

Sri NArAyaNa Teertha's Musical Magnum Opus



Sri nArAyaNa teertha (“nArAyaNa” aka “teertha”) was born in Villathur near kAzA village close to Mangalagiri in Guntur district of Andhra Pradesh and was claimed to be known at birth, as Madhava or ‘Govinda Sastrulu.’ But teertha became widely known to the music world, especially to Karnāṭaka saṃgīta vidwans, thanks to the Sankeertana bhAgavatAs of Thanjavur district in Tamilnadu, the seat of Karnāṭaka Saṃgītam. He lived for a while in kUchimanchi agrahAram in GodAvari district and visited SrikAkulam, SobanAdri, and VenkatAdri before settling down in Tamil Nadu. While there is significant dissent as to his exact time, historians place him between 1610 & 1745 AD. An extensive research done with the help of archives preserved in Sarasvati Mahal library has helped place the time as 1650 to 1745 AD, and that he reportedly lived a long life¹.

SanAtana dharma followers believe that the great Sage VedavyAsa (KrishNa DvaipAyana) who authored SrimadBhAgavatam and Sri MahAbhAratam took three incarnations in Kaliyuga, first as sringAra mahAkavi Jayadeva and composed the immortal Astapadis (24 immortal songs in 12 sargams or cantos) in the 12th century. His next reincarnation was that of sringAra mahAkavi Kshetrayya or kshetragna during 15/16th century (1484 to 1564), and composed as many as 24,000 romantic ‘padams’ with KrishNa as the main theme. His third reincarnation was that of Yogi NArAyaNa teertha in the 17th century. The theme, again, was ‘BhAgavatam’ and specifically on ‘KrishNa IIIA’ and appropriately named ‘KrishNa-IIIA-tarangiNi (“TarangiNi”) – River (or waves) of KrishNa’s IIIA.

¹ *The information on nArAyaNa teertha found in Wikipedia is primarily based on an article written by this author in 2000 and published in www.sankeertanam.com & acknowledged by Wiki under ‘References’*

An incident somewhat like what we read in the life of Adi Sankara bhagavadpAda happened in nArAyaNa's life as well. He was once reportedly caught in raging floods and got stuck in a whirlpool. He prayed to the Lord and promised HIM that he would, if saved, relinquish all the worldly pleasures and take up to asceticism. The waters subsided mysteriously, but when Teertha returned home he forgot his promise. From that day, his devout wife strangely felt a sanyAsin in him, and could not see him as her spouse anymore and thus directed him to an ascetic way of life. Very soon another challenge came in the form of an incurable stomach pain and this time he was guided in his dream to walk down to deep-south, in search of cure. After five hundred of miles of pAda-yAtra to his disciple Bodhendra Swami (in Govindapuram), he was about to collapse when a wild white boar practically escorted and led him into a temple in a village then known as *BhoopathirAjapuram* in Thanjavur. Teertha was instantly relieved of his otherwise *incurable* illness and stayed in that village to renovate the millennium-old temple and thus was born the masterpiece opera, tarangiNi. This village later became known as 'varAhapuri' or 'VarahUr', named after the 'varAham' (the boar) that guided him and in reverence of Teertha for his erudition. This town is now known as 'Varagur' (on the banks of the river *Kathungalaaru* (கதுங்கலாறு)²

Controversies abound that he was known as 'Madhava' and his father was 'Gandharva' or 'Neelakanta sastri' and that he finally came to be known, due to AbadsanyAsam, as nArAyaNa teertha; there is also debate as to whether it happened in the middle of KrishNa river as opposed to VeNNAr in Thanjavur district and if his final days were spent in Varanasi instead of in VarahUr. These debates do not affect the universality, the excellence or the authenticity of his masterpieces including his *magnum opus opera* '**KrishNa IIIA tarangiNi.**'

² As per his Guru's advice he came to Govindapuram to meet Bodendra Swamigal but he came to know that Bodendra Swamigal attained Mukthi just a few months earlier. After spending a few days in Govindapuram he again started his tour with chronic stomach ache and visited many places in Cauvery Delta and reached Thiruvaiyaru. When he was touring a small village called Nadukkavery, his stomach ache became unbearable that he slept in the old Vinayaka Temple there. In his sleep, Lord Krishna appeared and informed "when you wake up in the morning you will see an animal; follow the same and your stomach ache will vanish". Startled, he woke up to see a white boar appearing before him. Seeing a boar (pig) upon waking up was not considered to be a good omen! Therefore, he hesitated to follow. However, remembering the powerful words of Lord Krishna, he followed the varAham about 3 miles and almost fainted. That was when he noticed the boar entering the dilapidated temple and disappearing instantly. Once the boar disappeared Narayana teertha heard a voice from the sky *Akashvani*, "don't search for me. I only brought you here upon HIS command". upon hearing this teertha was in ecstasy and his stomach-ache vanished. Since then this Village originally named as "Bhoopathirajapuram" became known as "Varagur" representing the Sanskrit name for a boar.

