

# Oothukkadu Venkata Subbaier

## Profile

One of the greatest ever composers in Indian music, Oothukkadu Venkata Kavi (also referred to as Oothukkadu Venkata Subbaier) is said to have lived between 1700-65. Scholars believe that he was born in the Tamil month of Avani under the asterism 'Makham'. Venkata Kavi's parents were Ramachandra Vaathoolar and Kamalanayani Ammal. His elder brother's name was Kaattu Krishnaier who was a court musician in the court of Pratapasimha of Tanjore.

Venkata Kavi was born in Mannargudi but lived most of his life in Oothukkadu. Oothukkadu, along with Melattur was famous for Bhagavata mela tradition of dance and dramas. Venkata Kavi's early preceptor was Raja Bhagavatar also known as Pooranur Natesa Bhagavatar. Later Venkata Kavi listened to the music of one Krishna Yogi, under whom he wanted to learn but the Yogi refused. So he began singing himself in the presence of the Lord. The Lord Krishna is said to have appeared before him and transmitted knowledge to him.

He appears to have lived for 60 years and disappeared while crossing the Narmada, but according to another tradition he lived for 80 or 90 years. These details are not of much significance when one is willing to consider the wealth of material and try to assess this composer's place in the panorama of Carnatic music.

How has this musical heritage travelled during these 250 years or more?

Since Oothukkadu Venkata Kavi is not known to have entertained any disciples. Many of these the songs remained unknown for a number of generations. The few exceptions were the songs learnt by Nadaswara vidwan, Rudra Pasupahi, who is said to have learnt them on the sly.

Kaattu Krishnier, the elder brother of Venkata Kavi wrote down many of the songs sung by the composer. He had three daughters and they along with their descendents preserved the compositions. Kaattu Krishnier's granddaughter's husband Krishna Sastriyar had a number of disciples. Two of them were 'Kutti Kavi' (He called himself by this name which literally translates to 'small poet' because Venkata Kavi was Mahakavi - mega composer) and Ganapati Muni. A leading upanyasa (musical discourse) exponent Raju Sastrigal was captivated when he heard the songs and had them copied. Few of his disciples were proficient professional musicians but they preserved the music and probably made fresh copies of Venkata Kavi's compositions. There is little doubt that quite a few of them have also been lost, especially when one considers the number of songs unavailable in some of Venkata Kavi's operas so far.

One must give full credit to Needamangalam Krishnamurthy Bhagavatar who did his utmost to project the few hundred songs of Venkata Kavi in recent times. Needamangalam Krishnamurthy Bhagavatar's father's sister's husband Srinivasa Sastriyar was a Samasthana Vidwan of Baroda and he studied the manuscripts and the legacy was handed to the Bhagavatar. He used to present special harikathas entitled Sri Krishna Ganam wherein he used several of Venkata Kavi's compositions. He also trained dozens of disciples and presented several concerts exclusively on Venkata Kavi's compositions in prestigious venues such as The Music Academy, Madras. He also published a few books containing these compositions, which in turn have helped leading artistes to learn them and popularize them further today. His wife Rajammal is continuing the good work, making the music world infinitely richer. Several more compositions are yet to get into print and are in the Bhagavatar's notebooks or in loose sheets, some of it in the possession of Chitravina N Ravikiran.

## Prolific Genius

Oothukkadu Venkata Kavi's compositions reveal that his knowledge of music, dance, rhythm, languages (Tamil and Sanskrit and a bit of Marathi), culture, tantric worship, great sages and poets was nothing short of divine inheritance and his creativity was more than that of an average genius. He handled hundreds of ragas, many of them for the first time in music, composed in well known as also rare talas that few others ventured into, handled several compositional forms such as krti, tillana, shloka, kavadi chindu, javali etc and brought several new dimensions into play in these. He composed Navavarana krtis on Kamakshi, a few kritis like the Pancharatnas of Tyagaraja (seven of which are popular as Saptaratnas) and also a few operas. His vocabulary in Sanskrit was oceanic as seen from rare words and phrases he has used, proving also his scholarship in works of other great minds such as Valmiki, Vyasa, Kalidasa, Jayadeva, to name a few. What caps all these

accomplishments is his attitude as seen from his songs - love towards beauty and God, humility towards greatness, a general cheerful and humourous disposition but little self-centralisation

However it is not improbable that there could be a few spurious songs attributed to him, though it would take more study to weed them out with certainty. There are scores of well-known spurious krtis of several great composers such as Tyagaraja and Dikshitar.

