

Appreciating Carnatic Music
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Lecture -44
Bhakti and Carnatic Music:
(Metaphor, Worldview and Yearning in Carnatic Compositions)

(Music Starts: 00:20) (Music Ends: 02:52) “Rama ikka nanu brova radha dhaya ledha”, This is address to Sri Rama one of the most beloved deity of Hindu religion. The composers says Rama can you not take care of me, can you not protect me, “nanu brova radha dhaya ledha” to have pity do you, you not have compassion. Now one of the most obvious features, most striking features of carnatic music compositions is their religions orientations.

Most of them as I said especially, the krithi which is the premier compositions form. Krithis are always addressed, they always referred to one or the other deity in the Hindu pantheon. So the question naturally, immediately arises, how necessary is a religious attitude to perform or enjoy this music. If this music is art music, classical music then surely its reach should be beyond the certain religious community.

But the compositions, being so obviously and explicitly rooted in the Hindu traditions. What of people outside these religions, how do they relate to this composition, can a non-Hindu perform carnatic music or enjoy it. They answer to it straight away and very clearly yes and we have had performers from outside the Hindu fold. We have had westerners seriously took Carnatic music and in our own back yard.

We have Muslim families like the Sheik Chinna Moulana, how far family generations have been very prominent performer of carnatic music of the Nathaswaram, which is the traditional instruments. So the carnatic compositions are in devotions in content. They are devotional, so what is the relation between carnatic compositions and carnatic music and Hindu devotion.

Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer one of the most influential, one of the most venerated musicians of the previous generations, said that Bhakti or devotion is important in carnatic music. But it is Bhakti for the music that is what it is important. Another great musician, living legend as he is

called Professor V.V. Subramanian, he said that what is Bhakti? Bhakti stems from love, devotion stems from love and in the context of music. This love is seeking, this love yearning, is after merger with sruthi, merger with the raga, merger with the composers and composers mind.

So that we can bring out an evocative music, that is what is Bhakti in the context of carnatic music. Even so it is hard to ignore, that as far as content of the compositions goal, it is explicitly religious. So let us in this session, explore the relationship between carnatic music and just try to understand what, when we mean, when we say carnatic music compositions are rooted in the Bhakti or this is, something that we often hear it cannot be dismissed.

Compositions in carnatic music especially the krithis, as I said is rooted in the larger ethos of metaphysical structure forms. A world view that draws from various strands of this complex entity called Hinduism. Question about human destiny about, what is this life? What are we here for? What is its purpose? The angst, the agony, the anxiety of our mortality and every human soul seeking freedom liberation from the limitation imposed by this mortality.

These are the questions that every religion addresses and Hinduism also does it. But there is no single answer of, any single world view of it. There are at least three strands that can be discerned in this complex religion. We have the Vedic ritualism on one hand, which emphasizes discharge of religious duties. What is "Nitya Naimittika Karmas" and many other karmas. On this world view, human lives the goal of the human life is seen as the proper discharge of duties, religious duties.

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Human beings are seen, has been under the debts; seen under certain debts. What are called runa? they are indebted to gods, who give them life, who give them food, water, air everything. They are indebted to the fathers and forefathers is called pithru runa. And they are indebted to their Achariar, the teacher. And human being lives is properly lived, when he discharges his debts to these three beings.

And then, we have the quashing, the Upanishads extends, which advocates meditating to withdrawing into one self. Seeking truth by withdrawing from worldly pursuits. Now besides these two, there is third very powerful stand of Hinduism is the Bhakti stand. The Bhakti way, the way of Bhakti, this we find in our Puranas and more joyfully in the songs of hundreds of Bhakti poets. That we have had in this country from about the fifth century till about the sixteen of seventeenth centuries, even later.

So what is this bhakti movement? As it is called the Bhakti movement is originated in Tamilnadu in the out pouring, devotional out pouring's of the Alvars, who sang of their loves for Vishnu, followed by the out pouring by Shiva devotees is the Thavarams. And soon this spread across the country.

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And we have many Bhakti saints. We have the Desakotas and the Veerashaivas from Karnataka. We have Meerabai, Thulasidoss, Surdoss, Kabhirdoss, we have Chaithania Mahaprabhu many, many. Bhakti poets all of them singing of their love for Krishna or Rama or Devi or Shiva in their regional languages. Sanskrit was set side, they sang easily of their love, just as I would sing or they were talked to them like mother or father.

Bhakti is a movement with great diversities in it. But once feature is certainly in that, it is the individual seeking a direct relationship with god. The Bhakti poets all of them have very little use for ritualism. For outward religious symbol, perfunctory in their place a intense love for the god, intense love for Krishna or Rama. And singing to them as if they were, as if Rama or Krishna was their father.

