

In the bhakti tradition

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Most people believe that *bhakti* relates only to religion - as in devotion to a deity or God. Music, especially in India, is full of devotional songs in praise of various deities. Listen to 'Bhavayami gopalabalam' or 'Vande vasudevam' by M. S. Subbulakshmi or Balamuralikrishna sing 'Krishna nee begane' or 'Paal vadiyum mugam' in the rich tones of Maharajapuram Santhanam and one knows what *bhakti* is all about. But there are other interpretations of *bhakti* which have nothing to do with religion.

'Bhakti is a commitment, an expression of love, to a higher authority, whether it is, parents, teacher, country, work - religion is only one aspect,' is vocalist Vijay Siva's definition. Agreeing with him, Bombay S. Jayshree and Mandolin U. Srinivas define *bhakti* as faith in something you love. All of them believe in the Godhead but maintain that their personal belief has nothing to do with their chosen profession. "Even an atheist can be a good musician: declares Vijay Siva but hastens to add that his faith in God imparts an extra flavour to his music - "If I cannot get the *raga bhava* correctly, my belief helps me bring out the emotion in the song," he says.

While they discount the need for personal faith, they are emphatic about one point - *bhakti* to music. To express the range of emotions in a song, devotion to music is more necessary than belief in God which seems to be a

common factor. Jayshree is convinced that devotion to music gives one "scope to relate to the world without the Godhead. It is the spirit of music which moves you." Srinivas also is firm that involvement with music should be total, "Hard work is important, but belief in music is a necessity," he says.

But there is more to the idea of *bhakti*. One musician dismissed the concept of *bhakti* in music with an airy "There is nothing of substance in this. All the songs are about god." He would not accept that there were other definitions of *bhakti* or that *bhakti* could be applied to concepts other than religion.

However, Vijay Siva, Jayshree and Srinivas differ with this view - *deshabhakti*, *pitrubhakti*, *matrubhakti* are some of the many forms they spoke of. "One can have songs on any subject one is deeply committed to" says Vijay Siva and gives a list of such topics - patriotism, social reforms, cruelty to animals, saving the environment. All these highlight Subramania Bharati's songs as being full of *bhakti* whatever their subject.

Answering a question on why these songs are not heard more often at concerts, Vijay Siva and Srinivas point out that in many cases only the lyrics are available and the original tunes have not survived. Some of Bharati's songs were never set to music and this is being done only now. Both are certain

that these songs will eventually be an important part of music programmes. Only Jayshree expresses reservations as to whether these songs will occupy centrestage at concerts.

Speaking of devotional songs brings us to another aspect. At any concert of Carnatic music, whether vocal or instrumental, Tyagaraja kirtanas or the compositions of Muthusamy Dikshitar or Shyama Shastri dominate. Rarely do you hear songs of Tallapakkam Annamacharya, Papanasam Sivan, Oothukadu Subbaiyar, Swati Tirunal or Gopalakrishna Bharati, though these are as full of devotion as that of the Trinity. Though he agrees with this view, Vijay Siva points out that the Trinity were trendsetters who created a period of Renaissance in Carnatic music. They not only wrote the lyrics

but also set the lyrics to music. "In the case of composers like Annamacharya and Purandaradasa, only the lyrics have survived, not the tunes. Today these songs are being set to music and are performed at concerts," he says.

Agreeing with this view, Jayshree also feels that the *kirtanas* of Tyagaraja can be called religious only at a superfluous level. "It is almost as if he is talking over his problems with Rama. He pleads, demands, at times even rebukes the deity. It is not always a God-devotee relationship," Srinivas carries this further. "The songs of Tyagaraja are not only in praise of Rama but are also guidelines to how one should live," he says. Another reason for the popularity of the Trinity cited by all three is the depth of their compositions.

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