

“GEETHA ARTHAMU, SANGITA ANANDAMU

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In my childhood I had golden moments of listening to Nagaswaram music. The Sri Rama Navami festival in my village for ten days, brought eminent Vidwans of Nagaswaram. They stood and performed all the nights. We, children, also stood very near them, along with the petromax lights. The lights used to faint every now and then, but we stood very near the Nagaswaram Party with alert eyes even after midnight. We used to take steps in consonance with the Tavil Players and enjoy their great efforts in producing the enchanting sounds.

Village elders would sit in the pials of their houses and listen to Nagaswaram music with their legs stretched. They used to say that the Nagaswaram music is best enjoyed when one is far away from the instrument. “The sound of music wafting through the ozonic air is most enjoyable in Nagaswaram” they would say.

Nagaswaram became my ardent companion, after I joined All India Radio. I received Nagaswaram artistes and mingled with them. In my childhood I looked at them with awe. Affection replaced awe, when I interacted with them at AIR. Many of them became dear to me sheerly through their amiable manners. “Aiya Sowkyama?” (Are you alright Sir?) would be their first question, followed by “Amma Sowkyama? (Is your wife alright?), “Pappa Sowkyama?” (Is your daughter alright) I used to tell them that I had only a ‘Payyan’ (Son) and not ‘Pappa’ (daughter)! Such was their attempt to bring

happiness in a person merely through affectionate enquiries. They did not do it as a dry formality, but one could easily gauge their genuine affection, as their words rose from the bottom of their hearts.

The great Nagaswaram artiste Sheik Chinna Moula Saheb would not even venture to sit when he makes enquiries about a person. Such was his humility. He had great respect for those in authority. Utter humility prevailed in him as he rose to greater and greater heights in his art. He is the genuine paradigm to testify the immortal words of Bhagavad Gita, “Vidya Vinaya Sampannah”. His unassuming nature had endeared himself with many art lovers. I had first met him at All India Radio, Tiruchirapalli in the year 1967.

Sheikh Chinna Moula's Nagaswaram concerts were heard in Radio nearly fifty years back. He must have been an artiste under training those days. The training must have been not pertaining to the art that he had imbibed through Gurukulavasa, but towards various other paraphernalia, such as how to perform for a specific duration, how to weave a Kutcheri schedule and so on. What does he say about Gurukulavasa?

“Our old system of Gurukulavasam alone could give a sound footing to the aspirant. One cannot predict, when a learned Guru would enter into rapturous moments. It is better to be with a Guru always, for those unexpected moments, from where one could

learn the nuances of music. The disciple would get concentration. To think that music can be side business is a great fallacy. One has to sacrifice one's life for music. Then only one can realise to some extent what music is".

Sheikh is true to his words. He is the third generation artiste in his family from a village called Karavadi in Guntur district of Andhra Pradesh. He had learnt the art first from his beloved father and then from another artiste. To learn the Thanjavur style of playing he took training intensively under Nachiarkoil Rajam and Duraikannu for many years.

Artistes of the calibre of Sheik Chinna Moula may not conjure up visions within a ritualistic assignment of assorted factors of music. I had an occasion to listen to him at an opening ceremony of a Railway project way back in 1972 at Golden Rock, Tiruchirappalli. His assignment was just to close a gap before the inaugural function but what a mighty presentation he made even when the audience was not musically inclined. The length and breadth of his performance vouchsafe to the fact that the streams of music that came flowing from his instrument were not of curtailed Kutcheri pattern. There was a Bhurhga laden Kambhoji meandering the whole world of raga swaroopa defying thousands and thousands of familiar sound. His dictum appeared to be that he was born to proclaim the art in all its glory and splendour. This was not self-inflicted, but a self-ordained task to unbutton all those secretive and vital ingredients of the art form. In Sheik's music, the listener is not only transported to the unknown realms, but also consummated at the altar of music.

On that day, the rest of the railway programmes could commence only after Sheikh withdrew from the platform on his own.

Is it that the Classical music begins and ends up with the exposition of a specific raga?

There is a firm 'NO' from Sheikh. "Music does not live all alone. Music cannot emerge from nowhere. Composition is a must. But the performer should assimilate the composition. He must comprehend the innate 'Bhava' in it and should try to bring it out through the music. Eminent composers have left excellent compositions and they speak a lot about their importance. One will not be pardoned if he deliberately sidelines the composition at the cost of the music. To enjoy and render a composition is itself a supreme bliss leading to the realisation of the Lord" asserts Sheikh Chinna Moula. Once he told me that he was meek servant of the Lord and could not claim anything more than that. What a great soul!

I would like to narrate another episode where Radio had to extend its relay timings from a mere one hour to several hours. The cascade of music surging forth from Sheikh's Nagaswaram at the pandal of Saint Tyagaraja's holy shrine of Tiruvaiyaru, could not be contained within the scheduled time. His rendition on that night swallowed all the known concepts of time and space. His was not a mere delineation of a raga but brick by brick manifestation of his stupendous Mano Dharma. What a superlative treat it was to the listeners in every nook and corner of the country! The transmission was extended till

the end of the Nagaswaram concert of Sheikh Chinna Moula.

"For Keertanas you have to listen to Tiruveezhimizhalai Brothers. For raga alapana (Todi or Bhairavi) Tiruvavaduthurai Rajaratnam Pillai should be listened to. For the weighty classicism, it must be Semponnar Koil Brothers. For bits and pieces, tune into Tiruvenkadu Subramania Pillai. Their sancharas pricked and pierced the souls of millions of rasikas".

"Composition could be memorised easily. But for raga delineation the pre-requisite is boundless imagination. Imagination that is fertile. One must listen to several styles and later handle them based on individual merit. But the ground rule for excellence in music is rigorous training and ceaseless practice." asserts Sheikh Chinna Moula.

What about audience participation?

"There was a time when large number of people took part in the music programmes in the temples and other places with keen interest and extensive knowledge. But times have changed. An enterprising artiste needs avid listeners in front of him. Then only he can get absorbed in the art and carry on the

audience with his music. Powerful performance always draws excellent response. It is the responsibility of the artiste to see that he is rightly in communion with the audience, for which he must be fully equipped. Audience response alone decides the quality reproduction of an artiste". These are the valuable impressions of Nagaswaram Maestro Sheikh Chinna Moula Saheb.

Sheikh had performed extensively in India and abroad. He had been conferred with several awards. But what strikes me is his tendency to cling to the pilgrim town of Srirangam on the banks of river Cauvery. He lives there like a might mighty, in a small branch of a tree, after having soared to great heights during the day time. He is an artiste par excellence, his music is majestic and his search for more pinnacle of sweet sound is endless. He bestrides like a colossus in a arena of music.

In Brazil, it is said that Pele, if he had not been born a footballer, would have taken the incarnation of a football.

Let me apply it to our revered Sheikh Chinna Moula Saheb.

(By Courtesy Music Academy)