Sri NarAyaNa Teertha

Sri nArAyaNa Teertha ("Teertha") was born in kAzA village in KrishNa district of Andhra Pradesh but he became widely known thanks to the sankeertana bhAgavatAs of ThanjavUr district in TamilnAdu, the seat of CarnAtic music. 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 dissention as to his exact time, historians place him between 1610 and 1745 AD. An extensive research done with the help of archives preserved in Saraswati Mahal library has helped place the time closer to 1650 AD – 1745 AD, and he reportedly lived a long life.

SanAtana dharma followers believe that the great Sage VedavyAsa (KrishNa DwaipAyana) took three births in Kaliyuga, first as sringAra mahAkavi Jayadeva and composed the immortal Astapadis (24 immortal songs in 12 sargams or cantos) in the 12th century. He took another reincarnation as sringAra mahAkavi Kshetrayya or kshetragna during 15/16th century (1484 – 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 mid 17th century. The theme again was 'BhAgavatam' and specifically on 'KrishNa leela' and appropriately named 'Krishna Leela Tarangini ("Tarangini") – River of KrishNa's LeelA.

Teertha was a great scholar in Sanskrit and music. An incident somewhat similar to the one we read in the life of Adi Sankara bhagavat pAda happened in nArAyaNa's life as well.

He was once caught in raging floods and got stuck up in a whirlpool. He beckoned the Lord and assured that he would relinquish all the worldly pleasures and take up to asceticism. The waters subsided mysteriously and Teertha returned home forgetting his vow. His devout wife felt from that moment a sanyAsin in him and could not see him as her husband any more and directed him to ascetic way of life. Very soon a challenge came in the form of an incurable stomach pain and he was guided in his vision to go to deep south, in search of cure. After several hundreds of

miles of walking, he was about to faint 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 cured of his long illness and the masterpiece opera was born while he stayed to renovate the old temple, which later became known as 'varAhapuri' or 'VarahUr', after the 'varAham' that guided him or in the memory of Teertha for his earnest bhakti and erudition.

Controversies abound that he was known as 'Madhava' or 'Govinda Sastri' and his father was 'Gandharva' or 'Neelakanta sastri' and he finally came to be known, due to AbadsanyAsam, as nArAyaNa Teertha, and that it happened in the middle of Krishna river as opposed to VeNNAr in ThanjAvur district and his final days were spent in vAraNasi and not in Varahur etc. These do not take away the universality, the excellence or the authenticity of his masterpieces including the 'Tarangini'.

Manuscripts saved by Tulaja maharaja and several other scholars and devotees who belonged to 18th and 19th centuries helped the 20th century sankeertana bhAgavatAs to publish his works for our benefit. TillastAnam Narasimha bhAgavatar, & Nallur Venkatasubba released them in grantha libi and Telegu. Several publications in Telugu and grantha libi in 1920, 1948 and 1953 and a more recent and comprehensive publication in Sanskrit in 1986 have helped preserve and propagate this masterpiece.

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 popular belief that one of the Sankeertana Trinity, Bodhendra Swamigal, the 59th pontiff of the Sankara order was Teertha's disciple. No wonder that Tarangini became one of the integral parts of the sankeertana tradition and spread to the whole BhArata desam over the last two centuries. Tarangini consists of 12 Tarangams and encapsulates 153 songs, 302 slokams and 31 choornikaas. Teertha followed Veda VyAsa's Bhagavatam and concentrated on the 10th skandam and again just on the first 58 adhyAyaas of that skandam. Today, we are going to attempt to sing about 35 of his songs and twice the number of slokams and/or choornikas following the chronology or sequence as per BhAgavatam. KrishNa's AvatAra mahima, bAla leela, rAsaleela, Kamsa samhAram, DwAraka srushti and Rukmini KalayaNam (while he also describes in passing, the marriage with seven other queens). It is popular belief that when Teertha sang the keertanam 'GopAlameva deivatam sada' as from Rukmini, Lord KrishNa came in front of her and danced while playing on the flute. As desired by lord KrishNa, Teertha finished his Tarangini with Rukmini vivAham (from the narrations of Varahur Anai BhAgavatar, Panju BhAgavatar, GopAlabhAgavatar, TillaistAnam Narasimha bhAgavatar, Tiruvaiyaru Sonti VenkatrAmayya, Pantulu bhAgavatar)

Unlike many contemporary composers, Teertha was very well versed in Music and, nAtya sAstra, in addition to being a great scholar in Sanskrit. It is reported that he used at least 34 rAgAs which are very popular even today. He used triputa, Adi, rupaka, chapu, Jampa, Matya, viLamba, Eka and Ata taalams. Many of the songs are structurally well set for direct use as nritya or nAtya padams. 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 the Ultimate of nirguNa, is the worship through sravanam and keertanam, the two most important of the nine routes of Bhakti or Devotion, and that too through the manifestations of the NirguNa in the saguNa swaroopams such as KrishNa. Teertha sang on rAama, Narasimha, Venkateswara, Durga, Varadaraja and DakshiNamoorthy without any bedam.

