

Tyagaraja kritis—some misinterpretations

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Tyagaraja was in many ways a genius. On the one hand, he was a devout person and on the other, he was well aware of the complexities of life. He followed a disciplined life as laid down by the Vedas. He knew about the qualities of a good person and also the characteristics of a depraved soul. His songs carry innumerable examples from the puranas, itihisas, and Vedas and state profound spiritual truths in a very simple way. Tyagaraja was an evolved person free from desires. Through his songs he conveyed his thoughts and ideas on various subjects ranging from how to live life, to deeper philosophical expressions on the oneness with the supreme being. His daily pooja and rituals were the inspiration for a large number of his songs.

Although Tyagaraja lived within 250 years, no authentic biography is available except the writings of Krishnaswami Bhagavatar who was the son of Walajapet Venkataramana Bhagavatar—a direct disciple of Tyagaraja. This has been preserved as the “Walajapet Manuscripts”. A brief account of his life is also included in Subbarama Dikshitar’s *Sangeeta Sampradaya Pradarsini*.

It is important to understand that Tyagaraja lived a simple life and followed the bhagavata sampradaya. He was a deeply spiritual person in pursuit of his ishta deva Sree Rama, through his music. He did not possess occult powers nor did he perform miracles.

Because of the nature of his compositions and his own personality, legends and anecdotes started growing around the songs. It is believed that his kritis were used extensively in Harikatha kalakshepam, and often



imaginary tales were added to create drama and suspense. Here are a few examples to illustrate that the text of the songs often do not support the web created around them.

In the Bilahari raga kriti *Kanukontini*, the story is that his elder brother throws away Tyagaraja’s pooja idol of Sree Rama into the Kaveri river. Tyagaraja is in abject sorrow and Rama appears before him. There are many songs where Rama appears before Tyagaraja and this is not the only one for the story to be built around it.

In the Gaulipantu song *Terateeyagarada*, the story mentioned is that the curtain in front of the Lord denied him a darsan whereupon he sings this song. In reality he asks the lord to remove the screen of pride and envy—mada matsara—that obscure his vision from seeing the real thing.

Unlike his contemporary Muthuswami Dikshitar who sang at many shrines, Tyagaraja visited very few places. Apart from this Gaulipantu piece, he sings *Venkatesa ninu* in Madhyamavati saying that ten thousand eyes are required to serve the lord and see his auspicious and divine form. He mentions in the charanam that he heard of his unique form, urgently desired to see him, got transported, saw his glittering form and found that it was true.

His Chennai sojourn was at the behest of a yogi, Upanishad Brahman who lived in Kanchipuram. He was known to Tyagaraja’s father and it was

on his suggestion that he came to Kanchi to take his blessing and subsequently went to Tiruvottriyur and Chennai. This event has been documented by Krishnaswami Bhagavata.

The kriti *Najeevadhara* has no reference to the revival of a dead person in Tyagaraja's path during one of his yatras. The story made up is that he brought the dead body to life with his song. The actual contents of the song bear no reference to such an incident.

In the Darbar kriti *Mundu venuka*, robbers are believed to have waylaid Tyagaraja who was travelling in a palanquin. Rama and Lakshmana are said to have guarded him in front and the rear. This song actually has no reference to being attacked by robbers; instead it reflects a sloka in the collective memory for many years. It is a verse that grandmothers tell their grandchildren to repeat when they are afraid, as Rama would protect them.

*Agratah prishtataschaiva parsvatascha mahabalau
Akarnapoorna dhanvanau rakshetam Rama Lakshmanau*

Traditionally, any journey always starts with a prayer and this song could have been such a prayer. Tyagaraja was not interested in amassing wealth. Why would he have called out to Rama to protect his treasure? In the kriti he refers to Rama as being dear to his devotees and asks him for protection. In many compositions Tyagaraja describes himself as a detached person, free from desire. It is unthinkable that he would be carrying wealth in his palanquin.

A large number of his songs give vent to his anguish over his personal problems and the uncongenial situations arising at home. In the song *Nayeda vanchana* he refers to childish quarrels that parents observe patiently and intervene lovingly. He asks Rama to take care of him in the same manner. That is possibly why the story of

his brother throwing the idol was fabricated. In yet another song, *Anyayamu seyakura*, he prays for an end to the harassment from his brother 'Napoovaja badha teerpa leda'.

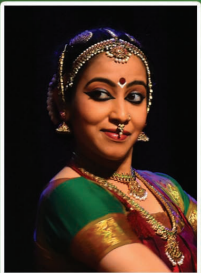
The Walajapet manuscripts mention that there were unbearable differences within the family and that Tyagaraja distanced himself from such disputes. There is mention that his brother was unhappy that he did not seek wealth from the rulers who approached him. The maharajas of Mysore and Tanjavur are believed to have approached Tyagaraja and this is mentioned in the *Sangeeta Sampradaya Pradarsini*.

As people from far and wide came to hear his music, it is possible that members from the court of Serfoji—the ruler of Tanjavur—may have visited Tyagaraja. The song *Nidhichala sukham* may just be an expression of his vairagya and his seeking the Lord over everything. His deep devotion to Rama is expressed in many of his kritis. Tyagaraja was not for material gain and the song expresses his feelings of detachment. There are numerous kritis of Tyagaraja that have been interpreted differently and we must look at the meaning of the entire song before coming to any conclusions.

We must view Tyagaraja as a fine musician and as one who helped preserve and create ragas. He was expert in both Telugu and Sanskrit. His keen power of observation made him write about all the evils that happen in the world and at the same time write about a path that we can follow to lead a good and worthy life. He did not sing for name or fame, nor did he consider himself a great guru or yogi. Many sishyas benefitted from his musical virtuosity. Successive generations of musicians continue to sing his songs and glean something new each time. He is a treasurehouse of music, and the music world will forever remain indebted to him.

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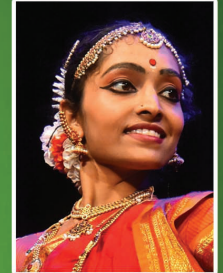
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