In the case of Venkata Kavi, the primary source has been the descendants of his own brother, Krishna Iyer's family and one sees no reason to doubt their books. Secondly, most of the Tamil compositions are parts of the operas he has written (based on Bhagavatam, Ramayanam etc), which establish a continuity of thought, expression and style, making one's task relatively easier. For instance, Teye Yashoda in Todi is one song out of several dozens written to depict Krishna's life in Brindavan. This very well known song has various people complaining about Krishna to his mother but what is not well known is that Krishna responds to all these charges in the very next song in Mohanam, Illai illai illai amma. There is an equally amazing composition in Suddhasaveri, Ittanai Parivu Enadi that appears later in the opera where one of the characters refers to Teye Yashoda and another piece, Parvai onre podume (Suruti) with the raga names also incorporated elegantly as a part of the lyrics.

The Kamakshi Navavaranaams are certainly his as the eighth one in Madhyamavati bears his signature. Using this as a base and looking at many of his Sanskrit compositions, one can easily see the stylistic similarity and high quality usages that stand up to be counted as works of none other than the Mahakavi. There is similar flow of thought and typical expressions, which authenticate the Saptaratna and other pieces.

## Clues To Period

Needamangalam Krishnamurthy Bhagavata has mentioned in page 14 of his long notebook that certain references he saw in the Saraswati Mahal library, Tanjore help him place Oothukkadu Venkata Kavi's period somewhere in the 1600-1700s. In this one page summary, he mentions Tanjore Maratha kings and some other leading personalities connected to Venkata Kavi but he has not mentioned clearly the books he referred to before arriving at this conclusion. He talks of Kattau Krishna Iyer, brother of Venkata Kavi being a court musician of Pratapasimha, whose period as ruler of Tanjore is generally accepted as 1741-1764. But Krishnamoorthy Bhagavata, mentions (in his notes, found in a long notebook, Page 14) that there was another Pratapasimha much before this, something that needs to be verified.

While there is little reason to doubt the honesty and integrity of Venkata Kavi's descendants as to their ancestor's life history, it is a fact that sufficient supporting evidence from other sources is scarce. In such a situation, the internal evidence available in his works gains considerable prominence. A quick look at some of these.

## Reference To Personalities

Definitely, Oothukkadu Venkata Kavi lived after Tulasidasa, who is the last of the greats mentioned in his compositions. Maybe, he lived after Bhadrachala Ramadasa too, if the two compositions narrating the story of Ramadasa (seen in Krishnamurthy Bhagavata's long notebook) can conclusively be proved to be his. The style of at least one of them surely seems to point to that.

Venkata Kavi has mentioned scores of great people in his works including many rare ones like Bhurishena, Pippilada and Utanga. He has also composed whole pieces devoted to some of them like Jayadeva, Shuka, Valmiki, the sixty three nayanmars etc. These reflect his deep knowledge about them and his profound humility. The fact that his references end with Tulasidasa (or Ramadasa at most) is a telling pointer to his period. He must have lived before the Trinity or been a contemporary at most.

## Style

Oothukkadu Venkata Kavi's style is quite unique and does not bear much resemblance to the Trinity or latter day composers. Even the tunes are quite original which is a very strong clue in itself. Attempts are also being made to look for clues in the Sanskrit or Tamil compositions for linguistic usages that may help one place a finger on the period with reasonable accuracy

## Marathi Compositions

Venkata Kavi has tried his hand on Marathi in a few of his compositions. The corrupted version of that language in his pieces points to a period when that language was reasonably popular in the Tanjore area in this form. This was during the rule of the Maratha kings like Ekoji, Shaji, Tulajaji etc. It is interesting to note

that there are few other Marathi compositions in the Carnatic music repertoire.

All said and done, there is little doubt that Venkata Kavi's works place him in a league of his own.

