The striking feature of folk music is its strong rhythm. Rhythm is made prominent by employing many percussion or time-keeping instruments, by clapping and by making the tempo fast. Instruments producing melody are comparatively fewer and even the music of these instruments are in fact drowned by the loud rhythm produced by the drums, cymbals etc.

How rhythm is made very powerful and conspicuous in folk music

Time in folk music is carried out by giving more stress or emphasis to the pulses of beats. Pulses are the inner units or inner divisions, vibrations or throbs of the beat. These pulses are accentuated and rhythmic patterns are woven with the beat which is powerfully reproduced on the time-keeping instruments enhance the overall rhythmic effect. Even in simple time or the uniform flow of rhythmic beats, each beat divides into two, four or eight inner units, and presented with strong accents on the first inner unit, or on the first and the third and accentuating all the pulses thus creating inner rhythmic patterns. Such an accentuation for pulses makes the tempo appear faster and livelier.

Poly rhythm, cross rhythm and syncopation

Poly rhythm is a suggestion of a contrast rhythm within the song. Poly rhythm is found in traditional African music, where one encounters simple as well as complex poly rhythm. In Indian folk music, there is only simple type of poly rhythm. Syncopation, where the accent is displaced, is also a common feature in folk music. Simple polyrhythm is found in South Indian devotional music and art music (Carnatic music). In Carnatic music, in the time measure adi tala with eight counts, the combination of three and five has been used in various ways to create many types of polyrhythmic patterns for the compositional structure. Tyagaraja’s large number of adi tala kritis offer endless varieties and create a lively atmosphere as they give high scope for complex cross-rhythmic accompaniment on the Mridangam. Tyagaraja’s desadi-type songs have syncopated passages that give the song vitality and energy. Tyagaraja’s compositions in general are devotional. In art music, Tyagaraja’s compositions are sung with more emphasis on melody. Still, one cannot miss their devotional content and rhythmic appeal.

Chapu Tala

Compound rhythm which is defined as additive rhythm, with 3, 5, 7, and 9 pulses, is popular in many types of folk music. In folk music, compound rhythm is in fast tempo. While the first three rhythmic types are universal, the last type with 9 pulses, and also some further complex rhythmic types are found in the folk music of Central Europe and Asia Minor. In Carnatic music, the chapu tala varieties have their origin in the compound rhythm of folk music. Tisra chapu which is usually called tisram or tisra nadai has 3 pulses for a beat, khanda chapu has 5, misra chapu 7, and sankirna chapu has 9 pulses. Peculiarly, we do not find sankirna chapu in Indian folk music or at least in South Indian folk music, while it is very common in the traditional folk music of
Bulgaria and other countries in the Balkan Peninsula. In South Indian devotional music, which is called “the refined type of folk music” by Prof. P. Sambamurthi, there are devotional songs in brisk tisram, khandam and misram. Some of the boat songs sung during the famous boat races in Kerala are sung with a very fast misra rhythm. In Carnatic music, a rather slow-paced tisram is handled in the art music forms in contrast to the fast tisram found in folk music compositions. In South Indian dance, the misram is adapted with a slow tempo that gives a swinging effect. The Kshetryya Padams are dance compositions mostly set in misra chapu tala and in triputa tala which is only a slower version of misra chapu. They are compositions meant for abhinaya or gesture and the slackening of the tempo serves this purpose very well. The misra chapu tala in Carnatic music compositions are also comparatively in a slow tempo. In the most superior art music form, you find the tala at its slowest tempo. In pallavi disposition, an intellectual sphere of art music, sometimes very fast tisram, khandam, misram and sankirnam are employed for certain rare brainstorming feats. But it is still different from folk music.

Like folk music, folk rhythm is natural and spontaneous. Here, rhythm and lyrics play a vital role and music is subservient. In art music, especially in its highest form, it is music that is the most important. Lyrics and rhythm are always underplayed.