Manuscripts saved by Tulaja maharaja as well as several scholars of the 18th and 19th centuries helped the 20th century sankeertana-bhAgavatAs to publish his works for our benefit. TillaistAnam Narasimha bhAgavata, & Nallur Venkatasubba released them in Grantha libi and in Telugu. Several publications followed in Telugu and grantha libi in 1920, 1948, and 1953. A more recent and comprehensive publication in Sanskrit was by *the NArAyaNa-teertha E & C Trust, Madras*. These efforts have helped preserve and propagate this masterpiece since the 18th century. Professor Varahur Brahmasri Guruswami sastrigal, Varahur Brahmasri Kalyana Sundaram and Srikantha Sastrigal worked tirelessly to bring out the most authentic version (1966) under the guidance of HH Kanchi ParamAchArya.

Tarangini is an opera highly suitable for *dance drama* and it has been very well utilized by dancers over the last two centuries. It is documented that one of the Sankeertana Trinity, Bodhendra Swamigal, the 59th pontiff of the Adi Sankara order was Teertha's disciple; no wonder that *tarangiNi* became one of the integral parts of the famous sankeertana tradition, the forerunner of the modern (Karnāṭaka-sangita) concert form, and spread to the whole BhArata desam over the last three centuries. TarangiNi consists of 12 'Tarangams' and encapsulates 153 songs (many with 6 or more stanzas), 303 slokams and 31 choornikaas. While 41 of the songs do not show the signature (mudra), the remaining 112 include the mudra, nArAyaNateertha or nArAyaNananda teertha et al. with prefixes/suffixes. Teertha followed Veda VyAsa's BhAgavatam, concentrated on the 10th skandam and focused on the first 58 adhyAyaas of 10th skandam. The opera covers KrishNa's AvatAra mahima, bAla IIIA, rAsalIIA, Kamsa samhAram, DwAraka-nirmANam and Rukmini KalayaNam (around which he also describes in passing, the marriage with seven other queens).

It is widespread belief that when Teertha sang the keertanam 'GopAlameva deivatam sada' (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A39icTui9ng>), Lord KrishNa appeared and danced while playing on the flute. As desired by lord KrishNa, Teertha finished his Tarangini with Rukmini vivAham (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TnWzO35Joc4>) as retold by the 19th and 20th century sankeertana bhagavatas - Varahur Anai-BhAgavata, Panju-BhAgavata,

GopAlabhAgavata, TillaistAnam Narasimha-bhAgavata, Tiruvaiyaru Sonti VenkatrAmayya (**Tyagaraja's guru**), and Pantulu bhAgavata.

Unlike many contemporary composers, Teertha was very well versed in music and, nAtya sAstra, in addition to great scholarship in Sanskrit. It is reported that he not only wrote these exquisite masterpieces but also methodically tuned them utilizing at least 34 rAgAs which are all very popular, even today. Teertha used for his compositions tAlams such as *aTA, tripuTa, Adi, rupaka, Dhruva, ChApu, Jampa, Matya, viLamba, & Eka*. Many of the songs are structurally well set for direct use as nritya or nAtya padams. Teertha himself states in 9th and 7th *tarangams* that GopikAs (of Gokulam) reportedly used *Bhoopalam, desAkshi, Malahari, Vasantam, devagAndhAri* raagams and *dhruvam and aTa* tAlams to the nAtya lakshaNams/specifications such as '*alagu, laghu, dhrutagati, madhyamagati, mandhara gati, patAkam, dhrupatAkam, sookaram, kaTakA, chileemukham, sooLA*.

Teertha also sang on rAma, Narasimha, Venkateswara, Durga, VaradarAja and DakshiNamoothy with equal inspiration of sama-bhava in abeda-bhakti. While KrishNa was known to be his Ishtadeivam, he was a vedAntin set in the mode of identification with the NirguNa Brahmam. But, he reiterated that the easiest path to reach the parabrahmam (which is *nirguNa*), is the worship through *SravaNam & keertanam*, the two most important of the nine facets of Bhakti or Devotion, and strangely through the manifestations of the saguNa swaroopams such as the *paripoorNAvatAra KrishNa*.

