

## Krishna and Music

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South Indian music has a strong spiritual back ground and is considered to be a kind of Yoga – Nada Yoga. Musical instruments have been associated with divinities-- Siva plays the damaru or the drum, Saraswati is seen with the yash or the veena and Krishna delights everyone with the kuzhal or the flute. Music in India has evolved from the Vedas and has given to the world the highly sophisticated "raga" music developed on melodic progression of notes.

In the Hindu pantheon of deities, Krishna is a much loved figure, worshipped by young and old in a variety of perspectives, throughout the length and breadth of India and in many languages and dialects too. Saulabhya or accessibility is one of the hall marks of the Krishna avatar, as the devotee is able to visualise him as the prankster stealing butter, a young lad playing the flute with the gopis or as the divine hero expounding the Bhagavad Gita on the battlefield of Kurukshetra.

From the 10<sup>th</sup> century AD, Krishna became a favourite subject in the music and dance traditions of India. If the Rasa-leela was romanticised by Jayadeva in his Gita Govinda, Oothukkadu Venkata Kavi described the glories of Lord Krishna as a child in his compositions and thus the Krishna image captured the public imagination as one of the most popular of all Indian divinities.

As a manifestation of Vishnu, Krishna is revered and worshipped by different names – He is Venkateswara or Balaji in Andhra Pradesh, Vitthala in Maharashtra, Jagannatha in Orissa and Srinathji in Rajasthan.

Carnatic or South Indian music has been enriched by the compositions of innumerable, inspired composers and vaggeyakaras like Andal, Purandaradasa, Annamacharya, Narayana Teertha, Kshetragna and Oothukkadu Venkata Kavi, who have contemplated on the divine attributes of Krishna and given us thousands of immortal songs.

The Bhajana Sampradaya or Namaskankeertana tradition in South India has incorporated the songs composed by the above mentioned composers in its repertoire and has thus contributed to their gaining popularity.

The traditional Bhajana Sampradaya begins with the songs in 'Todayamangalam', which are compositions by different saints in praise of the various forms and names of Lord Vishnu--like Krishna, Narayana, Mukunda, Madhava or Madhusudhana. Namaskankeertana is the japa or repetition of 'nama' (name) of the Almighty. The devotee chooses his ishta devata, literally, "cherished deity" and repeatedly chants the name vocally or in the mind.

Adi Sankaracharya in verse 27 of his hymn "Bhaja Govindam" says that meditating on the form of the Lord and chanting his holy name bestows all noble virtues on the devotee. Sri Sankara says that reciting the Vishnu Sahasranama Stotram gives relief from all sorrows and leads to happiness and peace of mind. Similarly, the Bhagavad Gita also mentions that He resides in the hearts of all those who sing the name of the Lord. As a name of Vishnu, "Krishna" is listed as the 57<sup>th</sup> name in the Vishnu Sahasranama. The name originates from the Sanskrit word "Krsna" which is primarily an adjective meaning "dark", "black" or "dark blue".

Based on his name, Krishna is often depicted in vigrahams or statues as dark or blue skinned. In the Tribhanga posture, he usually stands with one leg bent in front of the other with a flute raised to his lips, in a characteristically relaxed pose, playing ethereal music and enchanting listeners.

“Krishna” occurs again and again as a theme or subject in the works of composers in both the classical and devotional genres in Indian music. It will be very interesting to see how the inspired composers of these genres perceived the multi dimensional attributes of Krishna and penned some wonderful lyrics which have stood the test of time. These extraordinary gems passed down through the centuries have contributed to the richness of our musical heritage.

There was an efflorescence of Carnatic music in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, when three of the greatest composers of this music system lived and composed songs. These three vaggeyakaras – Tyagaraja (1767 – 1847), Muthuswami Dikshitar (1776 – 1835) and Shyama Shastri (1762 – 1827) called the Trinity of Carnatic Music, revolutionised classical music with their divine musical outpourings. It is astonishing to remember that the very same 18<sup>th</sup> century saw the rise of the three great composers in Western classical music too – Beethoven, Mozart and Haydn. An amazing co-incidence indeed!

The Trinity of Carnatic music are so well known that chroniclers and music historians refer to the composers who lived in the period before them as “pre-trinity composers” and those who came after them as “post-trinity composers”. I would like to take the readers on a musical journey giving a chronological bird’s eye view of some of the important poet-composers and their personal visions of the Supreme Godhead Krishna.

