

# Tiruvaiyaru Tyagaraja aradhana 2021

## A lifetime experience

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Certain things in life, while they begin as a one-off activity, become a part of yourself and your life by design. That is what my annual visit to Tiruvaiyaru has become -- a design and strong pattern that shines through over three decades of my life.

Winding up the Margazhi schedule is always a rush as the Pongal season of concerts then begin. Making a wedge and fitting in the Tiruvaiyaru pilgrimage has been a game of tic-tac-toe and always an exercise where I have to let go some invitations, work around the committed ones and ensure that come what may, I set my feet on the sands of this holy space by the banks of the serenely flowing Cauvery. And then once the Tyagaraja aradhana is over, it's back to the grind and travel and performances!

This year, the situation has been entirely different, naturally, with the pandemic throwing all schedules, plans, and life itself completely out of gear! As the months of lockdown and the yoyo swinging between 'not so safe' and 'fairly safe' situations were weighing on my mind each day, I also kept wondering how the aradhana would take place this time. Your heart wants to be there but your head reminds you of reality. But when the heart wills, the universe too conspires, is it not? What was usually a hurried trip each year, turned out to be a completely relaxed, beautiful and a lifetime experience for me this year.



With great uncertainties in the environment, the challenges faced by the Aradhana Committee to host the festival this time, with limited artists and limited audience, was king size! I was a part of the decision making and we did go back and forth many times on the rules and regulations, as well as discussions with government officials on how to hold the festival under such circumstances. From the artists' point of view, I had some suggestions on safety measures, and the Committee members -- comprising G.K. Vasan, Srimushanam Raja Rao, Deccan Murthy and A.K. Palanivel -- gave me a patient hearing. They agreed to my views and suggestions and ensured implementation of the same. Hence, we were able to sing in a secure and comfortable environment with adequate social distancing. Our masks were on until the time we began the Pancharatnam singing.

The luxury of time this year was personally 'joy unlimited' for me. I had a very unique 'vacation' steeped in bhakti and reflections into my soul. I travelled a day ahead and that gave me the opportunity of spending some good quality time at the precincts of the Tyagaraja samadhi. It was simply a period of soulful communion between the bard and me. The saint, with his simplicity in expressions, has had the Carnatic world on his little finger! How can any concert ever be complete without a kriti of Tyagayya?

It was 'the moment' for me to sit quietly and reminisce on the gifts and blessings that we have all abundantly received from this great soul. My subconscious mind sang *Saptaswara sobhillu*, where he teaches us to recognise the importance of the blessings that we have received in the form of the saptaswaras. "O Mind!" he calls out. "Praise the divine forms of the seven musical notes, which glow in the navel, heart, neck, tongue and nose of the human body. Those notes that shine in the four Vedas and in the sublime Gayatri mantra as its essence. The seven notes that sparkle in the hearts of the celestials, of the worthy bhusuras and of Tyagaraja!"

Is it not those 700 kritis that we have just about been able to gather and safeguard that serves for us as bread and butter? How many ever times I may have sung his kritis and how many ever times my rasikas would



have listened to them, yet there is still always a yearning for more!

My visit this time also gave me the happiness of seeking smaller temples around the vicinity. There was this quaint Narasimhar temple that I visited, where I sang Tyagayya's kriti in solitude, which I have shared on my social media handles. A slow drive around the place also took me to the two ponds that my Samudhaaya Foundation has restored at Tiruvaiyaru – the Nandhi kulam and the Ayyan Kulam. It gave me immense satisfaction to see them clean and brimming, giving life to the flora and fauna around. Our connect with nature is also a path to connect with the divine -- is what I believe, as we are working at safeguarding what the Almighty has given us as a habitat to leave in peace cohesively!

