

SWATI TIRUNAL AS A SCHOLAR

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Maharaja Swati Tirunal was a fine composer, a sound poet and a profound scholar. His literary and musical output is impressive as much by its bulk as by its content. A close examination of his works shows him to be a great devotee who gives expression to his ideas and experiences in language which is delightfully poetic and profoundly scholarly. Besides his musical compositions numbering a few hundreds and presenting a wide linguistic and structural variety, and the *Kuchelopakhyana*, *Ajamilopakhyana* and *Utsavaprabandha*, all in song and verse, he has written the *Bhaktimanjari*, a metrical treatise expounding the nature and aim of *bhakti* and the means of attaining it, the *Padmanabhasataka*, a poem dealing with the *avatars* of Vishnu and the greatness of devotion, the *Syanandurapurava-rnanaprabandha*, a *campu-kavya* giving the legendary history of the Sripadmanabhasvami temple at Trivandrum and describing the various festivals there, and the *Muhanaprasadivyavastha*, a short prose work laying down the rules for verbal ornamentation in musical compositions.

What strikes us most when we consider Swati Tirunal as a scholar is his mastery of a number of languages, both Indian and foreign. Besides his mother tongue, Malayalam, and that great language of Indian culture, Sanskrit, he had attained considerable proficiency in Tamil, Telugu, Kanarese, Marathi, Hindi, Persian and English. Sanskrit he had learnt from his father Rajaraja Varma, who was himself a renowned scholar, and English, along with Ethics, Mathematics, History and Logic, from Tanjore Subba Rao, who later became his Dewan and whose proficiency in English earned for him the name 'English Subba Rao'. Col. Welsh who met the Maharaja in his twelfth year, has recorded his appreciation of his wonderful command of the Persian language and of his linguistic acumen in identifying Sanskrit *jyamiti* and English *geometry* and Sanskrit *ashtakona* and English *octogen* as cognate words. His known compositions, however, are confined to five languages, namely, Sanskrit, Malayalam, Hindi, Telugu, and Kanarese. It is rather strange that no song of the

Maharaja is known in Tamil, although geographically and genealogically it is the nearest kin to Malayalam in the Dravidian family of languages.

The main bulk of his contributions is in Sanskrit, next comes Malayalam and then Hindi; his writings in Telugu and Kanarese are confined to a few songs. His Sanskrit is stately, his Malayalam and Telugu elegant and his Hindi simple. His command of a rich vocabulary of the Sanskrit language and his intimate acquaintance with its vast literature, coupled with his feel for the rhythm of words and their musical value, have given him a charming style which sparkles with assonance, rhyme and alliteration, but lucid, nevertheless, and effortless. Every one of his works, be it verse, prose or a musical form, is well marked by these characteristics. The passages,

गङ्गाधराहतमसङ्गाशयाम्बुरुहभृङ्गायितं दितिमुवां
भङ्गावहं विधृततुङ्गाचलं पृथुभुजङ्गाधिराजशयनम् ।
अङ्गानुपङ्गिमृदुपिङ्गाम्बरं परमनङ्गातिसुन्दरतनुं
शृङ्गारमुख्यरसरङ्गायितं भज तमङ्गाजनाममनिशम् ॥

in the *Kuchelopakhyana* (opening verse),

वज्राधिकस्थिरतरकर्परभागोद्धृतमन्थानीभूतमन्दरधराधरेन्द्र,
वरत्रीभूतवासुकिकलितमथनसंक्षुब्धत्केनोमिमालासङ्कुलक्षीराम्भो-
निधिसमुद्भूतपीयूषविश्राणनसम्प्रीणितसमस्तसुमनो निकुम्ब,
कूर्मस्वरूप, भगवन्नमस्ते ।

In the *Syananduraprabandha*, (IX. 4) and

हेमविराजितदिव्यकिरीटं
कोमलमृगमदबिन्दुललाटं
भीमसमरभुविकृतनिशाटं
भूमिभरासुरवह्निक्वपीटं

in the kirtana *Bhavaye Padmanabham* in Madhyamavati raga, may be cited as instances. It is this ability that makes many of his compositions bristle with the decorative device called *svarakshara* wherein a syllable in the *sahitya* becomes identical with the solfa sound of the music, as for instance in

