological texts open speculations on the science of music by describing the physical and biological foundations of human life as a prelude to its more technical deliberations.

However, these comparatively abstract formulations are inadequate for the visualization inherent in the act of painting. It is here that the very early Indian custom of finding wide-ranging non-musical correlates to musical features makes its contribution felt. For example, the correlates from Bharata’s Natyashastra can be tabulated as shown in Table 1. The Naradiya Shiksha moves a step forward in that swara is equated with varna (Table 2).

By the time we move to a musical landmark, the Sangita Ratnakara, matters are obviously heading towards firm visualization as well as personification processes (Table 3, p. 6). However, as Gangoly perceptively noted, “even though Ratnakara allots protective deities for melodies as distinct from individual swaras, their pictures or images are not described... in any prayer-formulas in the shape of descriptive verses (dhyanas) such as we find in the later texts” (Ragas and Raginis, p. 106). Most authorities seem to agree that dhyanabodhas are not found prior to the Ratnakara. According to Dr Premlata Sharma, the Sangitopanishadsar (1350) of Sudhakar, a Jain musicologist, is the earliest work to have dhyanas. (Incidentally, Chaitanya Desai has significantly referred to Sudhakar’s use of dance terms traceable to Rajasthani languages and dialects.) Gangoly however gives credit to the Panchama Sara Samhita of Narada, dated circa 1440, for the appearance of both ragas and raganidhi and dhyanashakas. More importantly, the text of the dhyanashakas—even in the later Sangitaraja of Kumbha, again from Rajasthan (1433–68)—is to be marked for the resemblance of the dhyanas to the tantric dhyanas. This ostensibly is the reason why the following and similar terms occur frequently in the early dhyanashakas: pasha (lasso/noose), phalam (fruit), abjam (thousand-petalled lotus), japalama (rosary), veena (lute), padmam (lotus), ankusha (goad), shankha (conch), chakram (wheel), gada (mace), abhayakaram (a tantric mudra), etc. To anticipate a little, the dhaya concept needed to be replaced by the nayaka-nayika bheda in preparation for the advent of ragamalas.

It is also helpful to note that dhyanashakas are mostly related to grama ragas as distinct from deshi ragas. The former kind belonged to margi sangeet, i.e. sacred music. On the other hand, deshi ragas belonged to deshi sangeeta which has been succinctly defined in the Ratnakara as “the sangeita comprising gitam, vadyam and nrittam, that entertains people according to their tastes in different regions”.

...
### TABLE 1

**Bharata's Correlatives**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rasa</th>
<th>Shringara</th>
<th>Hasya</th>
<th>Karuna</th>
<th>Roudra</th>
<th>Vira</th>
<th>Bhayanaka</th>
<th>Bibhatas</th>
<th>Adibhuta</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bhava</td>
<td>Rati</td>
<td>Hasya</td>
<td>Shoka</td>
<td>Krodha</td>
<td>Utsaha</td>
<td>Bhaya</td>
<td>Jugupsa</td>
<td>Vismaya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Varna</td>
<td>Shyama</td>
<td>Sita</td>
<td>Kapota</td>
<td>Rakta</td>
<td>Gaura</td>
<td>Krishna</td>
<td>Nila</td>
<td>Pito</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Light green</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Grey</td>
<td>Red</td>
<td>Yellow-red</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Blue</td>
<td>Yellow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devata</td>
<td>Vishnu</td>
<td>Pramatha</td>
<td>Yama</td>
<td>Rudra</td>
<td>Mahendra</td>
<td>Kala</td>
<td>Mahakala</td>
<td>Brahman</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### TABLE 2