## **Musicianship Of Venkata Kavi**

That Oottukkadu Venkata Kavi was not merely a sahyakarta (lyricist) but a musician of high calibre is evident from his works. He has covered a wide range of musical forms right from kriti to kavadichindu. Until recently, there were very few who knew of compositions other than the lively ones such as Alaipayude kanna, Kuzhaloodi manam ellam and Pullai piravi tara venum. But the reality is that Venkata Kavi has composed in so many levels - from the simple to the scholarly. There are several weighty masterpieces that bring out his multifaceted musical brilliance. Compositions such as Padmini Vallabha (Dhanyasi), Neelalohita ramani (Balahamsa) evoke a deep meditative atmosphere while those like Mundi varum ishai (Bharavi) and Ennadan inbam kandayo (Devagandhari) are full of sublime charm. The next few sections will endeavour to show that Venkata Kavi's musicianship is a combination of bhakti (devotion), bhava (emotion) and buddhi (intellect).

### **Ragas Handled**

Venkata Kavi had commendable mastery over the raga system. He has composed in major ragas like Todi, Shankarabharanam, Kalyani, Kambhodhi, Bhairavi and rakti ragas like Sahana, Anandabhairavi, Suruti, Madhyamavati, Arabhi, Atana and so on. There are kritis of his found in comparatively rare ones too such as Umabharanam, Hamsanadam, Malavi, Jayantashri, Kannadagowla, Abhogi, Malayamarutam, Manjari, Saraswati, Navarasakannada. There are also compositions of his in rare ragas like Kannadamaruvam, Hamsageervani, Lalitagandharvam and Deeparam, which do not seem to have been handled by any other major composers. Venkata Kavi has incorporated the name of the raga as part of the lyrics in several compositions. For eg: Shuddhasaveri, Navarasakannada, Hamsageervani.

Venkata Kavi also mentions the names of scores of other ragas in many songs. Ragas mentioned include Kalyani, Yamunakalyani, Saranga, Brindavanasaranga, Kambhodhi, Yadukulakambhodhi. He does this in several contexts, very attractively. In fact, there is a beautiful composition that mentions over fifty ragas.

### **Vadi Samvadi Relationships**

Equally noteworthy are the use of vadi-samvadi relationships in some of his works. In Ekadanta Vinayakam bhajami (Nattai - Khanda Triputa), he ends the charanam with RRS, NNP, RRS, for the words varam varam varam.

### **Musical Forms**

He has revealed his adeptness in many musical forms like kriti, tillana, kavadichindu. He has made use of different types of kritis apart from the conventional ones with Pallavi, Anupallavi, and Charana. Venkata Kavi has also composed a few shlokas and several poems, free verses and even unconventional metric pieces similar to Arunagirinathar's tiruppugaz.

### **Structure**

A few compositions follow the conventional structure of the musical forms intended. For instance, his kritis normally have pallavi, anupallavi, charanams in ideal proportions like 2:2:4. Eg: Sarasijabhava jaye - Kalyani, Udajagopa sundara - Umabharanam. Some of his kritis have only pallavi and a samashti charanam such as Senapate - Gowla, Tyagaraja paramesha - Chakravakam. There are many others containing a number of stanzas only like Vishamakkara Kannan - Shenshuruti. There are kritis beginning at various take off points. For instance, Senapate namostute - Gowla begins after 1.5 units. Until recently, this was believed to have been an innovation of Tyagaraja but it is quite probable that this concept was known much earlier in South Indian music during the reign of the Maratha rulers in Tanjore.

### **Madhyamakalam**

Venkata Kavi must have been one of the early composers to use faster passages (madhyamakalam) and he has used them aplenty. The faster sections are a result of his torrential imagination but they also bring in variety to the song. Even his kavadichindu, Kannan varuhinra neram has some sections in faster speeds.

## Innovations In Structure

Having exhibited his mastery in the straightforward and the conventional, Venkata Kavi goes on to show his innovative skills. There are also compositions where Venkata Kavi has varied the ratios or inserted madhyamakalams between slower passages within a given section as in the pallavi of Padmini vallabha - Dhanyasi.

(a) Sri Ganeshwara - Shanmukhapriya has 3 cycles in the pallavi, 6 in anupallavi and 12 in charanam.