### **Andal (9<sup>th</sup> Century)**

Kodhai Devi or Andal wrote the Tiruppavai, a collection of thirty verses (Pasuram) in Tamil, in praise of the Lord Perumal (Vishnu). It is part of the Nalayira Divya Prabhandam – works of the twelve alwars and is important in Tamil literature for its lyrical beauty.

Belonging to the Pavai genre of songs, Andal composed these beautiful poems for Krishna in the context of the Pavai vow (vrata or ritual) observed in the month of Margazhi. She says that one should get up early in the morning in the Brahma muhurta, as meditation and vratas done during that period give positive results. Andal visits each household in the village, exhorts her friends to give up luxuries and awaken to join her for a bath in a nearby pond.

In the 26<sup>th</sup> stanza of the Tiruppavai,

*Maale manivanna ! margazhi neeraduvaan*

*Melaiyar seyvanagall venduvana kettiyel*

*Gyanathey ellam nadunga muralvana*

*Palanna vannnathu un panchajanniyame*

Andal says:

“Oh Lord who is in the colour of a deep blue pearl, we salute your beautiful white “Panchajanyam conch”.

Although there is no direct Vedic injunction, we do this “nonbu” because our ancestors have done it (Melayaar Seyvanagal). We give importance to the practices of our learned forefathers.”

In this pasuram, Andal advises that the traditions of our acharyas are to be observed with conviction. Singing at his holy feet, Andal is happy and satisfied that her pavai-nonbu is fulfilled and that she is going to attain her Lord Krishna.

The last and concluding stanza of Tiruppavai identifies her as the daughter of Vishnu Chittar or Periyalvar and as the author of this garland of thirty pasurams.

### **Jayadeva (12<sup>th</sup> century)**

Gita Govindam, the best known composition of Jayadeva, is one of the most popular and influential poems to have been composed in medieval India. The work consists of 24 divisions called “Prabhandas”, each containing eight couplets named “Ashtapadi”. Gita Govindam, referred to as a “Maha Kavya” is a shringara kavya portraying madhura bhakti – the longing and striving of the individual for communion with God, culminating in the blissful union of Jeevatma and Paramatma. The transcendental love between Lord Krishna and his consort Radha is the theme of this charming poem in sonorous Sanskrit, vying for attention as one of the gems of literature written in this period. Thus Jayadeva, born in Kenduli Sasan village in Orissa, becomes the forerunner of the Bhakti cult followers of the later centuries. Tradition has it that while Jayadeva composed and recited the Gita Govindam, his wife Padmavati gave expression to these lyrics with her dancing.

In his auspicious invocation, Jayadeva says:

*Yadi Harismarane Sarasam Mano*

*Yadi Vilasa Kalasu Kutuhalam*

“If you yearn to delight in remembrance of Sri Hari; If you want to contemplate upon Him with intense affection – then listen to Jayadeva’s eloquence. If you are not possessed of these qualities, then do not read it”. Suffused with the

two aspects of separation and meeting, the poem reaches its happy ending towards the 19<sup>th</sup> ashtapadi, also called Darshana Ashtapadi:

“Smara garala khandanam mama shirasi mandanam”

Here, Jayadeva shows the readers the heights of creativity reached by him when he says:

“My beloved Radha ! Priye Charusheele! Please place your tender feet on my head in order to soothen the delirium of love and give me relief.

I, Jayadeva, the beloved of Padmavati have described the loving words spoken by Krishna to Radha. May these sweet and enchanting words be triumphant.”

In contemporary times, Smt. Sanjukta and Shri Raghunath Panigrahi, distinguished dancer and musician couple, gave performances of ashtapadis and regaled the artistic fraternity.

### **Annamacharya (1408 – 1503)**

The strains of ‘Sriman Narayana’ in Bowli raga wafted in the breeze at Tirumala, mesmerizing the crowds standing in the queue for darshan of Lord Venkateswara. It was the melodious voice of Smt. M.S. Subbulakshmi enthraling the listeners with her divine renditions of Annamacharya Kritis. Through her long playing (LP) records entitled “Balaji Pancharatnamala”, released in 1980, she revolutionised devotional music and created history of record sales for these albums.