**Correlatives in Naradiya Shiksha**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Shadja</th>
<th>Padmapatraprabha</th>
<th>Brahmin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shadja</td>
<td>Padmapatraprabha</td>
<td>Brahmin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rishabha</td>
<td>Shukapinjara</td>
<td>Kshatriya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rishabha</td>
<td>Shukapinjara</td>
<td>Kshatriya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gandhar</td>
<td>Kanakabha</td>
<td>Half-Vaishya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gandhar</td>
<td>Kanakabha</td>
<td>Half-Vaishya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madhyama</td>
<td>Kundasaprabha</td>
<td>Brahmin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madhyama</td>
<td>Kundasaprabha</td>
<td>Brahmin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panchama</td>
<td>Krishna</td>
<td>Brahmin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panchama</td>
<td>Krishna</td>
<td>Brahmin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dhaivata</td>
<td>Pitaka</td>
<td>Kshatriya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nishada</td>
<td>Saravarna</td>
<td>Half-Vaishya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nishada</td>
<td>Saravarna</td>
<td>Half-Vaishya</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All (multi)-coloured
One may wonder about the actual link between the ragadhyanas and their performance. Gangoly, Ebeling, and many others have suggested that the forms were intended to be used by performers in order to capture and understand the divine qualities of music and that they are thus to be described as prayer formulae.

Perhaps one should ponder a little over the concept of dhyaṇa. The term is derived from ‘ध्य’ to meditate upon, imagine, call to mind. Dhyaṇa is a mental representation of the personal attributes of an image, traditionally of a deity. The concept has been developed by the Vedanta, Sankhya, Buddhist and Yogic thinkers in their own ways. Dhyaṇa has been inevitably linked to the divinity concept interpreted according to the general thrust of the philosophy concerned. The Yogic and, to some extent, the Buddhist interpretation is comparatively more spiritual, psychological, and philosophical than theological. For example Patanjali defines dhyaṇa as “ध्यानं प्रवृत्तिचक्रात” Without going into highly technical details the process could be described as the arrest of the march of those otherwise evanescent impressions received from anything selected as a stimulus-support and the consequent stabilization of a particular impression. Dhyaṇa constitutes one of the eight aspects of Patanjali’s yoga. It can be essentially characterized as a victory over time because dhyaṇa denies successive moments their customary power of destroying the experience of all earlier moments and thus bringing about a state of continuing instability. One important component of the procedure is अलापनम, i.e. supportive stimulus. It is the mental exercise practised by yogis in order to stabilize in the mind selected grosser forms of the eternal. Developed over the course of centuries, dhyaṇa procedures and techniques consist of two major types known as saguna and nirguna. The distinction between the two is that the latter involves...
concentration on abstract qualities while the former employs concrete objects etc. A later Upanishad (Dhyanabindopanishad), devoted exclusively to the dhyana phenomenon, significantly mentions Brahma, Vishnu, Rudra, Maheshwar and Achyut as the main icons and the sounds of the Veena and Shankha as the revelatory timbres. The Buddhists made the concept so accommodative as to include ordinary objects as well as ashubhas (inauspicious things) as supportive stimuli.

I have dwelt on the dhyana concept at some length to suggest that the ragadhyanas need to be understood as cumulative musicological and multi-channelled efforts to shift music away from the preemption of the sacred. The dhyana philosophy, the psychological procedures involved in it, the techniques it perfected towards religio-metaphysical ends—all were skilfully assimilated and adapted by medieval Indian musicology because music, music-makers, and music-receivers were undergoing a total change during the period. One of the basic principles of cultural musicology holds music to be the most reluctant cultural facet to accept change (and consequently the last to accept and exhibit change). However, music is also the most symptomatic of deeper cultural transformations. When music changes, everything can be assumed to have changed. The ascendency of the deshi element in the middle ages thus indicates comprehensive religious, linguistic, demographic, political, and aesthetic changes that the Indian ethos was keen to assimilate. As an aid in the process, non-representational expression such as music would need representational strategic applications, and ragadhyanas were devised with this end in view. Sharangdeva in his Sangita Ratnakara spoke perceptively of poorvaprasiddha and adhunaprasiddha ragas and thus drew attention to noticeable changes demanding a new systematization. It is interesting to note that though he reorganized the prevailing raga corpus by employing the original-and-derived format, there is no indication of the ragini concept being in vogue. Derivative ragas were not called ragnis.