(b) Mahashaya hridaya - Abhogi has 5 cycles in the pallavi, 3 in madhyamakalam where the first part is kept constant but only the second varies. The song also has 6 cycles in anupallavi and 2 charanams of 2 cycles each, the first in chaturashra gati and the next in khandam.

(c) Shankari Sri Rajarajeshwari - Madhyamavati has a pallavi that starts off with 1.5 cycles of chaturashram, switches to tishram for 1.5 cycles and gets back to chaturashram for 2 more cycles. Its anupallavi is in tishram slow speed for 4 cycles and 4 more in tishram medium speed while charanam is in chaturashram for 12 cycles, 4 of which are in faster passages.

Even his tillanas are markedly different from most that are heard today as he has moved back and forth from jatis to lyrics and vice versa.

## Saptaratna Kritis

Venkata Kavi has created a few songs with pallavi, anupallavi and multiple charanas in madhyamakalam that can be rendered as swaras and sahityas a la the Pancharatnas of Tyagaraja. Seven of these are well known as Saptaratna.

## Lyric Based Variations

Sangatis are pre-composed variations in a composition and rendered in a disciplined manner (as opposed to variations born from free improvisation). Usually, variations are melodic in nature while the lyrics remain constant. Tyagaraja is supposed to be the master in composing pieces that give scope for many several variations of a given line. Several of Venkata Kavi's pieces also have this feature but he has also used the concept of lyrical variations. For instance, in the pallavi of his Abhogi piece, Mahashaya hridaya, he has composed 3 variations in the madhyamakala passage where the first part is kept constant but only the second varies. The 3 variations are given below:

(i) madhukara champaka vana vihara manamohana

Madhusoodana navabhooshana

(ii) madhukara champaka vana vihara nava pallava

padakara madana gambheera

(iii) madhukara champaka vana vihara govardhana dhara

bhujaga nartana charana

Venkata Kavi has adopted a similar approach in many other instances such as the main charanam of his Gowla Saptaratna, Aganitamahima, the anupallavi of his Atana krti, Gopakumara and so on. The closest similar examples of this are seen in the pallavis of Tyagaraja's Brochevarevare - Sriranjani and Dikshitar's Sri Kamalamba - Ahiri.

## Emphatic Finales

Venkata Kavi was a master of finishes. In several songs, his endings are in interesting rhythmic patterns. Example: Bhuvanamoha - Dhanyashi, where he has capped off the charanam with a pattern of 6 repeated 11 times, which is a wonderful way to get to half a beat landing (which is the commencing point of the pallavi) from the beat after 2 cycles of Adi tala. The words are superbly woven in lilting Sanskrit:

atinootana kusumakara vrjamohana saraseeruha

dalalochana mamamanasa patuchorasu- swarageetasu-

muraleedhara suramodita bhavamochana

There are many other instances of similar endings in krtis like Alavadennalo - Paras (5th charanam) and Mummada vezhamugattu Vinayakan (Nattai).

## Sprawling Dimensions

The average length of most of Oothukkadu Venkata Kavi's pieces is much longer than any other composer in Carnatic music. There are shorter pieces but most of his pieces run to dozens of cycles and with madhyamakalams too. In some instances, the tunes of the various charanams are similar to the first one. Example: Taya Yashoda - Todi, which has 8 charanams. But in numerous other cases, the tunes are as expansive as the words too.

Examples:

- (i) Vasudevaya namo namaste - Sahana: 4 (pallavi) + 6 anupallavi + 12 charanam.
- (ii) Yaar enna shonnalum - Manirangu: 5 + 4 + 8
- (ii) Bhuvana moha - Dhanyashi: 2 + 2 + 14 (plus 4 more as jatis)
- (iii) Aadinan vilaiyadinan - Sama: (2 + 3 + 12)

## Swarakshara Usages

Venkata Kavi has also woven wonderful swaraksharas (lyrics that match the solfa notes of the tune) with unaffected grace. Example: Sarasijabhava jaye - Kalyani  
Sarasijabhava jaye Saraswati namostute sarvada sada padaaravindam bhajamyaham

## Complex Talas

Venkata Kavi has composed in sophisticated talas like Khanda Dhruvam, Sankeerna Matyam, Mishra Ata and so on. He has handled these with such natural felicity and flow that it seems that they are mere child's play for him. A look at some parts of the kritis in such talas would show that he has composed not merely keeping the whole tala in mind but also many individual parts. For instance, in the krti Neela lohita ramani in Balahamsa, which is in Khanda Dhruvam. This tala has 17 units (split into 5,2,5,5) and Venkata Kavi has composed the madhyamakalas (faster sections) specifically in 5+2+5+5 and not in 17/2 or 17/4 parts. Only a vaggeyakara of the highest calibre can think thus.

