

Sangeeta Pitaamaha, Sri Purandara DAsaru [1480-1564]



The history of Indian Music is the same for the whole of India. The two distinctive bifurcations into North Indian (HINDUSTANI) and South Indian (KARNATIC) music systems developed simultaneously, but independent of one another.

While "HINDUSTANI" music was highly influenced by the Arabic and Persian styles due to a series of invasions by Muslim rulers who were on a crusade to spread their religion, Karnatic music (which means old or traditional), developed without any external influences.

Students of Karnatic Music are aware that the present system of karnatic music owes its foundations to the 'Immortal Bard' PURANDARA DASA.

Known as "Karnataka SangIta Pitaamaha" or the great father of karnatic music, Purandara DAsa made great contributions to "Bhakti SangIta" (Divine of sacred music) and Lakshana SangIta (grammatical or art forms of music). The great Doyen and the most prolific composer in the South Indian Music Scenario, Purandara DAsa ornamented God with compositions usually known as "Devarnaama" (Literally-Names of Gods) or DAsara Padagalu (Songs of DAsa). Besides his compositions, he perfected systematic approach to train the student of Karnatic Music. He composed the "Swaraavali" (simple exercises based on solfa notes on specific scales), "Alankaaras" (Exercises based on the seven basic Taalas) and GIams (Melodic Compositions in simple style).

He was, in fact, the innovator of the modern "Kriti" form which was later perfected by the great composer musician, Saint TyAgarAja Swami, one of the trinities of Karnatic Music.

Though Venkatamakhi (17th century AD) devised the 72 MELAKARTA SYSTEM (72 parent scales giving rise to thousands of minor scales called Ragas) and the Musical Trinities, TyAgarAja, Mudduswamy Dikshitar and Syama Sastri perfected the foundations by their immortal compositions, modern Karnatic music is not thought about without at least a silent invocation to SangIta Pitaamaha.

The soul of man is the stage for triumph and defeat, suffering and joy. Ordinary humans have no time nor do they possess the capacity to pause over the ambiguous nuances of human behaviour under pressure and passion. From the days of Rg Veda, several millenniums ago, down to our own days, a long line of torch bearers who stressed the primacy of spiritual values pointed that even as a human being is above the

animal, the spiritual Man is above the human. Thus the 'soul' of the spiritual man is the point of interaction between the divine and the human. Each human being has his roots here though he is also a reflection of the celestial light. The demand for self-realization through self-renewal is an appeal from the creature to the creator in us. As a creature, each one of us is given to inertia, staleness and distractedness. The creative spark in us gives us the power of Renunciation of the moods of self-pity, anger, distraction and abstract materialism. Renunciation of TyAga (Sacrifice) is the way to mental peace and freedom and a surer step towards renunciation of a higher plane "Moksha".

How the Divine Grace can transform the material human instantly into a Divine and Spiritual man could not have been better testified than from the annals of the life of Purandara DAsa.

NArada, the son of the Creator Brahma, once sought clarification from the Almighty Supreme Lord MahAvishnu as to his permanent abode! The Lord Almighty said,

*Naaham Vasaami Vaikunte; Na Yogee Hrdayeravow - mat Bhaktaa Yatra Gaayanti; Tatra Tishtaami
NArada!*

I neither remain in Vaikunta, nor am I confined to the hearts of the yogis; wherever my devotees sing, I remain there in rapt attention.

NArada was thrilled by this explanation and felt that he would not mind births and rebirths as long as he is blessed enough to sing in praise of the lord constantly!

It is believed that NArada descended down in human form "PURANDARA".

Five hundred years ago, RaghunAtha was born to Madhava Rao and Ratnabai, a wealthy couple steeped in divinity in a prosperous town called VEMANNAPURI near Pandaripuram in Western India.

At the appropriate age, RaghunAtha was married to Lakshmibai and with the increasing passion for his family profession as a conventional money-lender, RaghunAtha had only one aim in life and that was "multiplying wealth". His avaricious passion prompted amassing of wealth by usurious money-lending practices unmindful of basic business ethics. Daily worship, prayer, divinity, the pleasure of Giving and all the adorable family heritage and qualities vanished much to the anguish and mute agony of the pious and compassionate wife Lakshmibai.

If RaghunAtha was "NArada" re-born, why did not Lord Almighty destine him to be a pious devotee from the birth? As is usual with the Lord, he wanted to demonstrate to the world how a corrupt human can transform into a divine personality par excellence if only HE willed it so!