Thus we reach the crucial span of the 16th–17th century, the period which produced two major works directly related to ragamalas: Kshemakarna/Meshkarna’s Ragamala (1509) and Pundarik Vitthala’s Ragamala (1576). The works listed raga-ragini-putra families, gave the descriptive verses, and followed them with pictures. Obviously the raga corpus had grown enormously since the times of Sangita Ratnakara. The concept of putra was therefore pressed into service to accommodate the new entrants. Once again the authors came from the Rajasthan-Malwa region. The accumulated influx of new ragas during the three centuries proved challenging to musicologists and musicians alike. Fortunately a number of major musicologists appear to have been performers and this saved them from being initiators of dessicated theoretical formulations. It is significant to note that Pundarik Vitthala not only includes as many as 16 Persian ragas in his family of 66 but also mentions their nearest Indian equivalents. He does not fail to clarify that the Persian ragas are parada (gifted by others) but accepts them without further ado! Pundarik Vitthala was a Southerner who came to the North in search of patronage. He is reported to have written on Hindustani music and dance at the behest of his patron. The two works of Kshemakarna and Pundarik Vitthala are the acknowledged foundations of the ragamalas. However, discussion of the estab-
lished ragamala convention cannot be taken up unless an intervening phase is taken into account.

The reference is to the Kalpasutra manuscripts dated late 15th century. Ebeling admits that the Kalpasutra Ragamala is the earliest, yet concludes that it is “a dead end road in terms of pictorial ragamala-s”. Even if one accepts his judgement, the other illustrations from the same Jain source merit serious notice for every cultural consideration. The manuscript illustrations deal with very fundamental musicological concepts such as grama, swara, shruti, murchhana and tana. For the present purpose some features of these 107 illustrations (described by the editor alternatively as chitravali or sangita-rupavali) are worth noting:

1. All the illustrations have only one figure in the picture-space and the title is inscribed at the top.
2. Animals and birds find a place frequently but the common format is a figure with a human body and an animal head.
3. The highly technical concepts depicted in the series closely follow the stated musicological tradition. For example, the tana-visualizations include animals/birds because different tanas begin successively on different notes in sequence and the notes themselves have been associated with the calls of certain animals or birds according to the musicological tradition.
4. It is surprising that even though the chitramala proceeds to include illustrations on dance, the concept of tala is not even touched.
5. Altogether the series depicts 15 musical instruments—none of which sounds an unfamiliar note!

The undiluted musicological orientation of the series is remarkable. On the other hand the Kalpasutra includes ayudha (weapons), mudras, and other visual forms that echo the Yaksha-Yakshini or Gandharva-Surasundari figures of temple sculpture.

According to ragamala experts the Kalpasutra effort is at least a century away from the really important ragamalas. As a musicologist I feel it represents a major step towards the mainstream ragamala tradition since it reflects the incipient conceptual decision of the artists to deny a one-to-one correspondence between musical and visual phenomena. This is what made the later ragamalas possible. The Kalpasutra indicates a kind of breaking away, a liberation from a convention which was ambitiously comprehensive—attempting as it did to encompass too many details and perhaps hamper the freedom of performance so essential to music. Leaving aside this larger issue, it might be said that the Kalpasutra Ragamala, though nearer to ragadhyanas than to the pictorial ragamalas that came later, represents a necessary and a logical step towards them.

At this stage a little diversion needs to be made by going back to the ragadhyanas and especially their relation to the performing tradition. Is it sufficient to describe the dhyanas as prayer formulae to express their link with the performing tradition of Hindustani music? Perhaps in this respect the net has to be cast a little wider.
A look towards the Vaishnava tradition of music in Assam and adjoining areas seems advisable. This is logical because the *ragamala* traditions and Vaishnava musicology both leaned heavily on the *Sangita Damodara* (1500 A.D.) of Shubhankara. Authorities on Assamese and Manipuri music refer to the actual singing of *ragadhyana* s after the initial *alapa* which too is not set to rhythm (Neog and Changkakoty 1962, Darshana Jhaveri and Kalavati Devi 1978). In fact the former two authors assert that *raga*-visualization seems to have prevailed in Assam from medieval times in the form known as *raga-malita*. The same authorities state that Rama Saraswati, a contemporary of Shankaradeva (1449–1598), used the expression *raga-malita* in his *Geeta Govinda* and described it as *ragadhyana* while he took the musical contents of his compositions from Shubhankara’s *Sangita Damodara*. Further, the authors draw attention to the significant fact that popular *raga-malitas* differ from the *ragalakshanas* of the Sanskrit treatises including those of the *Sangita Damodara*. Very often the *malitas* do not give personified pictures of *ragas* but link them with some incident in the life stories of Krishna or Vishnu. Both these features suggest an independent, early, popular and secular evolution of the concept of *ragadhyana* as a performance feature. The similarity between the two terms *ragamala* and *raga-malita* is also obvious. The Assamese practice could raise many questions about the accepted statements on the origin, period, provenance and *raison d’être* of the *ragamalas* as a musical phenomenon.

