

# BHAJANA TRADITION IN SOUTH INDIA\*

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Bhajana connotes worship of Gods through the medium of song, verses and recitation of His name with devotion. In a popular sense, it implies a congregational ritual of collective worship of Gods through songs, dance etc. Bhajan implies a genre of devotional music conveying traditional religious values. Bhakti represents the unappeased craving of the heart for God.

The supreme Indian ideal is spirituality. The dominant awareness in every traditional Hindu's consciousness is the omnipresence and omnipotence of God. Religion is so wedded to our daily life that the two are inseparable. The Hindu daily experiences the religion in entertainment, literature, folk-lore and music. Traditionally music in South India has been closely connected with the temple like folk music is essentially devotional or reflects how religion has permeated into every aspect of life.

The most prominent tenets of the Bhakti doctrine are the efficacy of listening to the praise of God and of singing His holy names. The latter in particular refers directly to what is called—Nama Siddhanta school—that persuasion in which the utterance of God's name is the potent means of gaining His grace. There are two ways in which this is achieved. The first method called Nama Japa consists in repeating a name of God over and over again. The doctrine of the efficacy of the repetition of God's names is a vital aspect of the Bhakti approach to God. An important aspect of bhajana sampradaya is that which emphasises salvation through repeating the names of God as for example in the 'Sahasranama' stanzas (on different deities) containing a catalogue of one thousand names and attributes of the deity. The second method is called 'Nama kirtana' or 'Nama Sankirtana' meaning singing the names and praises of God. It is this second mode of worship that is the important cornerstone of the musical aspects of bhajana ritual tradition.

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Of the three-fold *marga* of approaching the infinite viz., *Gnana-marga* (knowledge of study and meditation), *Karma-marga* (right action and observance of rituals) and *Bhaktimarga* (devotional), the last is considered the easiest and most ideal. This is not however, to deny the importance of the other two paths to God for the highest achievements of *bhakti* embrace them as well. Devotion itself has been conceived of as being nine-fold viz., *Sravaṇa*, *Kirtana*, *Smarana*, *Padasevana*, *Archana*, *Vandana*, *Dasya*, *Sakhya* and *Atmanivedana*. It is significant that *sravana* or listening to the glories of God and *Kirtana* or individual and collective singing of His glories which have been accorded primacy in the order of development of *bhakti* form, in fact, the basis of *bhajana*.

According to Hindu traditions, sound or *Nada* itself is considered a manifestation of God. 'Om' represents the primordial sound—the eternal fundamental source of all life, that which encompasses the Universe. The participants of *bhajana* perform a form of *Yoga*—viz., *Nada yoga*. Since one of the underlying principles of *Yoga* is that all things we concentrate upon we become by dwelling through song on the names of God epitomizing His glories and virtues, the sound gets related to the thought and to that extent provides the participants into *bhajana* ritual with a mental condition conducive to union with the *Nadabrahman*.

In all devotional music, the words of the texts which are about God have special significance. When a devotional song is sung in *Bhajana*, in contrast to a musical concert, the words are considered more important than the music. The latter is only a vehicle for the more important texts, but when repeated in a musical setting, the power of the words in the *bhajana* is certainly enhanced.

The concept or idea of *bhajana* can be traced to the *Rgveda* whose hymns constitute the earliest outpourings of man praying to the divine power in the form of adulation of different members of the vast pantheon of Gods—*Agni*, *Indra* etc.—symbolizing the multifarious manifestations of the supreme Godhead. The importance of *bhajana* as a means of salvation is also emphasised in the *Bhagavad Gita* which represents the quintessence of all Hindu ethics and doctrines. One of the most striking features of Hinduism encountered everywhere in India is the overt personalisation of deities. The concept of God as revealed in the *Bhagavad Gita* later changed from that of being at once remote and austere to a *Krishna* having qualities very closely associated with mortals as described in the *Bhagavatha* relating to *Krishna's* antics with particular reference to his relationship with the *Gopis* in a warmly human yet divine manner—qualities that are characteristic of contemporary *Krishna* worship. These stories from *Krishna avatara* form the main legendary source from which has been generated much of the present day *bhajana* tradition. Many of the song texts themes, symbolic

acts and ritual dances connected with bhajana owe their origin to the Bhagavatha.