Time was ripening for transformation of the greedy RaghunAtha into the illustrious Purandara DAsa.

Lord taught the quintessence of code of conduct in human existence through the "Gitopadesa" to Arjuna and Uddhava. He used a different tactic for RaghunAtha!

An old man was walking through the streets of "Vemannapuri" asking the passers-by the address of the money-lender RaghunAtha. People dissuaded him from the effort advising him as to how futile would the attempt be to solicit any alms from RaghunAtha. Undaunted, the old man in rags reached the shop and

blessed RaghunAtha. Concluding instantly that the old man has come for alms, RaghunAtha tried to dispose him off with great contempt. The old man pleaded for a thousand gold coins as gift to help him celebrate his son's wedding. The furious RaghunAtha was so impolite that he nearly drove him with harsh words. The old man continued to occupy the place and advised profusely RaghunAtha, unsolicited, the value of "GIVING" much to RaghunAtha's annoyance. Highly incensed, RaghunAtha necked off the old man. The old man hugged him in anger and started wrestling. Astonished at the strength of the beggarly fragile old man, RaghunAtha jerked him off and ran back to the shop.

The old man muttering in disapproval, faltered and slowly reached RaghunAtha's home and pleaded for help the same way with RaghunAtha's wife. Lakshmibai, compassion incarnate, was sad that she had no valuables to offer, but offered her diamond nose-jewel, the only valuable possession ready at hand and requested the old man to accept it as her humble offering. The old man accepted it and vanished in haste.

A little while later, a rich pearl-merchant (!) entered RaghunAtha's shop in style. RaghunAtha, with all humility, greeted him. The merchant offered the nose-jewel for sale and RaghunAtha reluctantly quoted a thousand gold units. The merchant furiously retorted that the Jewel was worth three grand, but due to his hurry he was however willing to settle for one grand! RaghunAtha grew suspicious that the jewel looked identical to the one he had given his wife and suspected that the merchant might be a thief! Keeping the merchant at the shop[with some tactical excuse, RaghunAtha ran for his home to clear his doubt with his wife.

Lakshmibai was startled by the untimely visit of her husband. When demanded by the husband to produce her nose-jewel, she went in to the chamber to plead to her Lord privately to help her out of the fix. When the husband hurried her, she pretended to look into the jewel box and there it was! - The Jewel, which was a million times brighter than her own, was there! RaghunAtha could not believe his eyes and pleaded with his wife to apprise him of the truth. Lakshmibai narrated her experience and concluded that God had come to her rescue by providing the exceptional jewel in the box.

The materially oriented RaghunAtha was undergoing a unique transformation. Realizing that his wife had the greatest privilege of God's Grace, he rushed to the shop with his wife to apologies to the vender-merchant. Truth hit RaghunAtha when he went to the shop, the merchant had vanished and the shop was emitting a Divine fragrance.

RaghunAtha realized that God had come to transform him into a spiritual being. He renounced his entire wealth by donating it to the needy and for noble causes and divine purpose.

NARada started accomplishing the purpose of his birth as Purandara DAsa. Simple and matchless poetry started pouring spontaneously. The compositions appealed to the listeners., touched the souls so deep that the devotees looked to him as the reincarnation of NARada singing in profuse strains of unpremeditated art.

RaghunAtha started touring the Holy places (Kshetras) all over India and it was at Tirupati in South India that RaghunAtha dAsa became Purandara DAsa.

When RaghunAtha was staying in the holy town of Tirupati, he was looked after by a respectable dancer known as Purandari. Every night, RaghunAtha noticed the host lady leaving the house beautifully dressed

with a VeeNa in hand and returning home in the early hours of the morning. When RaghunAtha questioned her in all curiosity, Purandari, hesitantly, told the truth that she was visiting the temple of Lord Srinivasa (Venkateswara) where Lord used to wait for her, open the temple door and once inside the temple, Purandari used to dance when the Almighty would play on the veeNa and after a while the Almighty himself would dance for her music! Purandari requested RaghunAtha to keep the secret sacred.

RaghunAtha realized that he could hope to have Divine grace only through Purandari's induction. When he pleaded to her, Purandari accepted to take him to the temple at midnight. RaghunAtha hid himself behind a pillar and watched with astonishment and ecstasy the incredible sight of God playing the sidemen for Purandari. But, the Almighty had a different game to demonstrate!. When He started on the VeeNa, He tuned it differently and played with calculated carelessness and Apaswaras (out of tune solfas) emanated.