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That is the essence of Bhakti. The Bhakti voice, they seek the lord on their own terms, passion, love even defiance is seen in the poems of these bakhthas, Bhakti poets, Bhakti saints. It is the individual seeking the lord, which is why we find invariably, that thesesong has the signature of the bakhtha. The Bhakti poets live their signatures in their poems. What is called Ankitha or Mudra, so Meera says “meera ka gei” in all padas.

Kabhir say “dass kabhir kekath kabhir suno bhai”, Anamachariar uses the name of his lord as his signature “lord venketeswara”. Purandaradasa uses”purandara vittala” as his Ankitha, in all of his padas, purnadara vittala is used. We will see carnatic composers also use this ankitha or mudra and this they incorporate the signature in their compositions. Bhakti has no use in the rituals formalism nor for the quasins or withdrawal. The Upanishads preach, instead Bhakti saints sing of their love for god.

They sing to him, they speak to him, they cajole him, they plead with him, they will chastise him, they even show their anger that is the appointment, even at time sarcasm. The Bhakti movements as it is called as suffuse the Indian ethos, the Indian mind, the Indian psyche. It let a deep impact on certainly on the performing arts, on the literary art as well. Now while there were radical ideas in the Bhakti movement. The questioned prevailing religious mores, religious

practices that emphasize outward expression, outward symbolism. They also criticize social mores and many of them explicitly rejected the caste system.

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So, any bakhtha, whether, whatever gender or caste or creed. If he or she loves the lord, then he or she is the brother and the sister. So this kind of social radicalism is also seen in many Bhakti poetry. Now where does carnatic music stand vis-à-vis this tradition. I am going to play a composition for you, it is a Tamil composition composed by Gopalakrishna Bharathi, who lived in the 19th century.

He was a younger contemporary, the carnatic trinity and it is believed that he and Thygaraja had a meeting and there were some exchange of some musical ideas. So he chronologically or in terms of stature as composer, he comes next, he comes after the trinity certainly. But I want to play this composition of his before going on to talk about the trinity in our next sessions. Because this composition very clearly rooted in the Bhakti ethos, Bhakti traditions.

So I have outlined Bhakti, certain features of Bhakti sampradaya are very clearly in this compositions. Gopalakrishna Bharathi compositions are very poignant. They are very nuanced compositions. And this composition goes like this

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pallavi
vazhi maraittirukkudE malai pOIE
oru mADu paDuttirukkudE

anupallavi
pAVi paraiyan inda Uril vandu enna
pAvam tlrEnO pAdattil sErEnO ErEnO sivalOka nAdA

charaNam
tEraDiyil inDRu darisittAl pOdum
Koyil vara mATTEnE
Or aDi vilaginAl podum ingE nindRu uTRu pArkka
chaTRE Agilum vilagAdO undan mADu

Translation :
Alas, my view is blocked by a mountain-like bull which is lying down!
Even after coming to this town, will not this sinner of Parayan caste have his
sins pardoned? Will I not reach your feet? Will I not ascend to your abode, O
Lord Shiva?
It is enough if I can see you from the chariot stop (note: this is outside the
temple gates), I will not enter the temple. It is enough if your bull moves by
one foot for me to peer from here today. Will not your bull move just a little?

“Vazhi maraitirukude malai pOLE oru mADu paDuthirukkudE pAVi parayan inda Uril vandum enna pAvam rlrEnO pAdathil sErEno pAdarril nindru dharisithal podum koyil vara mattene oradi vilaginal podum inge nindru utru parka chatre agilum vilagadho undan madu”. The translation is there for you to read let us listen to the composition and then we will discuss it. (Music Starts: 19:32) (Music Ends: 34:07)

So this composition is part of a larger part of what is called a musical play. It is actually “Kathakalakshepam”, it is a larger work called “Nandanar Charithram” Nandanar or Nandan was a shiva devotee and he belong to a very low caste. Who traditionally could not enter temples. And yet he was a devote and he earned for glimpse of the lord at the temple in Chidambaram the Nataraja the Siva Sivalingam at Chidambaram.

And this composition describes his sheer frustration, that I against many odds, have come to this town of yours, and yet am I to be denied darshan, am I to be denied a glimpse of you. This huge bull lying in your way, the bull of course is Nandi, Nandi is the vahana or the vehicle of lord shiva. And in every Shiva temple, just right before the sanctum of the lord, we have the Nandi.

