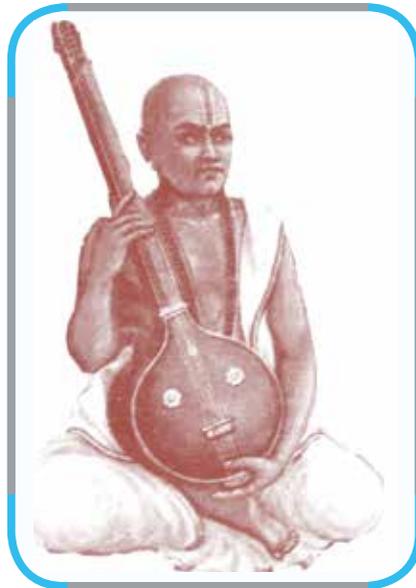


Unpublished varnas of Walajapet Venkataramana Bhagavatar

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Ayyampettai, a small village on the banks of the river Kaveri becomes musically active in the month of Masi, to commemorate the birth of Walajapet Venkataramana Bhagavatar, one of the primary disciples of Tyagaraja, known for his devotion to his guru. His jayanti is celebrated every year as a three-day celebration in Ayyampettai coinciding with Moola, his birth star. The jayanti celebrations of Venkataramana Bhagavatar were conducted in mid February in Ayyampettai this year.

Venkataramana Bhagavatar was an amanuensis (adept at taking notes and copying manuscripts) and he recorded the compositions learnt by him. This practice was later followed by his son Krishnaswamy Bhagavatar and this corpus, known as the Walajapet manuscripts are now stored in Sourashtra Sabha, Madurai. Though these original manuscripts are not easily accessible to all, the transcripts preserved in the Government Oriental Manuscript Library (GOML), Chennai, are more accessible.



Walajapet notations

The repertoire is not limited only to the compositions of Tyagaraja; we find many unpublished geetas, varnas and keertanas of various other composers. Among these works are a few unpublished compositions of Venkataramana Bhagavatar. He was

a composer par excellence and in his Anandabhairavi kriti *Guruvara mahimala*, he declares the divine vision of his guru in his dream; Tyagaraja instructed Bhagavatar to compose keertanas extolling Lord Vishnu (*Ninnareyi naa svapnamu.... maadhavu paramugaa konni kritulu jatagurcchumanina*). He has used his birthplace as a sthala mudra in his kritis as *Ramachandrapura vara sree Venkataramana* or 'Ramachandrapura' (Ayyampettai was previously known as Ramachandrapuram). Though the majority of his kritis are on Vishnu or his incarnations, there are rare instances where he has composed on Devi (*Neeve nannu* in Darbar). Venkataramana Bhagavatar spent the later part of his life in Walajapet, near Arcot.

Venkataramana Bhagavatar has composed several musical forms—geetas, swarajatis, varnas, kritis and tillanas. He is perhaps among those composers who have made a mark in all these genres. A study of his

Scripts on palm leaves written by Venkataramana Bhagavatar



At the jayanti



compositions reveals a unique style, distinctively different from that of his preceptor. We do not have the exact number, though the general opinion is that he has composed around 2500 compositions. Let us look at some of his unpublished, hitherto unknown compositions, found in the Walajapet transcripts.

Unpublished works in Walajapet notations

The compositions available here can be divided into two genres—geetas and varnas. There are three geetas in the ragas Vasanta, Reetigaula and Mukhari; and about nine varnas set in the ragas Nata, Gaula, Jhalavarali, Arabhi, Bilahari, Saranga, Kedaragaula, Dhanyasi and Mukhari. Along with these, we also have the already published varnas in the ragas Devamanohari, Sree, Chakravakam, Abhogi, Kedaram, Bhairavi and Kamalamanohari. A majority of these varnas were composed on his ishta deva, Sri Ramachandra.

Ragas handled

As mentioned earlier, Venkataramana Bhagavata's approach to a raga and handling of the required phrases differ considerably from that of his guru—he has used many rare phrases. In the Gaula raga varna *Ninne nammina* in khanda Triputa tala, phrases like *SMMR* and *SMGMR* are seen aplenty. These types of phrases are not seen in the commonly heard kritis and can be only found in a few old geetas. Another significant feature is the graha swara used to begin this varna. The nishada is an important swara for this raga as it serves the function of graha (starting note), nyasa (ending note) and amsa (frequently occurring note); this varna begins with this swara. It is to be remembered that the nishada was the graha for this raga (in the older

connotation). Again, none of the popularly heard kritis start with this note, though the charana, *Tanamadhini* in the pancharatna kriti *Dudukugala* begins with this swara.

Another example which reveals his prowess in raga lakshana is the handling of the Kedaragaula varna *Inakulabdhi* set to Jhampa tala. He has given a different swarupa by handling the known phrases in a 'not so often' heard manner. The sequential use of phrases like *NSRPMG – RMPNNDP – PMMGGR – RGRS* can be cited as an example. A superficial examination definitely reminds us of its ally Narayanagaula. But, there was a practice in the past, to use nishada, gandhara and madhyama as a janta in Kedaragaula. These swaras occurring as janta can be seen in the kriti *Neelakantham bhajeham* of Muthuswami Dikshitar, as notated in the *Sangeeta Sampradaya Pradarsini*. Another kriti *Abhayambikayah* of Dikshitar has the phrase *MGRGRS*.

Tala of these varnas

The talas handled by the composer also make for an interesting study. Venkataramana Bhagavata has opted for rare talas like chatusra Jhampa, misra Jhampa, misra Triputa and khanda Triputa along with the common ones like Adi and Ata talas. The tala of the Abhogi varnam *Sri Rajagopala* is mentioned as tisa Triputa in the published texts, but given as chatusra Jhampa in these transcripts, though the count remains as seven.

Conclusion

Many of these varnas could be single compositions in these rare talas. The handling of the raga considerably differs from that of his preceptor and these unpublished compositions serve as a link to understand the music of the past, like the compositions of Tyagaraja notated by Venkataramana Bhagavata.

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PHOTOS FROM VENKATARAMANABHAGAVADAR.ORG

Musicians participating in the aradhana in Walajapet