## Gati Bhedam

Venkata Kavi indulged in change of gait(gati bhedams) within pieces too, something that very few major composers have done before or since. On occasions, the gait shifts from chaturashram (4) to tishram (3) or khandam (5). Examples:

- (i) Neeradasama - Jayantashri (Tishram and Khandam)
- (ii) Natavaratarunee - Kannadagowla (Tishram and Chaturashram)

## Usage Of Yati Patterns

Venkata Kavi has used yatis in his compositions. Yatis are specific patterns and are of 6 types. Venkata Kavi has generally indulged in a few of these. Examples:

- (a) Bhajanamrta - Nattai: Here he has used Sama yati (even pattern).

vrjasundarijana - padapankajasama - anukampitahrdi - smarasambhavanija

- (b) Mummada vezha - Nattai: Use of Srotovaha yati (patterns of increasing dimensions) Tattuvam - paratattuvam - parapatattuvam-paramparaparasattuvam. Jatadhara shankara Gopuchcha yati in the first charanam.

The notes are: MPDPMGRS, DPMGRS, PMGRS, MGRS,

(Words: Madamayadaruka vanamunimano- haranipuna mahadhana)

Of course, vishama yati (random patterns) is found in many instances.

Apart from the quality of music, another great testimony to Venkata Kavi's musicianship is the fact that there are numerous references to music in his works.

Examples:

1. Ekadanta Vinayakam - Nattai: In the anupallavi madhyamakala, he says:

sangeeta shastra raga tala bhava pradham

2. Balasarasa murali - Keeravani: In the 5th charanam, he mentions the gamakas (ornamentation) aahatam and pratyagatam.

3. Bhakti yoga sangeeta margame - Kharaharapriya.

4. References to several musical instruments like flute (as venu, murali), mrdanga, dundubhi, dhakka, dindima, damaru etc abound in his works.

### **Predeliction For Dance**

Venkata Kavi's knowledge of and fondness for dance matched that of his music. It is not known if he had formal training in this field or he was just inspired by the vision of the dances of Krishna, Vinayaka etc. But the influence of Bhagavata mela tradition that was prevalent in those time and region seems very likely.

1. He has incorporated wonderful jatis in many of his compositions.

Examples:

(i) Nalladalla enru shalladi - Shankarabharanam

(ii) Ananda nartana ganapatim - Nattai

(iii) Marakata manimaya chela - Arabhi

(iv) Bhuvana moha - Dhanyashi

(v) Vanamali swagatam - Nattaikkuranji

(vi) Neerada sama neela - Jayantashri

In some of them, he has created jati/swara patterns and then composed lyrics to match those in the next line. Examples: Bhuvana moha - Dhanyasi

Tanomkita tajam tarita sagarini sa tajam tanam takum tarita

Pitambara dhara manimaya makara kun-dalam idam jala jalana

Similar examples are found in Marakata manimaya - Arabhi and Nalladalla enru shalladi - Shankarabharanam.

2. He has composed whole pieces suited for dance. Examples: Tillanas in Shuruti, Sindubhairavi.

3. There are several references to dance in his works.

Example: Pallavi of his krti in Manirangu:

Yaar yenna shonnam anjade nenjame

Aiyan karunaiyai paadu - raga

Aalaapanamudan paddu - mudindal

Adavodum jatiyodum aadu

### **Various Views On The Ragas Handled**

Scholars are trying to understand the evolution of ragas in light of the fact that Venkata Kavi seems to have handled certain ragas which, until recently were believed to have been handled later. There are several viewpoints and some of them are mentioned below.

