

Devotion Through Music

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Music has been the preferred medium for the expression of Devotion in many religions. In India, the music of the Vedic times was tuneful. The Samagana was said to possess supernatural powers. Every unit of vibration of the tones in Vedic songs was deemed to be surcharged with heavenly beauty and light.

Why is music, more than the arts of sculpture, painting, poetry, etc. so powerful a vehicle for emotions like Devotion? The German philosopher Hegel provides the answer :

"Music is the art of the soul addressed directly to the soul. Its expression does not produce an object persisting in space like a piece of sculpture. But through its free soaring, it becomes a communication between the individual soul and the universal soul."

According to Indian religion, music is the greatest art as it brings the sincere devotee in close touch with the Nadha Brahman, the divine aspect of Sat-chit-Ananda. According to the Upanishads, this Ananda has a birthless and deathless immortal existence, the ideal of all mortals. With the help of concentration and meditation, music can become saturated with the all-blissful and loving presence of the Beautiful. Realism of this possibility and its exploitation through proper channels, have enabled Indian music to be both loving and living.

Saints like Tyagaraja, Dikshitar, Syama Sastry Sadasiva Brahman, Arunagirinathar,

Annamachariar, Ramadasar, Purandaradasar, etc. therefore chose music to be the appropriate vehicle of Bhakthi for entering the divine temple of all-blissful state of existence. Their songs move us to heights of ethereal peace and states of bliss. Devotion can thus be most effectively practised by every bhaktha. Sri Tyagaraja is the outstanding example of this.

From the earliest days of Christianity, music was the medium through which the Church conducted its rituals. The effect of the Mass Ceremony, an elaborate ritual, was enhanced by music. The Gregorian chant provided the foundation of Western music. Through the darkest centuries of European civilisation, "plainsong" melody kept up the prevailing ecclesiastic art.

The auspicious Tyagaraja Aradhana day will soon come, when the thoughts of millions of music lovers throughout the world converge on the life and legacy of perhaps the greatest saint-musician of the world. Saint Tyagaraja's immortal music was not only a revolution in itself that changed the heart and face of Karnatak music, but an apocalyptic programme for spiritual transformation of all mankind. *Tyagaraja gathered musical resources from past and present and synthesised them in large composite forms sublimated to the highest plane, in which artistic vision and emotion exercised a balanced interplay.*

By his mastery of the purely craftsmanship and aesthetic aspects of music and his incandescent emotional attachment to his Ishta dhevata Lord Rama, he became

the mighty Ganga of Karnatak music. His genius brought unsurpassed beauties within the bounds of convention, not only evolving in the process a mature art of organised melody, but also translating, by faith and artistic vision, the chaos and misery of temporal experiences into emotional music of an indelible, unforgettable stamp.

Sri Tyagaraja was least interested in ephemereal displays of virtuosity, in which some of his predecessors engaged themselves. Nor in the sterile fanaticism of the intellect that revelled in the mere beauty of musical forms. He was, a single example of the great bhaktha matching Sri Aurobindo's great prescription viz. "Whoever seeks to climb from the level to level up the Hill of the Divine, deterred by no retardation or defeat, shrinking from no vastness because it is too vast for him, no height because it is too high for his spirit, no greatness because it is too great for him, he is the true Aryan."

Spurning every material comfort or chance of personal glory, Sri Tyagaraja concentrated his mind on Bhakthi or undeviating devotion to the Lord, as the great spiritual reformer Saint Sri Ramanuja defined it ("*Sneha-purvam anu-dhyanam bhaktir ityobhduhate*"). Moreover, as our wise leaders have said, Bhakthi leads to renunciation and concentration on the Divine. Tyaga or renunciation is the way to entail peace and freedom. The difficulties or obstacles in the path of renunciation are pride, envy, anger, worldly desires, etc. and to be free of them, the Saint appeals to the Lord of the Seven Hills in his Kriti "Tera tyagarada" in Gowlipantu. In order to understand his approach, let us consider some of his songs.

In "Ramabhakti samrajyamau" (Suddha Bangala) he again stresses the spiritual aspects of devotion to Sri Rama. As Sir S. Radhakrishnan said, "Religion is the *sadana* or discipline by which we make a whole of our being, when our thoughts, speech, action -- *manas, vak, kaya* - work together."

Tyagaraja saw Rama in everything and felt that there was no need for asramas or the trappings of religion. He scoffed at pretenders and the outward forms of religious practices by saying caustically: "If bathing, fasting, closing one's eyes, constitute devotion to God, then birds, animals will get to Heaven first"! His point is that the secular must be invaded by the spiritual.

The deterioration that set in South India in the arts like painting, sculpture, music after the fall of Vijaynagar, was offset by the emergence of saint-singers who helped to develop the art of music and elevated society with their exalting songs. Saint Annamacharya and Sri Purandaradasa stand at the beginning of this era of musicospiritual revival; Sri Tyagaraja dominated the end of that phase. Leaders of philosophic thought have said that Bhakthi was devised for arresting the decline in spiritual values by showing an easier path for salvation in place of the more rigid austerities prescribed for spiritual uplift. Hence the avatars of saint-singers like the Haridasas of Karnatak, who were foremost among Indian musical composers who composed songs in the form of Kirtanas, Suladis, Ugabhogos and Devaranamas, the latter thousands and thousands in number. Kanakadasa, Vijayadasa, Sripadaraya, Vadiraja, Anandadasa, Mohanadasa, Premadasa, Jagannathadasa, Gopaladasa, Vyasaraaja and

Purandaradasa gave pride of place to Bhakti marga as the supreme path of salvation, even though Gnana marga as the supreme path of salvation, even though Gnana marga and Karma marga were also acceptable to them. They were all devotees of Lord Hari and his ten avatars. Madhavacharya postulated the idea of Moksha as being linked closely to pure devotion and self-surrender. They also placed a lot of firm faith in Namasankirtana, the form of meditation easily available to ordinary mortals, leading to salvation.

