

The bard as a hero

(Excerpted from the novel The Singer By The River on the life of Tyagaraja by WILLIAM JACKSON)

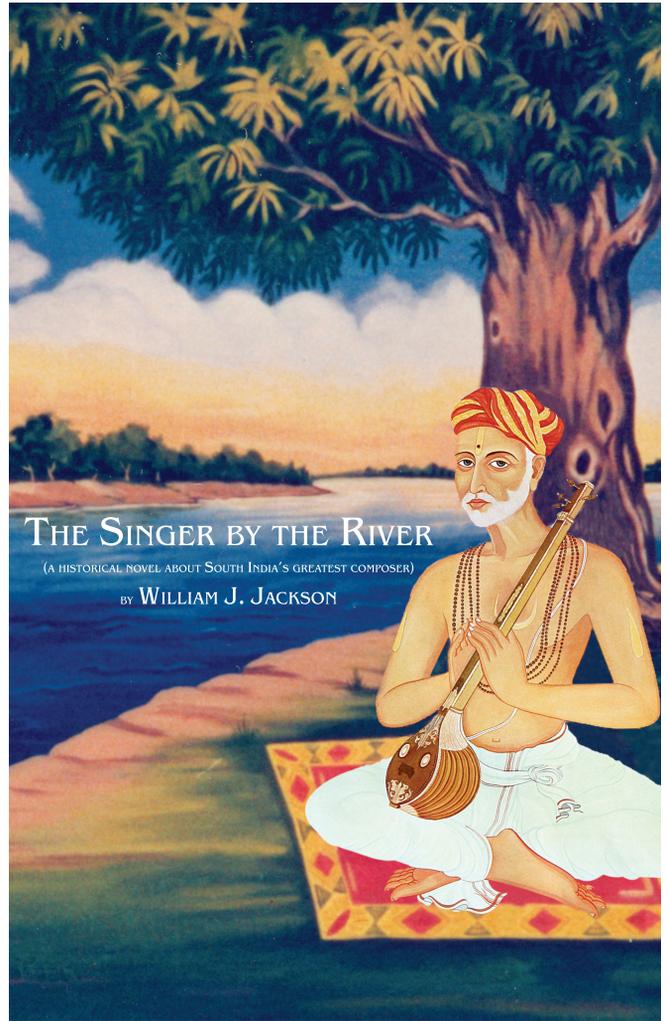
Though Tyagaraja refused the invitations of powerful men like Serfoji and Swati Tirunal, he visited the humble devadasi Nagaratnammal, who was so full of devotion. The dancer spent the rest of her life building a memorial to the saint, and consolidating the yearly festival honouring him.

The cocoons of the folk experience of south India, spun by the daily lives of family members together, women at home, birth-community-determined work, soul-felt religious devotion, the heart-hurts and experiences of exhilaration, all of these Tyagaraja with his music wound round and round the spiritual core—which finally flies free, a bright butterfly of the sky in mulberry tree Tanjavur. Gathering the best, the most soulful and songful of the cocoons, and weaving with that thread a silken music, he loomed the garment of dharma. And unlike heirlooms locked in silent almira, never-shown museum pieces which if used would become worn out, the whole cloth of his songs is a magic fabric never threadbare. The flower-patterned songs he wove are changeless offerings—their bright butterflies still flit year after year.

“As a rooster wakes villagers in the morning, Tyaga led souls into a new day’s dawn. He initiated a generation into bhakti’s mystery and that potentiality is still there in every song, to help all realise a living way of reaching the highest—rarely is such a hero found in this world,” Rama Rao said.

150 years later, modernising and growing, dusty and often-swept, India is a place of peace continually disturbed by harsh noises: inconsiderate beeps, Kali Yuga marriage halls with blaring loudspeakers, roaring buses and cars, incessantly chugging auto-rickshaws, eardrum-bursting fire-crackers, sky-piercing trainwhistles, monotonous water-pump engines droning, endless jabber and palaver babbling, and trucks back-firing and belching fumes. Tyagaraja’s subtle songs must compete with all this cacophony.

