

*Politics and Prestige in an Eighteenth-Century Rāgamālā*

At face value, the *rāgamālā* is a relatively standardized genre: verses describe the visual connotations of *rāgas*, the melodic modal entities foundational to Hindustani music. The authors of these texts drew upon a multitude of sources, including works of *saṅgīta śāstra*, *kāvya* aesthetics, symbols and narratives developed in *bhakti* contexts, as well as painted iconography. This variety of ingredients meant that in practice *rāgamālās* could take very different forms. Besides the different artistic and intellectual facets of these texts, *rāgamālās* also spoke to questions of power and social prestige. In the Late Mughal period, the connotations of musicological and literary expertise gradually changed, and *rāgamālās* from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries bear witness to this transition.

In this paper I will discuss the *Rāgamālā* written in Brajbhasha by Yasodananda Sukla "Kavidas", completed in 1758. Kavidas was a Brahman pandit from Malwa, employed in Murshidabad by the fourth Jagat Seth, Mahtab Rai (d.1764). While overtly concerned with conventional themes, such as musicological theory and poetic visualisations of the *rāgas*, Kavidas also wrote to establish his own credentials as a Brajbhasha intellectual, demonstrating his aptitude in different metres and styles, and his ability to unlock arcane knowledge for a vernacular readership. However, music and aesthetics was a secondary consideration in this work. The *Rāgamālā* was framed by extensive *praśasti* verses dedicated to his patron's family, the Jagat Seths. Itemising in concrete terms the economic and political clout of the individual members of this banking dynasty, Kavidas was able to render his poetic composition into a statement of material and worldly authority. Given that this text was prepared in 1758, the year after the Battle of Plassey and the establishment of a British mint in Calcutta, the political overtones of this work become especially significant: the text might in fact be read as a desperate attempt to assert the authority of the Jagat Seths just as they were at their most vulnerable. This paper will consider how Kavidas wove musicological lore together with contemporary economics, and reflect upon the larger social resonances of the *rāgamālā* genre.