Jo Achyutananda, Nanati Baduku, Bhavamulona, Brahma Kadigina, Deva Devambhaje, Vande Vasudevam and other evergreen songs rendered by M.S. Amma have preserved for posterity the sankirtanas composed by Tallapakkam Annamacharya in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Regarded as the “Pada Kavita Pitamaha” of Andhra Pradesh, he strongly influenced the structure of Carnatic music

compositions. His songs are classified into adhyatma (spiritual) and sringara (romantic) sankeertanas and also touch upon wide-ranging subjects such as surrender to Lord Venkateswara, dharma and righteousness and opposition to social stigma towards the untouchable castes in his era.

In his song “Brahmam Okkate Parabrahmamokkate”, Annamacharya explains that all humankind is equal in the eyes of the Lord, irrespective of colour, caste or creed, echoing the sentiments of the saints of Maharashtra who composed on similar themes in later centuries. Annamacharya composed thousands of songs on Lord Venkateswara and it is said that there are about 12,000 available today. His immense scholarship has definitely earned him a place among the great figures in Telugu literature.

In “Bhavayami Gopalabalam” (Yamankalyani raga), he says:

“I meditate upon the Baby Gopala who is adorned with glittering ornaments like a bell studded waist girdle. He is resplendent and his gait resembles that of a graceful dancer. Lord Brahma, all the Gods and humans have assembled on this auspicious occasion to see this beautiful little Lord Krishna!”

Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanam (TTD) has gone great service to preserve and propagate the rich legacy of Annamacharya’s compositions.

### **Purandaradasa (1484 – 1564)**

Purandardasa is famous among the Haridasas of Karnataka; he is considered to be the “Sangita Pitamaha” of Carnatic music because of his very significant contribution to formulating and standardising the basic lessons of teaching carnatic music. Purandaradasa started life as a miserly money lender, but a miraculous incident made a transformation in his life and he became an

enlightened saint. He explained the essence of the Upanishads and Vedas in colloquial and simple Kannada songs, comprehensible to the layman. He is believed to have composed a huge number of songs, of which a few thousands are available today. He introduced Mayamalavagowla as the raga for basic music instruction in Carnatic music (as opposed to Shankarabharanam in Hindustani and Western music) and composed Svaravalis, lakshana geetams, sooladis and kritis. His soul stirring Dasara Padagalu are sung extensively in Karnataka and the other southern states by all contemporary musicians. Purandaradasa had great influence also on Hindustani music and his compositions are performed in Hindustani music concerts too.

Among many deities, Krishna was his favourite and “Purandara Vitthala” his ankita or signature.

In his song “Enta punyave Gopi enta bhagyame ninna,

Yashode, inta maganane kanene”

He says:

“O Yashoda ! What punya is yours, that you have a son like Krishna.”

Some famous songs heard on the concert platform are Govinda Ninna Namave Chanda, Adaddella Olite Aayitu, Devabanda namma and the evergreen Jagadoddharana.

Purandaradasa’s guru Sri Vyasarayya or Vyasa Tirtha was the composer of “Krishna nee begane baro” in Yaman Kalyani. Smt. T. Balasaraswati (Queen of Abhinaya) was renowned for her beautiful interpretation of this song through dance.

A lot of credit has to be given to Smt. M.L. Vasanthakumari for singing and propagating Dasara Padams in her inimitable style.



## **Kshetragna (1600 – 1680)**

Scholars say that Kshetragna's original name was Varadayya and because of his extensive travels to many pilgrim centres, he came to be known as Kshetragna or Kshetrayya.

The padams of Kshetragna are addressed to the deity Muvvagopala in the village Muva or Movva where the poet was born. "Muvva" means "gajjai" or anklets worn on the legs by dancers and "Muvva Gopala" is the deity with dancing anklets.

Kshetragna wrote with sringara as the main theme in expressing madhura bhakti – devotion to the Supreme. The lyrics of his padams portray various types of heroines pining for Lord Krishna or Muvvagopala, allegorically standing for the individual soul or Jeevatma wanting union with the Supreme Lord or Paramatma. His padams in ragas like Nadanamakriya, Kambodi, Kalyani, Mukhari, Ahiri and Ghanta reflect his extraordinary musical proficiency and poetic genius.

My guru Smt. T. Brinda had an extensive repertoire of Kshetragna padams and together with other members of her family belonging to the Veena Dhanammal tradition, popularised the rendition of these songs.

Smt.Brinda-Smt Mukta's beautiful musical interpretation of Kshetragna's padams was highly appreciated by music connoisseurs.