Yet another instance of regional variation of some significance is the *Nasik Ragamala* brought to our notice by M.S. Mate and Usha Ranade in 1982. The series is incomplete and consists of only 44 paintings. The set is based on Kshmakarna’s *Ragamala* and displays interesting similarities and deviations. Dated 18th century, the series shows a remarkable local touch in the physiognomy of human figures, dresses, ornaments, general decor and architectural setting. Even in the incomplete version, the inclusion of Jogi-Asavari in the *raga* corpus may prove significant in view of the fact that Jogi-Asavari, like Gauri, is common in the non-elite musical traditions of Maharashtra.

Maharashtra is also credited to have originated a series of pictures on *talas* painted in the Deccan in the late 18th century. Whatever may be the verdict on their pictorial worth, the paintings undoubtedly arouse musicological interest.

In the musicological tradition *tala* has never been regarded as less important than *raga*. A pictorial tradition fully responsive to the musicological continuity would logically be expected to reflect the *tala* aspect of Indian music as well. It is interesting to note that to the ancients *tala* was an action-reaction of the two opposing principles of *purusha* and *prakriti*. Shiva and Shakti. Almost predictably, *ta* has been equated with Shiva and *la* with Shakti. One might recall the *tandava* dance of Shiva and the *lasya* expression of Parvati. Against this background the Deccan attempt, however isolated and weak, needs to be appreciated as a correction introduced to rectify the musico-pictorial imbalance conventionally present in *ragamala* paintings. When one remembers that even the pioneering *Kalpasutra* tradition did not touch *tala* (though it dealt with dance), the contribution of the Deccan *tala* paintings assumes added value.

Usha Ranade and Kamal Chavan, the editors of the monograph on the *tala*
paintings, have argued that \textit{tala} is difficult to portray because of its secondary role in generating a \textit{rasa}. They have also rightly drawn attention to the fact that \textit{tala} is distinct from \textit{laya} and that it is the latter which is rightfully associated with \textit{rasa}. Whether it is the early and seminal \textit{Vishnudharmottara Purana} or the later \textit{Sangitaraja} of Kumbha, the emotive aspect of music is clearly associated with \textit{laya} rather than \textit{tala}. But this only takes the argument farther back! The question which could then be raised is: Why is a pictorial representation of \textit{laya} not found in the tradition? Perhaps the answer lies elsewhere and needs to sought after some more ground has been covered.

Once again a look at North-eastern music-making may prove rewarding. It has been recorded by students of Manipuri dance and music and those of Vaishnavite rhythmic expression in Assam that Pung and Khol are played to realize musical forms described as \textit{ragas}. In the Manipuri presentation this specific form is reportedly known as \textit{ahoubi}. In a similar fashion the \textit{raga-diya} (presentation of a \textit{raga}) in the Assamese tradition includes \textit{raga-talani} which has no reference to the \textit{tala/talas} actually used in the performance of the \textit{Geet} which follows later. The \textit{raga-talani} in fact consists of playing certain \textit{pataksharas} in a definite sequence. It is thought-provoking that the oft-quoted definition of \textit{raga}\textemdash\textit{ranjayati raga}\textemdashhardly makes the exclusive use of musical notes inevitable! If one considers the traditional \textit{shabda-nada-dhvani-varna} hierarchy it is easy to follow the logic of having \textit{ragas} of the \textit{Mridanga} or any other instrument\textemdashwith no mandatory role for musical notes.