And Nandan, say that this is in the way and I cannot see you would not let your bull, little move just, so that I can glimpse of you. So here you have clear elements of the bhakti tradition. The

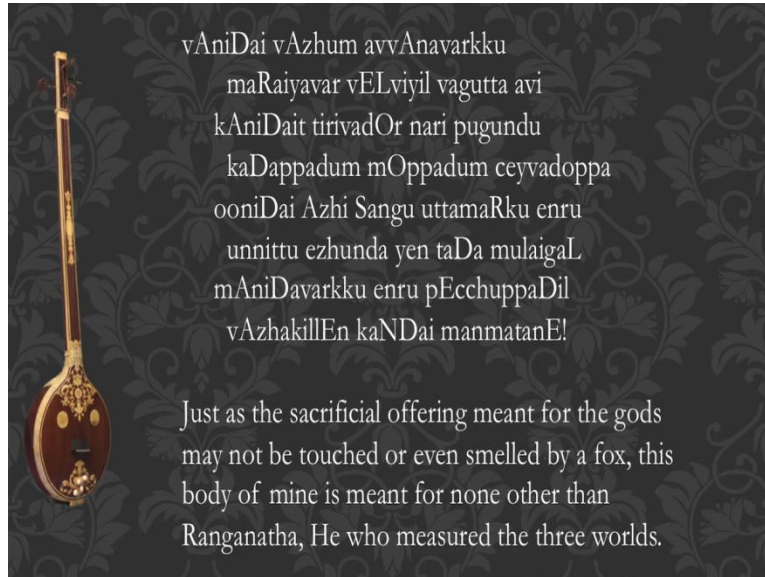
many bhakti poets were in fact from the lower caste. Who sought direct communion with the lord. And Nandan is earning for his, for the darshan of lord Shiva.

Now carnatic compositions are situated in the multihued Hindu religious tradition and certainly bhakti is a strong presence in this tradition. We find recurrent metaphoric illusions to the “Samsara Sagara” the oceanic tumult of worldly existence. We find ideas of world weariness of seeking redump or seeking release from the cycle of birth and death.

We find ideas of the lord, the god being a master puppeteer. Who has his own idea of play, what is called leela. It is a play for him and we are all actors in this play of his such ideas are all very much part of the Hindu metaphysical world view. And these are all reflected in carnatic compositions. The idea of god as being the protector, creator of course, protector god has been mother and father.

Interestingly the idea of bridal mysticism, where god is seeing as the beloved and the deity the bride that is not found in carnatic compositions. For instance, if you look at this song again from the Alvars, a partial from Andal.

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vAniDai vAzhum avvAnavarkku
maRaiyavar vELviyil vagutta avi
kAniDait tirivadOr nari pugundu
kaDappadam mOppadam ceyvadoppa
ooniDai Azhi Sangu uttamaRku enru
unnittu ezhunda yen taDa mulaigaL
mAniDavarkku enru pEcchuppaDil
vAzhakillEn kaNDai manmatanE!

Just as the sacrificial offering meant for the gods
may not be touched or even smelled by a fox, this
body of mine is meant for none other than
Ranganatha, He who measured the three worlds.

“vanidai valum av vanavarku maraiavar vezhviyil vagutta avi kanidait tirivadhori nari pugundhu kadapadam oppadam ceyva oppa” and so on. The meaning of which, Andal says is the bride she

says, she is the lord Ranganathas bride and she will unite with none other than him. This is bridal mysticism, at its most passionate and most explicit. She says just as the sacrificial offering that is made for the gods, may not be touched by her folks.

So also this body of mine is meant for Ranganatha and no mortal can even dream of touching it. And if that, if there is of the merest talk of may be invaded to a mortal, I will surely die. Now this is as I said bridal mysticism. We find bridal mysticism in the song of be a Veera Shaiva poets of Meera, Khabir and many others. Now this not found in carnatic compositions.

Though there is a teasing suggestion of it, in this composition by Thyagaraja the lyrics are here “Cherarava demira ramaiya” why do not you unite with me (Music Starts: 40:57) (Music Ends: 42:24)

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cEra rAv(a)dEmirA rAm(a)yya

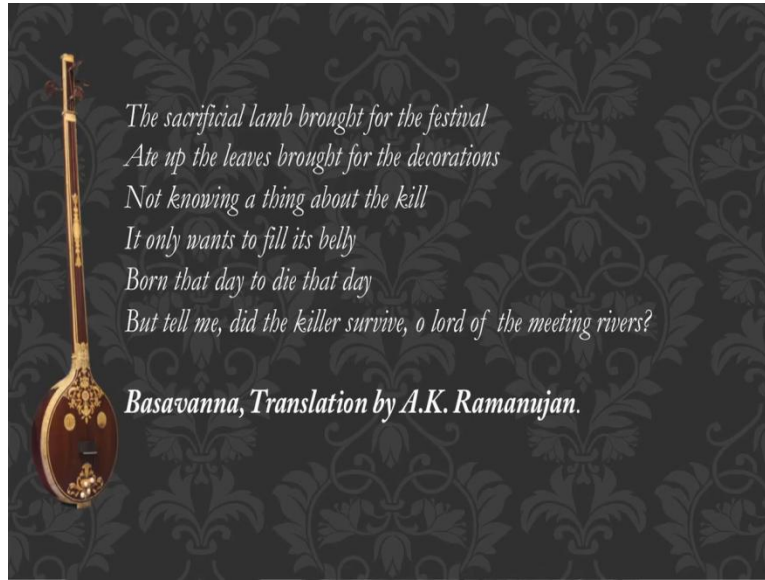
mEra kAdurA ika mahA
mEru dhIra Sri kara (cEra)