धा ; ; ध नि पा प ध मा ध प । धा ; ; प ध ।

धा - - तृ कृ पा व त मा ध व ता - - व द
नि ध नी ध प म प ॥

ति धु नी ध व व हु

धा ; ; प म ग रि स म ग म प नि । धा ; ; ध प ।

धा - - भ व ति हि कि मु व ह सि मु दा - - द र
नि ध सं नि गं रि सं म ॥

मि ह हि म गि रि स म

धा ; ; ध प धा ; ध प नी । ध प धा

दा - - मो - - - - द - - - - - - - - र

in the varna *Sa vama rusha* in *Khamas raga*. It is this, again, that enables him to skilfully weave, in certain cases, after the manner of his great contemporary Muthuswami Dikshitar, the name of the *raga* into the body of the song without in the least affecting its sense, as in

नीलाम्बरीहर्ष नित्यकारण देव

in the varna *Sarasasarasundara* in *Nilambari raga* and

भूरिनीलवरासिसमकच

in the kirtana *Mamava padmanabha sada* in *Varali raga*.

In the embellishment of the *sahitya* of his musical compositions, he himself states that he is following the principles observed by Sesha Ramanuja, better known as Margadarsi Sesha Ayyangar, the 17th century composer, whose songs, however, apart from a few which have been mistakenly attributed to the royal composer himself, have mostly sunk into unmerited oblivion. But this incidentally gives us an indication of the repertory of rare compositions which Swati Tirunal had in his possession.

An examination of the subject matter of the works of Swati Tirunal reveals him as a devout soul steeped in the spirit of our traditional lore, the *Itihasas* and the *Puranas*, and singing the glories of the Almighty to invoke his benevolence and grace. Almost all his songs are in praise of a personal god, mostly Sripadmanabha; so too his literary works. He often refers to the wonderful powers of *bhakti* as exemplified in the achievements of the devotees like Prahlada, Markandeya, Indradyumna and Ajamila known to our mythology, and sometimes narrates their stories at some length. Frequently we also come across passages in his works which echo well known passages in their sources like the *Bhagavata*, *Bhagavadgita* and *Narayaniya*. For instance, the *shloka*,

पिबन्ति ये त्वच्चरितामृतौघं
स्मरन्ति रूपं तव विच्चरम्यम् ।
हरन्ति कालं च सह त्वदीयै -
मन्येऽत्र तान् माधव धन्यधन्यान् ॥

in the *Padmanabhasataka* (II. 1) which speaks of those devotees who recite the glories of God and meditate on his form and spend their time in the company of other devotees as the most happy, is little different from the *shloka*,

पठन्तो नामानि प्रमदभरीसिन्धौ निपतिताः
स्मरन्तो रूपं ते वरद कथयन्तो गुणकथाः ।
चरन्तो ये भक्ता स्त्वयि खलु रमन्ते परमम् -
नहं धन्यान् मन्ये समभिगतसर्वाभिलषितान् ॥

in the *Narayaniya* (III. 1). The *shloka*

यद्यत् स्मरन् प्रोज्झति देहमेतत्
प्रयाणकाले विवशोऽत्र देही ।
तत्तत् किलाप्नोति यदन्यभावे
तस्मात् तवैव स्मृतिरस्तु निसम् ॥

in the same work (II. 8), which states that a person attains after death that form which he has in mind at the time of death, may be compared with the passage

यं यं वापि स्मरन् भावं त्यजसन्ते कलेवरम् ।
तं तमेवैति कौन्तेय सदा तद्भावाभावितः ॥
तस्मात् सर्वेषु कालेषु मामनुस्मर युध्य च
मय्यपि तमनोबुद्धिमिवैष्यत्य संशयम् ॥

in the *Bhagavadgita* (VIII. 6-7). The seven *shlokas* beginning with

गोप्यत्वनारतमिहाम्बुरुहाक्ष वाक्यैः

etc., in the *Bhaktimanjari* (VII. 15-21) is a paraphrase of the *Bhagavata shloka*

गोप्यः कामाद् भयात् कंसः द्वेषाच्चैद्यादयो नृपाः ।
सम्बन्धाद् वृष्णयः स्नेहाद् यूयं भक्त्या वयं विभो ॥