An example of the heights of emotion which Kshetragna demonstrated in his padams is given below in translation:

Kshetragna says in the padam “Ninna jooda galigen innaallaku”

(Raga Punnagavarali)

“It has become possible to see you after such a long time !

Four or five moons passed away since I saw you last !

O ! Muvvagopala !

- It has become -

### **Narayana Teertha (1650 – 1745)**

Narayana Teertha, with the birth name of Govinda Sastrulu was born in Andhra Pradesh, but eventually moved to Tanjavur in Tamilnadu. His claim to fame is the Sanskrit opera called Sri Krishna Leela Tarangini on the life of Lord Krishna. The songs are popularly called “Tarangas” meaning ‘waves’. Sri Narayana Teertha was a scholar in music, Natyashastra, Puranas, Bhagavatam and other Sanskrit works. The Tarangini consists of Shlokas and Kritis in 12 chapters famous for its richness in lyrics, melody and rhythm. Depicting the childhood leelas of Sri Krishna and culminating in the auspicious wedding “Rukmini Kalyanam”, this musical treatise forms an integral part of classical Indian music and dance till the present day.

This exalted saint attained samadhi at Varagur in 1745. A Tarangini Mahotsavam is being conducted at Tirupuntoorthi at his “mukti sthalam” for over 300 years.

Songs like Kshemam Kuru Gopala, Govardhana Giridhara, Kalaya Yashode, Govinda Ghataya and Alokaye are included in classical music concerts as well as the sampradaya bhajana paddhati of South India.

In one of his famous songs “Madhava Mamava” (Neelambari), he says:

Madhava Mamava deva	Oh Madhava, you are Krishna of Yadu
Yadava Krishna Yadukula Krishna	dynasty, protect me.

Sadhu Jana dhara sarva bhava	You are the prop for all saints. Oh
Madhava mamava deva	Madhava, the source of all thoughts, Please protect me.

### **The Varkari Sampradaya (13<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> Centuries)**

"Varkari" means "pilgrim", and the Varkari sampradaya is a religious movement within the Bhakti tradition of Hinduism, associated with the states of Maharashtra and Karnataka. Varkaris worship a form of Krishna known as Vitthal or Vithoba, the presiding deity of Pandharpur.

Questioning the importance of Sanskrit as a means to communicate with God, the common people addressed their prayers and songs in the everyday language – Marathi.

The Varkari movement began in the 13<sup>th</sup> century with Jnaneshwar and others like Nivrutti, Namdev, Sopana, Muktabai, Janabai, Tukaram, Eknath and Chokhamela composing abhangs in Marathi which the layman could understand ---and continued till the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

‘Abhang’ means ‘indestructible’ and the lilting lyrics and tunes strengthened the namasankeertana format where singing was in a chorus with a leader. The Panduranga temple in Pandharpur on the river Bhima has Vithoba and Rakhumai as its icon or vigrahas. Large groups of devotees go to

Pandharapur during Ashada Ekadashi and sing the abhangs with ektari and cymbals and it is truly an awe inspiring sight to behold. Abhangs like Teertha Vithala, Sundara te dhyana, Sada majhe dola, Majhe maher Pandhari and countless others are sung regularly by musicians in Maharashtra. Shri Bhimsen Joshi in his Sant Vani programmes brought abhangs to the concert platform and popularised them.

Janabai, one of the women saints who lived and worked in Namdev's house, says in sweet Marathi, the language of the masses:

“Dalita kandita tuzha mi gayina ananta”--

“Pounding and grinding, and in all the household chores that I do, O Vitthala, I think of you!”

### **Meerabai and Surdas (16<sup>th</sup> Century)**

One of the central saint poets of the Bhakti movement, Meera was a mystic poetess and devotee of Lord Krishna. She was born in a royal family of Rajasthan and composed many beautiful songs which have now become famous as “Meera Bhajans”.

Enacting the role of this saint in the film “Meera”, released both in Tamil and Hindi, Smt. M.S. Subbulakshmi gave a stellar performance that etched itself in the minds of her audiences throughout India. Her melodious renditions of More to Giridhar Gopal, Hari Tum Haro and Giridhara Gopala Bala are all time favourites. In ‘Aaj Suni Mai Hari Aavan Ki Avaaj’ sung by M.S., Meerabai says “The rainy season is here and even the earth knows it is time to meet my beloved Lord Krishna”.