RaghunAtha, a great NadopAsaka could not bear this. He came out from hiding and shouted, "What sort music is this? My head will blow up due to apaswara" The next minute RaghunAtha realized his folly and flat at Lord's feet. The Lord blessed him, made him benefit "GnAnopadesa" from Purandari, and there was born the Purandara dAsa.

For reasons of apace constraint, we have to stop the legend here and dwell upon the outstanding musical contributions the doyen gave to the music world.

Bhakti or devotion to the supreme leads to renunciation and concentration on the Divine. Incessant loving meditation of God is Bhakti, says RAmAnuja, the founder of the Hindu philosophy of VishishtAdvaita. In the case of Purandara dAsa, "Renunciation" came spontaneous as a result of undistracted devotion to God. The great humility helped utter self-effacement. The result was the immortal compositions expressing the truths of the Upanishads and Gita in simple language.

His padas and kritis abound in metaphors drawn from practical life and his alliterations are unparalleled for their poetic imagery and musical resonance. While a biased exaggeration cannot be ruled out on the actual number of songs attributed as "Composed by Purandara dAsa" according to popular belief, the following is the break-down of the compositions attributed to him.

1. On Holy Places and the Divine significance Attached to them	125,000
2. On Divine AchAryAs, Heredity and Divya Carita (Divine History) Of Gurus	25,000
3. On Lord Supreme-Vittaala (Padas, SulAdis,Kritis)	64,000
4. Sveta DvIpa, AnantAsana, Vaikunta, KailAsa (Heavenly abodes) Etc.,	60,000
5. Divine Marriages- DAsa (10) KalyAna, DAsa Caritram	40,000
6. EkAdasi and all the holy day of Divine Significance	75,000
7. Gadyas in non-rhythmic form	36,000
Total	425,000

Regrettably, hardly about 1000 of his songs are in vogue and only about 300 to 400 are being repeated and popularized.

The saying "Sisur Vetthi Pasur Vetthi, Vetthi Gaanarasam PaNi" means that even innocent and ignorant creatures like babies, and animals (birds and reptiles) are moved by the power of music. This also implies that music, the language of emotion, has the greater powers than the common language of the world and that it can establish communion between the known and the unknown, Man and God. It is with this view, the SangIta Pita Mahaa embarked upon his lofty mission of attaining salvation through music.

It is well known that the deep undercurrent of devotion distinguishes the kritis and Padas of Purandara dAsa. He could converse with ease in the language of emotion or music with his Ishta deivam- Ranga-Paandu ranga - Pandari Vittaala.

The founder of modern karnatic music, he was a person of great humility. He pleads to Lord Ranga to show him the path for salvation placing him in total self-effacement. In his famous kriti, "Kaliyugadalli Hari" he confesses that he knows nothing "Snaanavanariyenu, Mownavanariyenu, Dhyaanavanariyenu, - Duchchanu Nanu Endana Beda" Elsewhere he condemns the mere observance of ceremonies and deplors the waste of precious human existence without the realization of its spiritual purpose. In sum, he was not just the greatest poet-musician of all time but a great philosopher and social reformer as well.

DAsara Padagalu are the foundations of musical lore containing both the precept and practice of karnatic music. Their flexibility is the chief cause of their prominence. Sanskritised Kannada is used in the compositions in lucid and simple way explaining the reason for popularity amidst connoisseurs and laymen alike. The mystery behind the flexibility of his kritis is the minimum words which produce the poetic imagery and the divine emotion well distributed within the temporal magnitude of the Avartha of a given taala of a composition. This does not imply any conscious effort on the part of Purandara dAsa in framing the sAhitya. The divine spark fired his imagination resulting in blossoming of fragrant floral wreaths of poetry and music synchronously. His deep insight into human nature despite his later life of total detachment and spiritualism places him above all the known composers in the musical world.

There can be little doubt that NArada's earthly mission was meant to establish the creed of music on a more solid and sweeter foundation than all the other known ones and give to music a place and dignity hardly attainable by any other art form or religious belief in the world. Purandara dAsa started the tradition and the Trinities fulfilled the follow-up task to place karnatic music on top of the world.

We hear the group of children eagerly learning the foundation....."Maayamaalavagowla flows" We wonder.....who would have thought to compose Swaraavalis in this Raga when there are 72 major scales?

The senior group of children start the practice of Geetam:

"Keraya neeranu Kerugajalli" in Malahari.....who is the composer?

Who else could it be than the SangIta PitAmahA?