The Hindi compositions, in a similar way, bear the impress of such great devotional poets as Tulsidas, Surdas and Meera Bai in content, and even in form, the language being the rather antiquated Brajbhasha. The lines

करुणानिधान कुञ्जके विहारी
तुम्हारी बैसी लाला मेरा मनोहारी
इस बैसी से सुर नर मुनि मोहे
मोह गई सारी ब्रज की नारी
जब श्याम सुन्दर का तन देखी
जनम जनम के मैं संकट तारी

in the *Hamirkalpa* song may be noted in this connection.

The *padas* and *sringaravarnas* of Swati Tirunal, meant for dancing, display his intimate knowledge of poetics. The sentiment of love, *sringara*, especially in its *vipralambha* aspect, love in separation, is beautifully delineated in them. The excipients like the rising moon, the gentle breeze and the warbling birds, ensuants like eager looks, change of hue and flowing tears, transient moods like joy, envy, langour, apprehension and recollection, are all appropriately depicted. Many of the diverse emotional dispositions of *nayikas* and *nayakas* depicted in works on Poetics are well represented in these compositions. For instance, in some *padas* like *Prananayaka* in *Kambhoji* and *Dhanyayayi nan* in *Navarasa*, the *nayika* is depicted as a *svadhinapatika*, having her lover under her control. In others like *Rajani-jata* in *Sarati* and *Punten nermoli* in *Anandabhairavi* and in most of the *varnas* and in many Hindi songs, she is a *virahotkanthita* suffering the pangs of separation. In yet others like *Hem-pam-yangi* in *Saveri* and *Manasi dussaham* in *Ahari* we find her a *proshitabhartraka* anxiously awaiting the return of her lover gone abroad. A few like *Sumasaranayi* in *Kambhoji* and *Kulirmativardane* in *Dhanyasi* show her as a *vipralabdha*, disappointed by the lover. Occassionally we also find her a *kalahantarita* in

quarrel with him, as in *Sadhujane* in *Athana*, and a *khandita* taking serious offence at his manifest unfaithfulness as in *Viditamte nisavrittam* in *Surati*. We also find in these works the different types of *sringaranayakas*.

Swati Tirunal's knowledge of the art and science of music was as deep as it was wide and he turned it into good use. The intimate knowledge of Karnatak music of that time, which he was able to acquire through the many reputed musicians from far and near in his court, enabled him to remodel the classical music of Kerala by building up an attractive super-structure of Karnatak or *desiya* music on the bedrock of the indigenous *sopana* music. He was the first in Kerala to try his hand at all the major forms of South Indian music like *svarajati*, *varna*, *kirtana*, *pada* and *tillana*, and none did he touch which he did not adorn. He was one of the first in the South to handle Mahrati forms like *saki*, *ovi*, *dindi* and *abhang* and Hindustani forms like *dhrupad*, *tappa* and *khayal*. And he is the only composer in South India who has composed in the Hindi language itself. His creative genius enabled him to evolve new *ragas* like *Mohanakalyani* and *Purvakambhoji* and to adopt, like his great contemporaries Tyagaraja and Muthuswami Dikshitar, Hindustani tunes like *Khamas*, *Bihag*, *Yaman kalyani*, *Sindhubhairavi* and *Vrindavanasaranga* for Karnatak compositions and thereby attempt, though unconsciously, a sort of synthesis of the Karnatak and Hindusthani systems and bring the North and South nearer together in the realm of arts like music.

But with all this, unlike several other votaries of music, he never looked upon that art as an end in itself; not even as a direct means to the ultimate end, but only as an auxiliary to a means. He considered music an *upaya* or accessory to *bhakti* or devotion which is the *sadhana* or means leading to *mukti* or liberation. He observes in the *Bhaktimanjari* that even the most enchanting music can be likened only to a cry in the wilderness unless it is employed as a medium to extol the greatness of God,