At the Tyagaraja aradhana the following morning, for the Pancharatnam singing at 9 am, it was a very new and different experience. The usual hustle and bustle, the jostling for space, the hurry in being seated, the wait for the seniors to begin orchestrating... all that was missing! Instead, the atmosphere was calm, the area was well laid out, social distancing was followed and there was

a serenity along with quietude and divinity. May be the relaxed pace in which all the events were laid out gave this feeling of tranquillity. Sometimes we need to convert disasters into opportunities and this is one typical example. The uncertainty that the pandemic had brought became an opportunity to absorb the entire proceedings at our own pace and time, relishing each moment as a divine communion with the bard!

My grand guru G.N. Balasubramaniam would always mention that the Tyagaraja kritis provide ample scope to the musician for manodharma -- to bring out the essence of the ragas in a varied, pleasing and satisfying manner!

My annual pilgrimage to this sacred place has so many beautiful memories, with each year bringing its share of reasons to smile and be content. My planning for this sojourn usually begins during October/ November of the year, when I check the date of the Panchami tithi and the Pancharatnam singing. I accept no other invitation that comes around this time. It is like a predefined process that simply sets my calendar on its own!

There have been times when I have travelled twice during the festival – when I had to sing on the first day and then again during the group singing that happens a few days later, simply because I had back-to-back concerts during the days in between.

One memory that is particularly fond, precious and valuable to me is during the time I accompanied my guru MLV amma and we sang *Mariyada gadayya* in Bhairavam raga. The pallavi is set in a manner that one can sing on the usual pitch and another on the higher octave. I sang on the higher

octave that brought in so much of appreciation from the audience. To be lauded here in this divine venue and in the presence of my respected guru was indeed like a double bonanza for me!

Rushing to Tiruvaiyaru after returning from a concert at Theatre de la Ville, Paris and reaching in the nick of time was another occasion when I felt all the efforts were worthwhile... simply to sit on the sands and sing his kritis and be lost in oblivion and bliss! There was no tiredness or jet lag at all but just a feeling of serenity and calm.

Brushing aside caution while being diagnosed for jaundice and travelling to perform, with assistance from some good friends, was a real defining and fulfilling moment. I realised the power of music and the universe in toto, and the rigours of the ailment became secondary or perhaps non-existent once I sat to sing! No medicine could have ever given me that feeling of well-being that the singing gave me!

My presiding over the inaugural function of the 250th birth anniversary of this great saint in 2017, is what I felt was his way of rewarding me for my determination and perseverance. A





very rare honour that came my way, as events such as these are mostly presided by politicians or Central government heads; an artist at the helm is not so common.

Each year, during this mass congregation, there have been many stray comments lamenting that the kritis are not sung in perfect rhythm, or that there is a lag in the sruti or sangatis while the Pancharatnam singing happens. I somehow am undeterred by such statements. It is the experience of ecstasy while singing with devotion that matters. So many hundreds of voices sing in unison

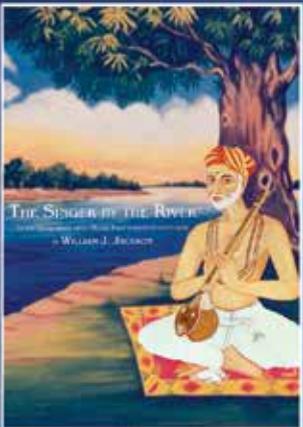
without rehearsals, simply out of a commitment. It is a kind of a regime that one follows, a regime that has been passed on without any kind of definiteness and left to the individual as a choice.

Year after year, the urge to pack my bags for this special day of Bahula Panchami never fades. The journey continues and while the pandemic has put a small speed-breaker this year, am sure it will be back to all its glory in the ensuing years! Nothing ever can stop the spirit nor the music from reigning and spreading its fragrance in this special venue. As I begin to

sing *Jagadanandakaraka*, Tyagaraja's first Pancharatna kriti in raga Nata, there is a sense of purpose, a sense of well-being and a fulfilment that he is blessing me for another beautiful year ahead.

Blessings from my parents and my gurus, and the support and affection from my family, my rasikas and well-wishers make this annual ritual happen seamlessly. *Endaro mahanubhavulu, andariki vandanamulu*" -- in the words of Tyagayya!

(The author is a top Carnatic musician)



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