The beginnings of the bhajana sampradaya in South India may be traced to the appearance on the scene of a succession of great saint leaders—Nayanmars and Alvars who were respectively worshippers of Siva and Vishnu. These god-intoxicated poet singers preached complete surrender to God by way of Bhakti and used fervent devotional songs to convey their special messages. These hymns like the Tevaram, Tiruvachagam, Divya-prabandham, Tiruvaymozhi and Pasuram represent the highest Saivite and Vaishnavite writings and to this day are regularly performed by Oduvars, Araiyaans etc., in temples and they can be considered as so earliest progenitors of the bhajana tradition in South India. An important feature is the use of Tamil for these song texts rather than the traditional Sanskrit. This was not only because not all these poet-singers were well-versed in Sanskrit but more importantly the bhakti movement involved the society in general and in order to ensure that the message of bhakti reached as many persons as possible, the vernacular was used. Although a great portion of the bhakti song texts are in Sanskrit, one of the hallmarks of the bhakti tradition in all parts of India is the use of regional languages. The Nayanmars and Alvars made exhaustive pilgrimages to various shrines composing a great part of their works in these temples and dedicating their songs to the presiding deities of these sacred centres which consequently came to be known as **புரடல் பெற்ற ஸ்தலங்கள்**. The arrival of these poet-singers coincided with the establishment of the Pallava empire in South India. The Nayanmars were instrumental in converting some of the Pallava kings from Jainism back to Saivism and the latter in turn aided in the promulgation of the faith by founding new temples in and around which the religious activities were centered and all the arts and music flourished focussing on the idea of loving surrender to the Almighty. This work was continued with great zeal for many centuries by the Cholas who followed the Pallavas.

Along with the Nayanmars and Alvars, the three great Acharyas—Sankara, Ramanuja and Madhwa—vedantic philosophical leaders who for the most part based their teachings on re-interpretations of the ancient scriptures—gave fresh impetus to the development of Bhakti movement and spread of the bhajana cult in South India. They travelled far and wide, preaching and debating, thereby bringing a philosophical vitality to the awakening. These Acharyas helped provide, through their exemplary lives and teachings, inspiration not only for generations of poet-singers, but also activists of the bhajana movement like Ramananda in North India and Chaitanya in Bengal.

The Hindu revival of the 7th century which saw the beginnings of the

bhajana cult in the Tamil country was taken by other regions with populations speaking different vernacular languages. It first spread to the West and then to the North and eventually engulfed the whole of India. In Karnataka, the main protagonists of the movement were the Virasaivas (devotees of Siva) and the Haridasas who are comparable respectively to the Nayanmars and Alvars and like them used the popular vernacular for emphasising the bhakti approach to God. The Haridasas, who were ardent followers of Madhwa, wandered from village to village carrying their message in song. The *Devarnamas* of Purandaradasa, the most well known among the Haridasas form an important part of the present-day South Indian bhajana repertoire as do the *Abhangs* of prominent Maharashtrian poet-singers like Tukaram and Ramadas. The bhakti activities in Maharashtra are continued round Pandharpur and the bulk of the Marathi devotional songs are in praise of the presiding deity, Panduranga. The most distinguishing among the poet-singers of Northwest India are Narasimha Mehta of Gujarat, Mirabai of Rajasthan and Guru Nanak of the Punjab. Mira, more than other poet-singer, has captured and held the hearts of Indians all over the country down to the present day and her very thought is associated with the most ardent devotion to Lord Krishna. Coming to North India proper, a noteworthy feature is the emergence of Sufism out of Islamic elements which were compatible with Hindu bhakti; songs and dance were the essential parts of the worship of Sulfis who had much in common with Hindus. Kabirdas represents a fusion of both the Hindu and Muslim ideologies. Ramananda who hailed from Varanasi was the chief architect of the bhajana cult in the religion based on Ramanuja's Vaishnavite doctrines and he provided inspiration to generations of distinguished Hindu Bhajan composers such as Ravidas, Surdas and Tulasidas. In Eastern India it was Chaitanya who gave impetus to the resurgence of Vaishnavism and he is hailed as the *Mulapurusha* of the Nama siddhanta cult. Dominating the entire religious scene, he is unrivalled as the promoter of the bhajana tradition in the form of Bengali Kirtans. Song and dance are reported to be integral parts of his Krishna worship. In fact Chaitanya is credited with having introduced dancing in the bhajana rituals. He is further said to have preached with great effectiveness the gospel of devotion to Vishnu in the course of his pilgrimage to the temples in South India.