It is at the hands of Purandaradasa, the foremost disciple of Vyasaraaya that the art of composition reached the highest perfection and attained status as models, even to Sri Tyagaraja. Purandara's songs had lucidity, simplicity of style, understanding of the basic norms of music. No wonder he is regarded as the Pithamaha of Karnataka music. The music world today owes a deep debt of gratitude to the revered late Dr. M. L. Vasanthakumari for popularising the songs of Haridasas in her numerous concerts but also publishing them with notation by Dr. Gowri Kuppuswamy and Dr. M. Hariharan.

Perhaps, the pioneer among all saint-composers was Jayadeva who towards the end of the 12th century made the Gita Govinda, the greatest love-poem in Sanskrit and a work that is a splendid example of Krishna Bhakti, the "Jagadisa Hari" hymn being of compelling interest. Lilasukha of Andhra and Jayadeva in Orissa were saintly poets whose source of inspiration was Lord Krishna and his playmate Radha. In spite of its erotic mysticism, the "Gita Govinda" recited at the Jagannath temple at Puri, is a great instrument of Devotion through Bhakti. It influenced the entire Sanskrit literature of India ever since. Many of the

Ashtapadi songs are household chants in north and south, although they are sung in ragas different from what Jayadeva ascribed to them.

According to the scholars, Jayadeva was the founder of the Bhakti movement which grew in strength and spread rapidly in the 15th and 16th centuries, even defying the aggressive sectarianism and bigotry of the preachers and followers of other religions and faiths. As one writer has it, "It is at once a great poem, a gripping lyric drama, a heart-entrancing opera, all rolled into rapturous music." Sir Edwin Arnold who translated it into English called it the "Indian Song of Songs".

There is a very fine story in Skanda Purana illustrating the character of Bhakthi. A girl aged about 16 is sitting by the side of two old men who are about to breathe their last. Narada appears on the scene and asks the girl what she was doing in the company of the two old men. The girl replies that she is the mother and the two old men are her children. Narada is puzzled and asks for an explanation. The girl tells him that she is Bhakti and that the two old men represent Vairagya and Jnana. Narada understands the significance. Bhakti is eternal, while Vairagya and Jnana are ephemeral only.

Annamacharya of Thirupati of the 14th century is another of the poet-singers who adhered entirely to the doctrine of Bhakthi. His songs are now becoming increasingly well known thanks to the researches of scholars under the impetus of the Tirupati Devasthanam.

Closer to Sri Tyagaraja in the pursuit of the doctrine of devotion and Saranagati was Saint Ramadasar, one of the greatest Rama

bhaktas, whose compositions are increasingly in vogue and breathe the spirit of *dasya* to Lord Rama, for whom he built a temple and went to jail, until the Lord appeared before him. Naturally, he was Tyagaraja's mentor as well.

Sri Narayana Theerthar, the author of "Krishnaleela Tharangini" was also another guru, who inspired Sri Tyagaraja in his pursuit of spiritual advance. As a proof thereof, he even incorporated here and there, some phrases of the tarangams into his songs.

Nava Vidha Bhakti

The Srimad Bhagavatham envisages Nava Vidha Bhakti Tyagaraja, brought-up on Potana's Bhagavatham (a daily chore), naturally has embodied the essence of each channel of the Bhakthi stream in his compositions and glorified Ramabhakti's immense power and superiority through them. We may note a few of them in passing:

1. *Sravanam* : "Rama Katha Sudarasa" (Madhyamavathi)
2. *Kirtana* : Though his whole life was spent only in composing and singing Kirthanas on Lord Rama, yet in "Pakkala nilabadi" (Karaharapriya) he says that he employs his tongue in singing namakirthana. His "Sataraga Rathnamalika" is a garland of 100 Kirtanas. The Kirti is referred to by him in his Kirti "Elavathara" in Mukhari raga.

Smaranam : In the Nagasvaravali Kirti "Sri Pate" he avers the "meditation on you, Rama, is my life". The Kirti "Smarane sukhamu" (Janaranjani raga)

is another example. Examples are hardly necessary as Tyagarajaswami was contemplating Sri Rama day and night.

4. *Padasevana* : "Sri Rama Padama" (Amrithvahini), "Lekhana ninnu" (Asaveri) and "Nama kusuma" (Sri raga) are all about the lotus feet of Rama.
5. *Archana* : The Kritis "Tulas dalamulache" (Mayamalavagowla) and "Tulasi bilva" refers to the various flowers used in angarchana.
6. *Vandanam* : Songs "Vandanam Raghunandana" in Sahana and "Dandamu pettenura" in Balahamsa raga and "Endaro Mahanubhavulu (Sri) are fine examples.
7. *Dasyam* : Every minute of Tyagaraja's life was devoted to this concept of bhakti. Examples are the Kritis "Vidamuseyave" (Karaharapriya) and "Tavadasoham" (Punnagavarali).
8. *Sakhyam* : "Amma Ravamma" (Kalyani) "Nennarunchina" (Malavi)
9. *Atma Nivedana* : Absolute surrender. The Kritis "Kalaharana" (Suddhasaveri) "Nannu Vidachi" (Ritigowla) "Bhuvini dasudane (Sriranjani)

In the song "Chani todi teve", a tint of *Madhura bhakti* could be seen.

Sri Tyagaraja is often regarded as another avatar of Valmiki and he is supposed to have composed as many songs as the Ramayana, though only about 860 songs are available today. No wonder Sri Tyagaraja's life and achievements are regarded as the supreme example of devotion through music for the attainment of Moksha (liberation).