His Gadyams and Padyams in most of the *tarangams* are exquisite in beauty, but least intimidating. Although he was one of the greatest of Sanskrit scholars, he carefully avoided complex usages and consciously used facile expressions. **He used 17 different chandas or meters³.**

ChAndokya, brihadAraNyaka, Taitareeya, EasAvAsya, Mundaka, sAmavedopanishad – all of them reiterated this aspect of rAsaIIA enunciated by TarangiNi (to discern the *paratatvam*). Teertha defines a 'Gopee' as, '*Aneka Janma sAbasra tapasaa paritoshitaha; Avirbhutaha sa BhagavAn tAsAm GopyAm sujanmani*' [The

³ *anushtup, Arya, Indravajra, Upendravajra, rathotthada, druta vilambitam, panca-cAmaram, BhujangaprayAdam, sragdhara, sArdoola vikreeditam, sikhariNI, mAlini, vasanta-tilaka, sakitahariNI, pritvi, mandAkrAntA, and vamsastam.*

birth of a Gopee is a result of the penance done over thousands of births and ParaMatma waits to get close to the Gopee]. Teerta goes further to add: *RAsakreedA mahotsavArambha sambhramachetAha Atma tatvam upadisan nAthamAha* [It is said that ParamAtma did the ‘Atma-tatvopadesam’ at the beginning of the rAsaIIIa].

- Teertha improved upon his own ecstatic personal experience in his prior incarnations as Jayadeva and Kshetrayya and sang the IIIAmruta of KrishNa while being an ascetic. Notwithstanding the exalted self-realized state as a sanyAsin, he confesses in his own poetic excellence that the realization of ParamAtma should be from the state of AnurAga and that without love, in this existence, an attempt to reach the *NirguNa Brahman* will be a dry and futile attempt.
- The mythological *Sukhabrahmam* told *ParIkshita MaharAja* while narrating the BhAgavatam, that ‘... those who cannot understand the rAsaIIIa as the natural yearning of all beings endowed with Rasa and rAga to get to the ParamAtman, are better off not reading it, since such dry pundits have to come back to understand or re-live the experience...’
- **Swami Vivekananda** was a great admirer of Sukhabrahmam’s re-narration of Srimad BhAgavatam, Jayadeva’s *Gita Govindam* and *KrishNa IIIa tarangini*. He told the inquiring followers that “if your mind is conditioned to dispense rAsaIIIa as ‘a dissipation of spiritual energy,’ it is better that you first make attempts to understand your limitations before attempting to go near such great works of philosophy.”
- In fact, saint TyAgaraja said, “*anuraagamuleni nee manasuna sugyaanamu raadhu.*”

nArAyaNa teertha’s Other Creations:

Other works attributed to Teertha include the following: ‘*Subhodinee*’ a treatise (in Sanskrit) on Brahma Sutra Sankara BhAshyam; *VivaraNa Deepika* (in Telugu), a treatise on *PancheekaraNa vartika of SureswarAchArya*, a renowned yakshagAnam in Telugu called ‘*PaarijAtApaharaNam*,’ an opera in Sanskrit by the same name, *Hari Bhakti SudhArNavam*, and *ChaAndilya Bhakti Sutra*

vyAkyaNam (disputed, however, by a few researchers as to the authenticity of authorship).

It is somewhat sad that barring a few musicians, Karnāṭaka sangIta (concert) artists seldom feature these remarkable gems, though these are well designed, structured, and tuned, ranking on par with other compositions from the Trinity that are frequently presented in concerts. One of the reasons for such a void could be the lack of knowledge! But, the “Sankeertanam world” (mother of the modern Karnāṭaka Saṃgītam) has been regularly using about a hundred compositions in (divya-nAma)Sankeertanams and divine-weddings, and in harikatha forums. Nevertheless, common challenges for Harikatha exponents attempting a comprehensive program on ‘TarangiNi’ include the following:

1. The need to limit such a vast subject to about four hours.
2. The need to cater to the varied tastes and emphasis from rasikas: Majority of the harikatha attendees are concert-music lovers, and they tend to expect more than 80% of the content to be musical.
3. The need to consider the flipside to TarangiNi’s compositional excellence as an opera **originally set to music with fine grammar & meters**: the more one listens to such an exemplary opera, the less one would like to break the musical tempo by “kathA interludes”.
4. There is compelling need to frequently provide explanations as both the structural and metrical specialties of the language used are some of the greatest in Sanskrit language.
5. The need to elaborate/melt into katha-pravachanam since it is a condensation of the most important part of VedavyAsa’s Bhagavatam, the IIIA of a PurNavatAram – Sri Krishna.

We had the pleasure of attending the Varahur annual festival honoring Sri Teertha; it was heartwarming to observe hundreds of harikatha and sankeertana bhagavatAs from all over India, with most of them from outside Tamilnadu, and/or from outside India participating in the 2-day festival, *just* to be able to sing, if possible, even one song as their offering to the colossus Teertha!

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