The great bhakti movement and its accompanying expression in the shape of bhajana which initially originated in South India roundabout the 7th century A.D. seems to have moved clockwise round the country into Karnataka and Maharashtra and then through the Western and Northern regions east to Bengal and finally down the East coast, back to South India once again nearly eight centuries later. The second half of the 15th and first half of the 16th centuries brought to fruition in great measure the essential formation of the present day bhajana ritual structures as at present performed by orthodox groups in South India. This task was begun by three generations of a family of poet composers from Tallapakkam in Andhra—

Annamacharya, Tirumalacharya and Chinnayya whose activities were centered round the Tirupathi temple. Among these, far less is known about Tirumalacharya as compared to his more famous father and son. The importance of the Tallapakkam composers lies in the fact that they began many of the conventions in bhajana paddhati that were continued and developed by those who came later. Indeed they are credited with having codified the present bhajana tradition and systematizing the orthodox bhajana ritual. They are also responsible for the largest output of diverse types of devotional songs. They composed the Todayamangalam songs with which the first section of the bhajana invariably ends proclaiming victory of the Lord as well as the Heccharika or the songs used in processions announcing the arrival of the deities. Chinnayya is responsible for the composition used in different stages of Pooja during bhajana and he also set the order of songs performed during the last section of the bhajana ritual i.e., the Dolotsavam. More than anything else, the tradition of worshipping Rama in song and ritual can be traced to Annamacharya. Annamacharya's imprint on the Rama cult was continued by Bhadrachala Ramadas but received its apex with Tyagaraja. The devotional songs of Ramadas who appeared on the Andhra scene two centuries later also form an important part of contemporary bhajana paddhati. He was instrumental in establishing Rama Mandirams at different centres to facilitate the performance of Bhajana rituals largely devoted to Rama as regular religious and social functions in the lives of the people. After the Tallapakkam composers, Tyagaraja is the contributor to the largest amount of musical literature performed in contemporary bhajana rituals. He owed much like the Tallapakkam composers as well as Ramadas and closely followed their Rama Nama Siddhanta cult living his life of worship mostly by songs. In fact he had the opportunity of constantly listening to vast number of Ramadas's compositions sung to him by his mother during his childhood and this is believed to have influenced his musical style considerably. He used to invariably sing Annamacharya's Todayamangalams and other devotional pieces during his Unchavritti and Chaturmasya bhajanas. Tyagaraja composed music for complete sections of bhajana paddhati as well as individual songs of varying standards, ranging from simple songs for the musically untrained to sing in unison to complex pieces sung ordinarily in solos by the musically initiated or by small groups within larger congregation. His important bhajana pieces include Divyanama kirtanas which form an important part of the second section of the bhajana ritual as well as Utsava Sampradaya Kirtanas usually sung during the closing stages.

In addition to the above mentioned three architects of contemporary bhajana sampradaya who were all ardent votaries of Rama Nama Siddhanta, there are some exponents of the Krishna cult who have also contributed in large measure to the present day bhajana structure. Foremost among them is Jayadeva, the Oriyan poet of the 12th century whose Gitagovinda has remained for eight centuries, the highest symbolic example of bhakti and the

single-most influential musico-poetic work on subsequent individual poet singers and bhakti movements. The main theme of the *Gitagovinda* is the estrangement of Radha and Krishna caused by the latter's solicitude for other Gopis, Radha's anguish at Krishna's indifference towards her and lastly the rapture which attend their final reunion. Another important savant of the Krishna cult in the context of Bhajana is Narayana Tirtha whose magnum opus *Krishna Lila Tarangini* has noticeable connection with the *Gitagovinda* both in point of poetic structure and thematic material. The *Ashtapadis* of Jayadeva and the *Tarangas* of Narayana Tirtha form indispensable constituents of the present day bhajana music repertoire. The complete set of *Ashtapadis* from the entire *Gitagovinda* are performed in some bhajana rituals like *Radhakalyana*. A noteworthy feature of the bhajana tradition based predominantly on the devotional songs springing from the Krishna Cult is the comparative preponderance of dance elements in the ritual.

A hallowed name in South Indian bhajana is Sadasiva Brahmendra whose Advaitic songs on the greatness of Nama Siddhanta in fine and flowing Sanskrit with easy diction attract connoisseurs and laymen alike. Another such saint poet is Uttukkadu Venkatasubbier whose *Rasa Sabdha* songs in both Tamil and Sanskrit are also quite popular in bhajana. Like some *Tarangas*, these compositions have *Solkattu* appendages characterized by intricate rhythmic patterns. Venkatasubbier has also composed devotional songs for the Utsava on different steps to union with God. The most prominent Tamil composer of bhajana songs is Gopalakrishna Bharati, some of whose *Nandanar Charitra Kirtanas* find an important place in bhajana rituals as '*Nataraja Dhyana*'. The *Tiruppugazh* songs of Arunagirinathar are indispensable items in bhajanas dedicated largely to Lord Muruga.