To listen is a form of meditation. If you can’t sit still in silence and attend with your whole being, you miss the intention of the inspired song’s original impulse. Yet amid all the chaos today, the saint’s improvisations continue to capture souls. The people hear from afar and seek out the source of enchantment. The world is an ocean of changing illusions; one gets an overwhelming sensation of this in



India. Buildings decay. Rivers meander. Floods wash out villages. Famines decimate. Some fortunes crumble to rubble. New families prosper. Swans fly near and fly away; monsoons transform the coastline. The heat cooks the ego. Granite Europe seems more rigid, compared with this tropical stew, this curried life of contingencies, this continual slippage and flux. India is too various to represent truly in words. But Tyagaraja sang a music which flows on like a holy river, carrying the essence of India’s sakti and bhakti.

The people continued to sing Tyagaraja’s songs after he was gone. They sang them in his village, and in towns all over south India—Madras, Kanchipuram, Tiruvannamalai, Madurai, Kovalam, Tirupati, Hyderabad, Bangalore, and many other places. In cities abroad they remembered and

“His music flows on like a holy river, carrying the essence of India’s sakti and bhakti.”

sang and played his songs. Generations gather, year after year, and Tyagaraja's music is enjoyed in prosperity and troubles, in places far from the Kaveri delta, and in new times with their own distinct challenges. Tyagaraja's music continues to inspire.

A prosperous merchant sits on a platform amid an ensemble of violinist, mridangam player, tambourine jingler, while people sit and watch him. He promises to have something worth singing about. He learned the way to sing it from a teacher whose teacher studied with a disciple of the saint-composer, Tyagaraja, who sang his soul within the strictest grammar of traditional music. It was the only way. If he had tried to tell family, friends, neighbours and people on the street his deepest agonies and greatest joys, they'd have thought him crazy. But within this strict and elaborate classical format he explored and blossomed as the greatest songwriter in the lower half of the entire subcontinent of India. Now this affable merchant—you've seen him behind his counter in a stained apron—is starting to incarnate the song. He jerks his body to emphasise rhythm, but the rhythm itself is emphasising a twinge of grief, an oomph of longing: Where are you? He makes faces. His voice is in control, though it moves through sounds like sighs and cries, pleas and arguments turned into music—perfectly controlled, with the distance between the singer and the song showing in the ease and smile, yet full of portrayed feeling. He holds his arms in front of himself as if embracing an invisible person, he moves his head, jerks his torso, to punctuate the



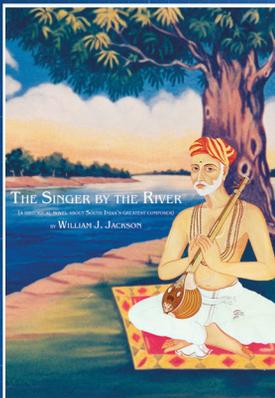
AKIRAO

Unchavritti procession in Tiruvaiyaru

shape of the song—or rather it jerks him, shapes his rhythm. He and the drummer bow to each other in agreement. He yanks on invisible cords, rings invisible bells, and turns his hand in the air, palm up; he slaps his knee, and full of willfully taken on feeling, his voice soars. “Ni...”

Tyagaraja is a poet of space, forever given over to binding up the painful gaps, to pleasing pleas for the closing of distant spans between him and his Loved One, Rama. His homey song does not rend the skies but bridges them, uniting him with his far-off highborn solar king, Rama. He stitches whole the torn asunder, brings near the absent one with his love songs. He heals partitioned space. “Ni...”

