

## Padanthara:

# From a Lofty Concept to a Huge Joke

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Traditional excellence is what makes Carnatic music the great art that it is and without it Carnatic music will not remain Carnatic music. The richness of this excellence is packed in the compositions of the great composers in a matchless range of rasas and if only musicians care to learn and interpret them with sensitive understanding of their extraordinary beauty, classical music will never face the danger of extinction.

This danger is, however, very much present in the contemporary approach of most musicians to whom a song is not important by itself and serves more as a plank on which they can mount their technical skill which provides ready and robust percussive entertainment. Even the great songs are made to subserve this purpose by the serried akara and additive sangati slant in rendition thus demonstrating how unthinking professionalism can render even the most profound barren.

There is just no scope for genuine musical bhava in the percussive style of song interpretation. A Tyagaraja song ceases to be a Tyagaraja song when rendered in this hacking fashion. The impression created by this modern technique is far from the pregnant evocation of an inspired composition. It is more that of a tune presented in swara arrangements though the swaras are not stated.

### THE SLIDE-DOWN

This unfortunate trend has been a major factor responsible for the slide-down in standards of Carnatic excellence and is the direct result of the total reliance on swara-notation in the learning process setting at

naught the values of the serious, dedicated and painstaking effort on which the oral tradition placed utmost emphasis.

Notation is all right for common tunes but in the case of the varnamettus of the great vaggeyakaras, it can serve only a very limited purpose (like providing a reference aid when memory weakens). The great kritis have to be learnt as padanthalas from masters who preserve them with their loveliness of shape and nuances intact.

Alas, the word "padanthara" itself is not heard these days while it was omnipresent a few decades ago and considerable time was devoted in the conferences of the Music Academy to discuss the authenticity of padanthalas and "padanthara suddha" in the course of the very fruitful debates on raga lakshana. Teachers known for the excellence of their padanthara repertoire were eagerly sought after by students of music in those times when the traditional motivation in Carnatic music ruled high. It is a sad and different picture today with the few who maintain links with the padanthara tradition allowed to remain in oblivion.

However, one virtue about contemporary musicians is that they know what they are doing with the compositions of the great masters and never claim that their version of any song is the "correct pata". Padanthara sensitivity suffered a setback with the emergence of personal styles but, when it throve, there was a confusing and comic side to it which, perhaps, encouraged the trend of the new stylists to indulge in the daring act of modifying classical kirtana versions to suit their personal approaches. The huge

joke is that these versions are now followed with further modifications and what has resulted is further erosion of traditional musical values.

### **SAD DILUTION**

From the lofty concept of the inviolability of the traditional padanthara to this sad state of enormous dilution of classicism in the rendition of the songs of the great composers is, indeed, a tragic descent. But, can the padanthara votaries disown responsibility for this unfortunate situation?

Certainly, they cannot for they have been guilty of the over-zealous conflicting claims, each insisting that his is the "authentic version", the "correct pata" etc. that threw the padanthara scene into confusion and drove some bewildered but resourceful musicians to rely on their own intelligence and imagination in interpreting the compositions of the masters.

There was much that was educative, enlightening and edifying in the raga lakshana debates of yesteryears at the Music Academy's annual conferences but the padanthara battles that, at times, ensued between the experts in the course of the debates provided more amusement than instruction. The acid tongue, cleverness and ready wit ruled during these bouts but serious pursuit of truth suffered. To the public who witnessed the show it was all excruciatingly funny.

### **THE SPECTACLE**

There was the spectacle of a song being sung not in one or two but even three different versions, fortunately in the same raga. A greater shock was the same song being sung in more than one raga by different experts each of whom claimed that his was the authentic "pata". There was also the occasion when Nayaki was being discussed and a musician walked in and rendered the second movement of a song in the raga with an unvarnished Arabhi phrase and declared that it was how his "Guru-nadhar" taught him the piece and he would not entertain any thought of correcting his "padanthara".

Certainly, the great creators of music cannot be blamed for all this anarchy. They had disciples of various grades ranging from the distinctive to the dense and it stands to reason that the levels of assimilation varied and found expression later in a puzzling variety of conflicting padanthatras. It is also as natural for each school of thought to claim authenticity for its music only with fanatic zeal as it is for the erring musicians who is totally unaware of a nuance that has completely eluded him to persist in the delusion that he is repeating a particular phrase precisely as his master had taught him while the guru may have, in fact, given up all hopes of correcting the student after a hundred attempts had proved futile. ■

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