The point is that \textit{ragamala} paintings did not aim at reflecting the musicological tradition\textemdashat least not after the early \textit{dhyana} phase was over. In fact, it did not use music even as its stimulus! It became what it is because it worked within its own pictorial tradition. The tradition, it appears to me now, is more theatre-oriented than music-oriented. This is the reason why the early \textit{Kalpasutra} attempt with its heavy musicological bias was not followed up. The two other controlling contents of the \textit{ragamalas} are known to be the \textit{nayika-bheda} doctrine and the \textit{Krishna-lila} literature. It is necessary to remember that \textit{nayika-bheda} as propounded in the Sanskrit tradition was part of the \textit{rasa} theory in which \textit{shringara} was dominant. The \textit{Krishna-lila} concept accepted the \textit{rasa} system but processed it with allegorical devotion through the literature of Jayadeva, Vidyapati, Surdas, etc. It is also important to note that Rupa Goswami’s \textit{Ujjwal Chintamani} brought into being a comprehensive \textit{bhakti}-oriented Vaishnava theoretical structure to add an invaluable dimension to the Hindi literary tradition.

I suggest that it is the theatre-inspired \textit{rasa} system which provided a foundation for \textit{ragamala} paintings while the \textit{nayika-bheda} as propounded in the Hindi tradition helped to determine their content. The \textit{avatara} concept has always proved conducive to theatric expression because it creates roles and not characters alone. In addition, the \textit{Krishna-lila} proved to be an apt formula for humanizing abstractions inherent in conceptual structures in the \textit{rasa} theory, literary sophistications in the \textit{nayika-bheda}, or philosophical subtleties in the \textit{avatara} concept. It is against this background that we can appreciate many components of \textit{ragamala} paintings: for example love as the \textit{sthayi-bhava}; \textit{nayaka-nayika} as the \textit{alambana-vibhavas}; friends/messengers and natural surroundings as \textit{uddipana-}
vibhavas; alankaras and havas of the personages as anubhavas; and finally the
eexpressions and feelings depicted as the sanchari-bhavas. This is the reason why the
musicological authenticity gets weaker and weaker as we move from one ragamala
to the other. Meshakarna and his followers represent musical impulses taken over
by theoreic ideas struggling to give expression to artistic interest in mundane (as
distinct from divine and profane), secular (as distinct from sacred), and
action-oriented (as distinct from contemplative) theme and content. In addition,
there was the urge to articulate regional instead of pan-Indian features. Thus, while
the musical labels continued, the content underwent a radical change. The true
significance of the ragamala phenomenon would be lost if we continued to be
guided by the labels.

For a musicologist ragamala paintings could pose the following questions:

1. Why is it that there are no talamalas?
2. Why is it that the Carnatic system of music does not enjoy this extra-musical
but music-related art expression?
3. Where did the basic loyalty of the ragamalas lie—in the performing or the
scholastic tradition of music?
4. In view of the categorial pentad of Indian musical expression, is it preferable
to examine ragamala paintings with a set of criteria other than the customary
historico-musicological?
5. Indian musical expression has been more composite than usually realized. Is it
possible to use the fact to explain the rationale governing the origin, nature, and
function of the paintings?
6. What are the probable reasons which confined the ragamala tradition to a
certain part of the country? Were there any musical reasons for it?
7. Meshakarna's attempt certainly provides the most complete model of the
paintings. But is it possible to ascribe deviations from his work to differences in
regional musical traditions? In other words, pictorial deviations from Meshakarna
may prove to be musical/musicological conformities.

Note: I would like to dedicate this presentation to the late Ardhendukumar Gangopadhyay, better
known as O.C. Gangoly (1 Aug. 1881-9 Feb. 1974). Like Pandit V.N. Bhatkhande (whom Gangoly
respected), Ardhendukumar left a flourishing legal practice to devote himself to work in the field of
music and arts. His insights into the visual arts and music made him a major thinker analyzing the
composite nature of Indian art theory and its practice. His book Ragas and Raganis laid a firm
foundation for the study of the musical aspect of ragamala paintings. The first limited edition of Ragas
and Raganis in 1935 consisted of only 36 copies. The second edition saw the light of day in 1947. He
dedicated this seminal work to Pandit Bhatkhande. Gangoly writes briefly but touchingly of how
Bhatkhande on his sick-bed shed silent tears when he found that the work was dedicated to him.

Gangoly is thorough, fundamental, comprehensive, and systematic. His work is at once an
encouragement and a challenge to students of Hindustani music—ADR.