The archaic scrolled violin with its polished wooden stem unfurling like a fiddlehead fern sticks up out of the crowd—old wood; the tambura stem straight, with curving knobs and ivory swan inlay work, pokes up above peoples' heads too. The man with a water pot balanced on his head, with a coconut on top and a garland slung around it, an old symbol of fertility. The sectarian marks on the forehead all a bit different—horizontal ash stripes, sandalwood paste, red kumkum dots, a couple with Vaishnava *namam* shaped like a “U” with different colours of red, yellow, grey, white. The boy, collecting offerings in his bag, takes the small pot and



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holds it out. The lady of the house drops some rice into it then prostrates at the singer's feet. The music goes on with joyous sincere intensity. Buses trucks, cars, honk and beep, "Get out of the way!" Bhajana and kritis. The wood and metal fish-shaped *cheplas*—clappers held in the palm of the hand like castanets— making little jinglies of noise to the rhythm of the song. Old man struggling to keep balance, hair growing from ears. The sweat shining in sun, perspiration of the hardworking drummer. A Baul? Doesn't look south Indian—bigger. So good humoured—a real cook. These songs cook in a way other music more superficial and sensational never could. Soul food. Tyagaraja as rhythm man. He established the nodes of the pulsating rhythm from which the intensifying leap from one tier of cadenced tempo rises to a more elaborate tier, while the melody and lyrics achieve their free flights.

By masterly improvisation exploring time by tracing soulful melodies through space, Tyaga's music reveals our depths of consciousness. By knowing the tradition and being immersed in the world of fine music he sang the new songs that we can't forget. By echoing the rhythmic spaces of the mind, our dance of becoming feels aware and is reflected in the love that impels us. The inspired singer makes music, which makes the world's havoc more bearable. His sounds call us out, with vibes which evoke fuller life, touch the membranes of memories, and mime futures we will know most intimately. His songs lure us beyond time, lead us to the embrace of wordless mystery. If one is open to experience, one can go on approximating one's desire, which is to express the uniqueness of our passage through time. Poets have their own voices but all are part of the history of humanity; people listen to poetry, for in the images and feelings sung they can find their own soul's intuitions and fantasies, their sorrows and destinies. "Poetry is praise," as a poet once said.

Like the tail of a magic elephant who holds up the four corners of the earth, a tail swinging and curling, and like the elephant's spiral trunk, trumpeting "Niiii!" and refurling, the sound of Tyagaraja's heavenly blues rises up, up to the sky for all to see—"Saaa!"

Tyagaraja, like all poets, is man, the voice of the depths, the heart of humanity. Is that distant music of thunder drumming? Now the night seems so dark we can't see the

stars. A storm must be approaching. Was that a baby's cry, or may be a bird. The first drops will start to fall any time now, returning as they always do, wedding the sky and the earth, with sounds of "saaa..." The saaa of Silence, "costumeless consciousness" the potential theatre of the invisible ether, the hullabaloo hubbub, kolahala chaotic silence in which all melodies play intermingled and intermingled, the silence of all the potential musics swirling together, waiting to be heard by discerning ears, silence of being flowing into becoming... Ah. The musician plays and brings our feelings into play, and hearing him fly we fly free, toward silent peace, "Saaa..."

His music still reaches people today; you can listen to the heartbeats of his life echoing as the musicians sing. Musical patterns meandering from a time of chaotic change—famines, invasions, colonisation—weave soulful melodies with the power of the universe in them.

"His music still reaches people today."

In Tyagaraja's meditative and languorous music we can hear tropical rhythms of monsoon longings, stormy passions and restless rivers flowing to the ocean. In this



music we can hear water buffaloes sauntering in daydreamy Adi tala. The most-used Carnatic music drumbeat, Adi tala, can also be intense as the noon sun, depending on the tempo the drummer puts into it. And we can hear the poignant vital voice of Mayamalavagaula raga, the typical South Indian raga; it is the one which beginning music students learn to sing first. Amid the hullabaloo of modernising south India, with angry truck horns braying and blaring, and hungry crows cawing, we can hear the timeless insistent call of heartbeats pulsing haunting songs of hope and love. South of the Vindhya mountains, home of parrots

and palm trees, rice-paddies and plantain groves, bees buzz and Tyagaraja and other singer saints' songs still echo in many peoples' lives. It is part of the charm of the south which faraway outsiders cannot imagine, until they experience it for themselves, everyday life's ragas echoing on and on in the resounding silence... Inspiration's silence disappearing into the Kaveri delta night... "Saaaaa..."

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