

COMPOSITIONS OF SRI SWATI TIRUNAL

Some Firsts in Karnatak Music

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Maharaja Swati Tirunal of Travancore (1813-1845) is a great composer. The wealth and variety of his musical output and its high quality have gained for him a rank among composers no less exalted than that of Tyagaraja, Dikshitar and Syama Sastri, the Trinity of Karnatak Music. Not a single musician of note in South India today considers his repertoire complete without some of the songs of this royal composer. Many of these songs are available in proper notation too. Still a comprehensive study of these compositions from diverse aspects remains but a desideratum.

It is now admitted that the indigenous music of Kerala which goes by the name *Sopana* system is, in its fundamentals, practically identical with the classical music current in the rest of South India. But it has a style of rendering of its own marked by a slow and stately flow with little emphasis on rhythmic intricacies and melodic nuances, but with adequate stress on the text and its sense. Swati Tirunal added to this system whatever it was lacking and brought it on a par with the music on the other side of the *ghats* without however, sacrificing its distinctive quality.

There were two principal factors responsible for fostering Swati Tirunal's creative activity in music. One was the influence of his tutor and later Dewan, Tanjore Subha Rao, who was himself a musician and patron of music. The other was the profound impression made on his responsive mind by the musicians and dancers that flocked to his court from all parts of India, particularly after the demise in 1832 of the great patron of arts, Raja Sarabhoji of Tanjore. The musical genius of Swati Tirunal effloresced into a variety of beautiful patterns, and among them we find many which have claim to be the firsts of their kind in South Indian music.

As a composer of *varnas*, Swati Tirunal is excelled by few. He has composed more than a score of them and this is a remarkable number when we take into account the great mastery over *raga* and its meticulous details this type of composition demands. In this category he has three firsts to his credit on the basis of *raga*, form and language. A *varna* in the *raga*

Navarasa, the Telugu composition *Entanavadi naga* in *Tripita tala*, was first composed by Swati Tirunal. *Navarasa* is sometimes identified with the modern *Navaraju* but as rendered in Kathakali it has certain differences. Unlike most *varnas* which have only four *charanas*, this one has six. With regard to the novelty in form, we find in his *varna Sumasayaka* in *Kapiraga-Aditala* the last *charana* as a *ragamalika* (in *Kalyani*, *Kamas*, *Vasanta* and *Mohanam*), a feature which was adopted by Vadivelu, the great master of *varnas* in his court, in some of his own compositions.

As far as language, Swati Tirunal was the first to use for *varnas*, Sanskrit and Malayalam in addition to Telugu, the language used by most other composers of *varnas*. Some of the best known *varnas* of the Maharaja like *Sa vama rusha* in *Khamas-Adi* and '*Sarasasarasundara*' in *Nilambari-Adi* are in Sanskrit. He has honoured his own mother tongue Malayalam by employing it for the *varna* '*Indumukhi nizamaya*' in *Sankarabharana-Chapu*. His example was followed by the famous poet and composer in his court, Irayimman Thampi.

The *pada* is a class of composition which depicts the nexus between the deity and the devotee as the relation between a lover and his beloved and portrays the individual soul conceived as a *nayika*, as yearning for union with the supreme soul conceived as the *nayaka*, and in this process presents a variety of erotic moods. This class is, therefore, primarily meant for *abhinaya* and it came into great prominence from the time of Kshetragna who gave the musical world numberless scintillating songs of this type. Telugu, the language in Kshetragna's *padas*, was felt to be the most suitable language for such songs and later composers adopted it. Swati Tirunal too was no exception to this, but he also felt that for proper enjoyment of *abhinaya*, a knowledge of the import of the song that is elaborated in dance is an essential and so with the non-Telugu knowing people in mind, he composed many *padas* in Malayalam and some in Sanskrit, the language that was nearest to his heart. He is the first composer to attempt *padas* in these two languages.

In the same class, *pada*, Swati Tirunal has another first. That is the *Ragamalika pada*. The well-known song '*Pannagendrasayana*' is a *pada* and depicts the diverse moods of a *nayika* awaiting her lover from nightfall to daybreak in appropriate *ragas*. The language is Sanskrit.

In addition to the *varna* and *pada* in the *Ragamalika* type of composition, he is also the originator of the *Ragamalika sloka*. Any *sloka* can be rendered in any suitable *raga*, but what Swati Tirunal has done is to specify the *raga* for each foot of a verse by covertly incorporating the name of the *raga* in it. His innovation does not consist in this alone but in applying this for dancing. After the recent discovery of the musical structure of the *ragamalika sloka* *Kalyani khalu* etc., it has become clear that these *slokas* were meant not merely for singing, but improvised with suitable *jatis*, for dancing too. This incidentally shows that the *sloka*, like the composition *sabda*, was formerly in vogue as an item for *nritya*. The rendering of *sloka* by the danseuse we sometimes meet with in dance recitals today, is perhaps a remnant of this. Besides the *slokas* *Kalyani kahlu* etc., and *Balaharipada* which have now become popular, there are several others also by him. Two of them are given below:

नीलपीतपटानिशावृतमध्यमावतिसुन्दरी
 सादरं त्रिदशाक्षिपङ्कजमानिताङ्घ्रियुगौ सदा ।
 पीतमङ्गलकौशिकाघृतदिव्यकीर्तिनिकेतनी
 यादवाववता मुदा बत मां चिर बलकशायौ ॥
 करुणाकरमतिभैरवसहनान्दकलीलं
 कलये स्मररुचिनिन्दनपरमुन्दरदेहम् ।
 अधिकं नटनतयीकृतपृथुकालियौलि
 नवमौकितकमणिगौरिमरदमम्ब, जनाभम् ॥

It may be noted that these two *slokas* are composed in metres which have a measured rhythmic flow, which in the first corresponds to the *Misrachapu tala* and in the second to the *Rupaka tala*.

Some *ragas* also occur for the first time in the composition of Swati Tirunal. Such are *Sudhabhairavi* and *Purvakamboji*. We are able to know the nature of the first since we have got the *varnamettu* of the song '*Viharamanasa sada*' composed in it, but we have no idea of the latter since only the *sahitya* of that song '*Keminimani*' etc. is known and not its *varnamettu*.

The period of Swati Tirunal's musical activity was marked by the influence of North Indian Music and many North Indian *ragas* like *Yamuna-kalyani* (*Yaman Kalyan*), *Hamir Kalyani*, *Dviadvanti*, *Sindhuhairavi*, *Kafi* and *Hindolam* figure not only in the music of Swati Tirunal but in that of Tyagaraja and Dikshitar also. But it may appear strange that the use of that sparkling *raga Bihag* in Karnatak music goes to the credit of the Maharaja alone. In spite of the great popularity of his *kirtana* '*Smarajanaka*' in this *raga* even outside Kerala as can be seen from its occurrence in several old musical anthologies compiled in Tamilnad and Andhra, and in spite of its arresting attractiveness, *Bihag* seems to have remained outside the domain of the Karnatak composers for a long time. It is Tirupati Narayanaswami who gives an equally charming specimen in this *raga*, the famous *javali* '*Vakaladi*'.

The *raga Mohanakalyani*, as we get in his composition '*Seve srikantam*', seems to be his own creation. It combines the *arohana* of *Mohana* and *avarohana* of *Kalyani* and is a fine example for a novel method of creating new *ragas*. We may remember, however, that we do get a composition indicated to be in a *raga* of this name among the numerous compositions of Ramachandrendrayati, better known as Upanishadbrahmayogi of Kanchipuram in the 18th century. But we have no means of knowing whether the structure of the *raga* used by Upanishadbrahmayogi is the same as or different from the *raga* we get in Swati Tirunal's song. There are several *ragas* with names compounded from the names of two other *ragas* but of a nature different from both. Such are, for instance, *Kannadagaule*, *Kapinarayani*, *Sarasvatimanohari* and *Vasantabhairavi*. It may be that Upanishadbrahmayogi's *Mohanakalyani* is one such.

Swati Tirunal is the first composer of separate works for *Harikatha-kalakshepam*. The art of *Harikatha* or musical discourse which originated with the Maharashtra saints became popular in South India, but for their musical part, songs were culled from various sources and *slokas* were borrowed from the epics and Puranas and the popular *kavyas*. The *ovis*, *sakis*,

dindis, abhangs etc. from Maharashtra music were also liberally employed. But Swati Tirunal composed two works *Kuchelopakhya* and *Ajamilopakhya* in the Sanskrit language with musical forms popular with discourses and interspersed with verses. These two works remain unique specimens of this type.

The type of musical narrative having verses alternating with songs is a feature current in Tamilnadu, although the earliest work where we get the alternation of verse and song is the *Gitagovinda* of Jayadeva. Swati Tirunal was the first to adopt this type for a Malayalam work. His *Utsavaprabandha* is a work of this kind and it describes the festival at the Sri Padmanabhaswami temple in Trivandrum, in verses in Sanskrit metres interspersed with songs.

Apart from these which lay claim to being firsts in Karnatak music, there is an outstanding contribution which marks out Swati Tirunal as the first without having a second so far, and that is his Hindustani compositions. A Maharaja in farthest south composing songs in Hindustani of the distant North more than a century before that language was ever thought of as a possible claimant for being considered as the *lingua franca* of India! One can imagine his catholicity. And his contribution embraces all forms of Hindustani music. An admirable achievement indeed, but not adequately appreciated.

It can be seen from the above, that Swati Tirunal has claim to several things original among his compositions. He is the first author to write musical *Upakhyanas* for *Harikatha*. He is the first to compose *Prabandha* and *Varna* in Malayalam and *Ragamalika sloka* and *pada* in Sanskrit. He is again the first to devise a new *raga* by combining parts of two others and to handle some of the uncommon *ragas*. Steeped in tradition no doubt he was, but he had a mind open to receive the modern and a genius active to create the new. His musical output is vast and varied. Its proper preservation and fair evaluation are matters which should engage the serious attention of lovers of our music.