तन्त्रीनादविमिश्रितं लययुतं तारस्वनान्युजलं
श्रोत्रानन्दकरं चरिणुमिरलं ग्रामत्रयेऽपि स्वरैः ।
गीतं तावकनामनिर्भरसुधाजुष्टं न चेत् तत्पुन-
र्व्यर्थं व्यर्थमरण्यरोदनमिव प्रायो रमावल्लभ ॥

and again, that a discerning man should listen only to such music,

गीते यदीह रमते हृदयं मनोज्ञे
तन्त्रीनिनादसुखदायिनि तर्हि मर्त्यः ।
गीतेषु तावकचरित्ररसोज्ज्वलेषु
युञ्जीत मानसमजस्रमनन्तशायिन् ॥

Not only should one's musical powers be so applied, the poetic powers too should be harnessed towards that end. He observes that poetry, even if it is technically faultless and artistically perfect, can be commendable only if its content is the eulogy of the Almighty,

रम्यापि ध्वनिमण्डितापि यमकप्रासोज्ज्वलापि प्रभो
प्रौढार्थप्यनवद्यगद्यगणयुक्पद्यान्वितापि ध्रुवम् ।
श्रीजाने यदि साहिती तव गुणालापैरलं वर्जिता
धिक् तां मोघतमां वृथाप्रलपितप्रायामिहाधोज्ञ ॥

We, therefore, find each of the works of Swati Tirunal, musical as well as literary, forming either a prayer for *bhakti* or the expression of some aspect of *bhakti*. The spirit of the *Bhagavata* which so deeply permeated him, made him adopt the nine-fold path of devotion detailed therein, namely,

श्रवणं कीर्तनं विष्णोः स्मरणं पादसेवनम् ।

अर्चनं वन्दनं दास्यं सख्यमात्मनिवेदनम् ॥

Lending the ear to the praise of God,
Chanting His names, meditation on His form,
Service at His feet, worship of His images,
Salutation sincere, dedication of deeds,
Friendship that frees the soul of all bondage,
And the surrender of ego to the supreme at last.

In the string of songs known as the *Navaratnamalika* these nine aspects are dealt with in order. His monumental *Bhaktimanjari* is, in the main, an enunciation and illustrative exposition of these in detail.

But the *bhakti* propounded by Swati Tirunal is not of this conventional type alone. The more emotional form of it symbolised by the love of the *gopis* for Lord Krishna and worked out as a distinct discipline in the *Bhaktisutras* of Narada and Sandilya, also impressed his sensitive mind. This *premabhakti* or erotic mysticism had already been much popularised on the lyrical and musical side by Jayadeva and on the religious side by Chaitanya. The erotic sentiment we see in the *padas* and *varnas* is this *madhurabhava*, a super-sensuous love directed towards the Supreme by the devotee vicariously feeling himself a *gopi* yearning for the divine love; what sage Narada calls as *Kantasakti* in the psychological evolution of the *bhakta* in the culture of devotion culminating in *paramaprema* when the devotee feels the living presence of God everywhere and becomes absorbed in him.

Swati Tirunal repeatedly states that the *karmamarga* or the path of action, with its emphasis on formal ritualism and aim for the attainment of heaven, cannot lead to salvation, and the *jnanamarga* or the path of knowledge is not directly accessible to all and demands certain prerequisites, and that, therefore, it is the *bhaktimarga* or the path of devotion that is easy to practice and sure of success. After the manner of Narayanabhattacha, the author of the *Narayaniva*, he prescribes this course for those who are neither wholly attached to the world nor fully detached from it. Cf.

ये तु नाधिकविरक्तसक्तहृदया हि भक्तिरयि तद्विता

(*Padmanabhataka*, X. 9).

Towards the close of the *Bhaktimanjari* he states that *bhakti* leads to *jnana* which, in its turn, leads to the four-fold *mukti*, namely, *salokya*, *samipya*, *sarupya* and *sayujya*.

Maharaja Swati Tirunal was, therefore, a great devotee, a versatile scholar, a fine poet and a gifted composer. He held that poetic and musical talents should be directed towards the propagation of piety, and singing and dancing should be pressed into such service as would evoke religious emotion leading to devotional ecstasy. He never aims at showing off his erudition or indulging in pedantry, and all the expression of learning we see in his works is quite incidental and unlaboured. We appreciate his effortless ease, and his substantial scholarship and admire his genius.