Although he was one of the greatest Sanskrit scholars, he carefully avoided complex usages and utilized easy expressions. His Gadyams and Padyams are exquisite in beauty, but least intimidating. He used 17 different chandas or meters such as Anushtup, Arya, Indravajra, BhujangaprayAdam, sArdoola vikreeditam, vasanta tilaka, pritvi.

His other works are:
'Subhodinee' – treatise (in Sanskrit) on Brahma Sutra Sankara BhAshyam; *VivaraNa Deepika* in Telegu, a treatise on *PancheekaraNa vartika* of SureswarAchArya;
The well known yakshagAnam in Telegu *'ParijAtApaharaNam'*, and
An opera in Sanskrit by the same name;
Hari Bhakti SudhArNavam, and
ChaAndilya Bhakti Sutra vyAkyAnam (disputed by some as to the authorship).

<u>The challenges in presenting a musical exposition of this nature are multifold:</u>
1) We attempt to limit a vast subject in 3 hours.
2) The difference in emphasis from rasikas; Majority of the devotees to such harikatha are music lovers or sangIta rasikas and expects about 90% of the content to be music.
3) The exemplary nature of the compositions such as the Tarangini. It is extraordinary in its compositional excellence that it is an opera already set to music with fine meters. The more you listen to such, the less you want to break the tempo by talks.
4) The language, structural and metrical specialties; being one of the greatest in Sanskrit, a trendsetter.
5) That it is a condensation of the most important part of VedavyAsa's Bhagavatam, the leela of a PurNavatSram.
6) Selecting less than 20% of the tarangini for an operatic presentation within a short time frame is in itself a challenge.

While there is so much temptation to share the appreciation of the selected 35 compositions, slokams and choornika and present the context of each, I have to restrict the desire to occasional interludes.

Teertha improved upon his own ecstatic personal experience in his prior incarnations as Jayadeva and Kshetrayya and sang the leelAmruta of KrishNa while being an ascetic. Not withstanding the exalted self-realized state as a sanyAsin, he confesses in his own poetic excellence that the realization of ParamAtma has to be from the state of AnurAga and without

love, this prapancham and attempt to reach the NirguNa Brahmam will be a dry and futile attempt.

Sukhabrahmam told ParIkshit MaharAja while narrating the BhAgavatam that those who cannot understand the rAsaleela as the natural yearning of all beings endowed with Rasa and rAga to get to the ParamAtman, are better off not reading it, as such dry pundits have to come back to understand or re-live the experience. Swami Vivekananda was a great admirer of Sukha and his BhAgavatam, Jayadeva's gIta govindam and KrishNa leela tarangini. He answered the inquiring followers that 'if your mind is conditioned to dispense rAsaleela as the dissipation of spiritual energy, it is better that you make attempts to understand your limitations before going near such great works of philosophy'.

In fact saint TyAgaraja said "anuraagamuleni nee manasuna sugyaanamu raadhu".

He defines a 'Gopee', **'Aneka Janma sAhasra tapasaa paritoshitaha; Avirbhutaha sa BhagavAn tAsAm GopyAm sujanmani**

[The birth of a Gopee is a result of the penance done over thousands of births and ParaMatma waits to get close to the Gopee]

Further Teerta adds: **RAsakreedA mahotsavArambha sambhramachetAha Atma tatvam upadisan nAthamAha**

[It is said that ParamAtma did the 'Atma-tatvopadesam' at the beginning of the rAsaleela].

- sAmavedopanishad, ChAndokya upanishad – 6th canto; brihadAraNyaka, Taitreeya Upanishad , EasAvAsyopanishad, Mundakopanishad – all of them reiterate this aspect of rAsaleela and paratatvam

Some of his compositions have been shown in this link: **http://www.karnatik.com**

- *baalaa gOpaala krishNa*
- *Ehi mudam dEhi*
- *gOvardhana giridhara gOvinda*
- *gOvindamiha gOpikaa -*
- *jaya jaya gOkulabaala -*
- *jayamangaLam -*
- *kalaya yashOdE -*
- *krishnam kalaya saki*
- *maadhava maamava*
- *maa mahaapaarata*
- *maNgaLaalaya maamava*
- *naaraayaNaaya namO*
- *puraya mama kaamam*
- *shree naraayaNa vaahana*