talli taNDri lEni ³bAla
tana ⁴nAithu kOru rIti
palumAru vEDukoNTE
pAlinca rAdA
valacucu nEnu nIdu
vadan(A)ravavindamunu
talaci karagaga jUCi
tyAgarAja sannuta (cEra)

O Lord rAma! O Brave like the Great mEru mountain! O Lord who causes prosperity! O Lord well praised by this tyAgarAja!
Why is it that You wouldn't come to be united with me even now, after seeing me melting with love thinking of Your Lotus face? it is not appropriate.
In the same manner as a young (married) woman, having no parents, would seek her husband, I beseech You repeatedly; can't You protect me?

Though he seems to refer to idea of bridal criticism is quite different from the Andal Pasuram. That I just discussed why you do not think about, how two are different and this is an exercise for you. How the two compositions are different and how they are similar? We will find some radical questioning of social mores of as I said before in bhakti poetry. For example in this composition by Basavanna, which I am showing a translation Basavanna was a Veera Shaiva poet and he is here making fun of questioning the practice of offering sacrifice as a part of the religious ritual.

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He says, the sacrificial lamb brought for the festival ate up the leaves brought for the decorations not knowing a thing about the kill it, only wants to fill its belly, born that day to die that day. But tell me did the killer survive a lord of the meeting rivers “Kudala sangama deva” was the ankita or the signature of Basavanna who was a leading poet in the Veera Shaiva tradition.

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Again kabiyaar says this “sir undathe hari mile tho har koye mudai bar vaar ke undathe bedu lambai kunda jaai” so this again this religious practice of shaving the head. What is it that achieved if by shaving your head. You will find your god, then how about the sheep surely, the sheep should have found Vaikunt, the lord long before anybody else. Now this sort of radical

questioning, we do not find in carnatic compositions, though these are very much part of the bhakti tradition. As the bhakti movement bhakti poetry as we know it.

So carnatic composers draw from the bhakti traditions and the other aspects of other strands of the Hindu religion to varying degrees. If we speak of the carnatic trinity Thyagaraja, Muthusamy Dikshitar and Shyama Sastri. Thyagaraja is perhaps the closest to the bhakti movement. As I have discussed just a little while ago, he sings to his Rama in various moods and we will see this later in our next session when we take up Thyagaraja in some detail.

Shyama Sastri from the literary point of view, his lyrics are very simple bare almost, he seems to draw from a set of stop phrases and the sentiment express are very simple, very straight forward. The music is that, much more sophisticated. The lyrics are kept to the bare the minimum, but very simple lyrics. But the music scales great heights. Now Muthusamy Dikshitar is perhaps the farthest from the bhakti tradition.

He was no doubt a devote person and but not his compositions do not belong in the bhakti tradition. There is complete absence of passion of expression. Dikshitar's compositions are rooted more in the abstract philosophical, realms of Advaita and Srividya worship. Both of which are exoteric and deeply spiritual, rather than passionately devotional. There is little expression of passion and love, that is the hallmark of bhakti poetry.

These compositions have a aloof grandeur about it. The trinity and the other composers, the trinity especially are not the trinity because of the devotional content in their compositions. Because of their affiliations with the Hindu religion these were great musical minds. And the coming together of music with strong lyrics, strong sahitya that is what has given them the stature of being the trinity of carnatic music.

Now I will end this session with this link of composition, grand composition by Shyama Sastri this is in the raga Bairavai and this is not a kriti, this is called a swara jathi. You can try and see what the structure of the composition is by listening to it. Here as I said it is in the raga bhairavi is one of the very old ragas and it is immensely the Nratti raga.

It can evoke so many notes and lends itself to so many elaborations and search evocative music and this composition is by it brings out bhairavi very powerfully.

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The composition is in place of the composition is addressed to Kamakshi Devi, kamakshi the goddess Kamakshi of Kanchipuram. (Singing Starts: 49:46) (Singing Ends: 51:42) The composition as I said addressed to Kanchi Kamakshi, Kamakshi of Kanchipuram. The Nayaka of this composition, the heroine of this piece in my opinion is Bhairavi. Kamakshi is of course there, she is the source of everything, but the heroine of this piece is the raga bhairavi.

And that in my opinion, is not just me, but most of carnatic performance is where bhakti and religion stands vis-à-vis carnatic music.