Surdas is another Krishna bhakta, a blind saint-poet known for his devotional songs dedicated to the Lord of Vrindavan.

A Surdas gem in the voice of M.S. Amma is:

“Akhiyan – Main Hari darshan ki pyasi”

“Our eyes thirst for a vision of Hari”.

### **Oothukkadu Venkata Kavi (1700 – 1765)**

Oothukkadu Venkata Kavi lived in the times just prior to the Trinity of Carnatic music and was a master poet whose vivid imagination created hundreds of songs renowned for their musical excellence. His wonderful compositions like Taya Yashoda, Pal Vadiyum Mukham, Adadu Ashangadu, Alai Payude, Parvai Onru Podume and Kannan Varukinra Neram – conjure up picturesque scenes of Krishna’s life – childhood, youth and His leelas. These well known kritis are part of the opera named “Krishna Ganam”, based on the Bhagavatam.

He used a wide variety of ragas – major ones like Todi, Kalyani and Kharaharapriya as well as apoorva ragas like Jayantasri, Malavi and Kannadagowla. It is said that he could not find a guru of his choice and he appealed to Lord Krishna Himself in the Kalinga Nartana Temple in Oothukkadu. Venkata Kavi affirms in a Kriti that he received the guru kataksham and upadesa from the Lord himself. He was completely God-intoxicated and in a state of bliss – it is no wonder that his divine compositions have endured till present times as great favourites with performing musicians and dancers. Historians feel that Venkata Kavi’s classical compositions filled a gap between Purandaradasa and the Carnatic Trinity.

### **Tyagaraja (1767 – 1847)**

Tyagaraja is among the greatest of Carnatic composers and considered the most well known of the Carnatic music Trinity. A prolific contributor to the classical music tradition of South India, his Kritis form the back bone of the repertoire of any musician in Carnatic music. The lyrics of his compositions are simple, elegant and profound at the same time, thus touching a chord in both pundit and layman. Tyagaraja's ishta devata was Rama and his works explore various facets of Lord Rama's personality, incidents from the Ramayana and philosophical truths. But there is a lovely gem of a composition named "Nauka Charitram" (the story of the boat) which consists of 21 kritis and is devoted to Lord Krishna. This is one of the most popular of Tyagaraja's operas and the narrated story is a creation of the composer's own imagination. The Gopis take Lord Krishna in a boat on the River Yamuna and he quells their pride when they realise that only Krishna can save them. Tyagaraja brings out the need for unquestioned surrender to the Lord's feet by the devotee.

Beautiful Kritis like Sringarinchukoni, Odanu Jaripe, Gandhamu Puyyaruka and Hari Hari Nee Yokka adorn the Nauka Charitram. Tyagaraja adopts the Yakshagana tradition where the opening and concluding songs are in the same raga Suratti in this music drama. The majesty and grandeur of his poetic expression is evident in Nauka Charitram just as in his world famous master pieces.

### **Muthuswamy Dikshitar (1776 – 1835)**

A composer par excellence, Dikshitar's style was a unique amalgam of raga bhava, lyrical beauty and information about the deities and temples of South India. Attaining mastery over the veena, the influence of veena playing is evident in the gamakas and vilamba kalam of his works. His compositions on

Krishna are full of details about the particular form of the deity and the sthalapuranam of that temple.

Some of the well known kritis include Nanda Gopala Mukunda (Khamas), Shri Krishnam Bhaja Manasa (Todi), Balagopala Palayasumam (Bhairavi), Rajagopalam Bhajeham (Mohanam), Sri Rajagopala (Saveri), and Chetasri Balakrishnam (Dvijavanti).

In “Chetasri”, he says: “O mind ! Worship Balakrishna whose feet are beautiful like lotuses. He will grant your desires. He is the incarnation of Lord Vishnu and dwells in the hearts of good men. Protector of the worlds, He is the Gopala praised by Guru-Guha.”

Scores of Post Trinity composers like Swati Tirunal, Subramania Bharati, Mysore Vasudevacharya, Mysore Sadasiva Rao, Ambujam Krishna and Papanasam Sivan have contributed to the big treasure trove of compositions on Lord Krishna. Being such an inspiring and colourful personality – savants, saints and composers have delighted in depicting Him in all His many aspects throughout the ages. It is certain that our lovable Lord Krishna will be celebrated in all His glory till the end of mankind. May He bless us all !