In the bhajana tradition in South India, great emphasis is laid on the role of the devotees of God. Prominent preceptors of bhaktas like Narada and Prahlada are given the pride of place. Anjeneya is lauded as the supreme bhakta exemplifying the highest ideals of love and fidelity towards God. Of great importance to the development of bhajana paddhati in South India was the appearance in the Cauvery delta of three bhajana Gurus—Bodhendra, Sridhara Venkatesa Ayyaval and Venkatarama Sadguruswami who were responsible for the bhakti revival during the late 17th and early 18th centuries. Realising the efficacy of Nama-Sankirtana as the ideal means of salvation in the Kali age and finding that the congregational singing of devotional songs in unison helped to inculcate bhakti into the minds of the people, they were instrumental not only in standardizing and codifying the contemporary bhajana structure but also founding Matths in various centres which went a long way in popularising the bhajana cult. Compositions venerating these bhajana Gurus are an indispensable part of the bhajana format and are sung in the *Gurudhyana* section following the *Todaya-amangalam*.

The song types used in bhajana recitals fall into four categories—Pundarikam, Namavali, Sloka and Kirtana. The Pundarikam is a short responsorial song consisting of a few words used as a formula-like signal to the congregational indicating the beginning of a section of the ritual or the end of a longer song marking its conclusion. Namavalis too are sung in a responsorial manner and are made up of comparatively short texts consisting of names and for praises of a diety or supplications directed to him. Rhythmically and melodically simple, direct and free of ornamentation, they are the mainstay of congregational singing. Slokas or Viruttams are performed in invocative and meditative sections of the ritual usually by a leader or other solo singer in a free rhythmic manner. Kirtanas constitute the vast bulk of the songs used in Bhajanas; these refrain-like compositions include most devotional types like Ashtapadis, Tarangas, Devarnamas, Abhangs etc. While simple Kirtanas are sung by the entire congregation in unison, the advanced types are performed in solos by the musically trained. Forms of bhajana ritual itself vary from a solitary man singing unaccompanied songs about or to his God or the Unchavritti moving from house to house singing, playing and dancing to his God to simple collective bhajanas composed predominantly of Namavalis or annual festivals wherein larger congregations take part involving the enacting of the comprehensive bhajano-tsavam. Such rituals are made up of four sections. The first section includes invocations to various Gods beginning with Ganesa as well as salutations to the great preceptors and bhaktas and ends with Annama-charya's Todayamangalam compositions. The second section commences with Guru Kirtanas on the three Bhajana Gurus followed by Ashtapadis, Tarangas, compositions of Sadasiva Brahmendra, Bhadrachala Ramadas, Gopalikrishna Bharati etc., and lastly by Upachara Gitas. The third or Divyanama Sankirtana section is the most absorbing and elevating part of the whole ritual dealing largely with anecdotes from the Bhagavata. The relevant songs are performed around Krishna represented by a Deepa followed by Gopika Gitas and Abhangs and this section concludes with an Ashtapadi and Dhyana slokas. In the last or Dholotsavan section, Uthsava Sampradaya Kirtanas are rendered relating to various aspects like Nalangu, Shobhanam, Arati etc., and the whole ritual concludes with awakening the diety by singing suprabhatham the next morning.

The South Indian bhajana ritual which was inaugurated by the Hindu revival of the Nayanmars and Alwars and consolidated later by Annama-charya received fresh impetus as a result of the establishment of Marathi rule at Tanjore which heralded the influx of large numbers of Marathi saints and singers. The current bhajana tradition is the result of developments from varying accretions which came from both North and South India. The influence of the Marathi Harikritanas and the highly devotional songs popularised by the Kirtanakaras results in the evolution of a composite form of bhajana in which the fine elements of Maharashtrian devotional music got embedded. Their impact was even greater on the sister institution of



Kathakalakshepam which is verily the off-shoot of the Maharashtrian tradition. Whereas the essential feature in bhajana is the active participation of the devotees in the ritual involving the entire congregation, in Kathakalakshepam it is the Katha performer who gives a literary and musical exposition of the theme with members of the audience occasionally joining only in singing the Pundarikam and Namavalis. The Kathakalakshepam performance involved elements of drama, humour, satire etc., requiring diverse historionic talents amounting to versatility on the part of the Harikatha exponent in addition to an intimate knowledge of bhakti lore and a large repertoire of devotional songs of diverse types. In the long line of distinguished Harikatha performers, Chidambaram Embar Srirangachariar holds a prominent place. His original contribution lay in ceaseless working on the expansion of the songs and themes of the art through the preparation of Nirupanas for whole series of epics and puranas like the Ramayana and Bhagavata. That he was eclectic in the choice of his themes is borne out by the fact that in addition to becoming most celebrated in his time for his performance of the Siva Charitram of Nandanar specially associated with Chidambaram where he lived, he was also the pioneer in performing the lives of many Nayanmars, who, as we have already seen, laid the foundations for the South Indian bhajana cult.

It is a matter of profound gratification to all the lovers of art that the present Annual conference of the Music Academy is being presided over by his distinguished son, Sri Embar Vijayaraghavachariar who is so eminently carrying on the traditions of his illustrious father.