Prof S R Janakiraman :

"Jayantashri is not mentioned in any of the musical texts starting from Sangeeta Makarandam upto Sangeetha Sampradaya Pradarshini. Govinda's Sangraha Choodamani belonging to the 18th and 19th centuries and later texts like Svara Prastara Sagaram, Tachur Singaracharlu's Ganenedu Shekaram, K.V.Srinivasa Iyengar's Gana Bhaskaram and Sangeeta Sara Sangrahamu, supposedly written by Akalanga and a few small Telegu musical texts do however mention this raga. Umabharanam and Hamsanadham were first mentioned only in the Sangraha Choodamani. There is also a manuscript in the Saraswati Mahal Library (in Tanjore) called 'Meladhikara Lakshana' that has not been published so far. The author and the period of this book is not known. It is another text that uses the Kanakangi-Ratnangi nomenclature."

T V Subba Rao :

(in his article on the Ragas of Saramrita, in Vol XIX of the Music Academy Journal, 1948): "Tulajendra classifies Malavi under Mayamalavagowla. This Malavi is however entirely different from the Malavi of the kirtana of Tyagaraja - Nennarunchinanu which is a vakra raga derived from the Harikambojhi scale. The Malavi described by Tulajendra is not in vogue now."

In the light of the above, the questions that arise are:

Was Venkata Kavi's period a little later than what is generally accepted now (1700-1765)?

Were some of his compositions tuned later?

Are some of these compositions wholly latter day works?

It will take more study before conclusive answers are found. But some key points ought to be noted here:

1. The exact date/period of Sangraha Choodamani and Meladhikara Lakshana has not been established beyond doubt.
2. Even granting that Sangraha Choodamani was 18th-19th century, the conclusion that Jayantashri, Umabharanam etc could not have existed before Sangraha Choodamani is untenable. The ragas could very well have existed for several years before someone incorporated them in books of theory. A treatise generally provides us a clue only as to what period after which a raga could not have been created and not what period it could have been discovered. Musicologists - all through time - were also human and may have missed out many ragas.
3. Another possibility is that the ragas were in existence but not yet known outside a small region.
4. There could also be other treatises mentioning these ragas that have not been found so far.
5. The tune-lyric (dhatu-maatu) relationship in the krtis in these ragas like Vallari samane - Malavi, Neeradasama - Jayantashri and Udajagopa - Umabharanam suggest that it was one person who composed both spontaneously. The overall style and quality of these positively point to Venkata Kavi. For example, let us look at the words of the Pallavi in Umabharanam krti.

udajagopa sundara giridhara ulookhalaalaana Damodara

The words may appear simple, but they are not usual usages. They kept Sanskrit scholars on their toes for quite sometime before they could finally come up with the right meaning. Udaja refers to one who drives forth cattle while ulookhala aalaana refers to someone tied to the grinding stone. But the composer has given the clue with the word, Damodara, which is the story of Krishna being tied in this manner by Yashoda.

Similarly, Neeradasama neela Krishna in Jayantashri has transitions in gait (gati bhedom) between Tishram and Khandam and also rhythmic syllables (jati) that it is difficult to imagine anyone else tuning it just looking at lyrics composed a few decades/centuries earlier.

Thus it is most likely that Oottukkadu Venkata Kavi handled these ragas and that he was one of the first, if not the first to do so.

## STUPENDOUS IMAGINATION

In terms of sheer imagination, Venkata Kavi is as good as the best there have been. The way he has created scenarios in his operas leaves him in a class of his own. Each composition is different from the others, which makes his works endlessly ever fresh and leaves one awestruck at his genius on the one hand and the extent of his involvement in the various stories he set out to portray. Apart from his innate creativity, he had doubtless mastered the works of several great poets over centuries and this is reflected in his compositions

What makes his compositions even more special are the quality of expressions, choice of words and phrases rhyme and alliteration. Scores of examples can be given to show his imagination. Almost any song one picks will have something or the other to savour. A few are given below.

### kannan varuhinra neram - kavadichindu (stanza 4):

tazhai madal neettu nokkum

mullai paarkum

'enna sowkkiyamo?'enru ketkum

ada mozhi peshida iduvo pozhudenavo varum Madhavan

muttu mudiyinil shervom

ange metta peshi peshi nervom

This piece talks about the effect of Krishna's impending arrival on those around him including flowers. The stanza above describes the conversation between two flowers, tazhai and mullai. The former looks at the latter and asks if he is doing well. Mullai says, 'Is this the time for us to chit chat? Let's chat when we have all the leisure in the world as we adorn Lord Krishna's hair.'

### neelamar kola - vasanta (charanam):

Vana villil kanuhinra vanna vanna niram ellam

vandu vandu sharan puhundado

Mona ezhil kana nani vana madiyanadanji  
Moolanathan shadai ponado  
Gana mazhai pozhindida gandharuva kinnararum  
Manam anji maraindanaro

Did all the colours of the rainbow come and surrender unto you? Did the moon, unable to face your elegance, develop a complex and take refuge in Lord Shiva's locks? Did the celestial musicians, Gandharvas and Kinnaras go into hiding upon after being drenched in your musical downpour?

### **ashaindadum mayil onru kaanum - simhendramadhyamam (madhyamakalam of anupallavi and charanam)**

...Oru padam vaittu maru padam tookki ninraada - mayilin irahaada - makara kuzhaiaada -  
madivadanam aada - mayakku vizhi aada - malaranihal aada - malar mahalum paada - idu  
kanavo nanavo ena mananirai munivarum mahizhndu kondada

Venkata Kavi envisions Lord Krishna dancing with one foot on the ground and how his face, eyes and ornaments move in sync with his movements, leaving even desire-conquered philosophers bursting with joy.

### **Hasya (Humour)**

This imagination takes several forms and churns out several emotions (rasas) including hasya rasa, humour. Venkata Kavi's works are remarkable for the high percentage of richly humorous compositions he has composed. They are a refreshing deviation from the trend of several Carnatic composers to compose excellent bhakti (devotion) oriented pieces but often with more pathos in them, using God as a sounding board for their woes or critiques of life or those around them.

One of the main reasons and sources for this is his opera on Lord Krishna, especially the sections describing his life with the gopis in Brindavan.

His Madhyamavati piece, Aashaiyinaip paradi, is an excellent example of this. The poet takes a dig at Lord Krishna through the words of one of the gopis in Brindavanam.

Aashaiyinaip paradi - peraashaiyinaip paradi

Ettanai koti koti bhaktarhalanalum attanaiyum podadenru metta metta venumenra (aashai inaipparadi)

Look at His greed! He cannot be content even with billions of devotees, he needs more and more.

In the charanam, he takes a dig at a few great devotees:

Appanai madikkadaan ororuvan avan pero Prahladan ennum kal manattan

Appanai madikkadan veroruvan avan pero sukan ennum kilippillai

Annanai veruttane innavanai nimbi avan pero Vibheeshanan Ravanan tambi

Annanai veruttane innavanai nimbi avan pero Sugreevan Valiyin tambi

Look at his devotees - Prahlada and Shuka who thought they were one better than their own fathers; Vibheeshana and Sugreeva who relinquished their own brothers Ravana and Sugreeva because of him!

Another lovely example is the piece in Huseni, Adum varai avar adattum where again, it is one lady speaking to another about Krishna.

The charanam, the poet takes a dig at Krishna's culture and music as few others have done.

Ingitam enrale veeshai enna vilai

enru ketpar anda mannan

Idai eduttu sholla vandu ninrayi penne nee

Erkumodi endan ullam

Sangeetam avar kyil koil kurangaha

Tavikkude en sholla ennum

Sarali varishai muralikkaacchu

Jantai varishai kondaikkaacchu

Alankaara paambumela

Aadiyacchu paadiaacchu

This royal guy would ask the price of Culture by weight! And look at Music suffering in his hands like a temple

monkey! Sarali varishais - to him - means just ornaments in his flute while the Jantai varishais mean the same for his hair. And Alankaras mean only the beauty of the snake he has danced upon!

It is remarkable that Venkata Kavi has punned on the terms Sarali varishai, Jantai varishai and Alankarams in a charming manner.

An equally enchanting example is his Vishamakkara Kannan (Junjooti), describing the childhood pranks of Krishna. In one of the verses, he says:

Pakkattu veettu pennai azhaippan - Mukhari ragam

paada sholli vambukkizhuppan -

enakkadu teriyadenral nekkuruha killi vittu

vikki vikki azhumpodu 'idandi Mukhari' enban (vishamakkara Kannan)

Krishna would call the girl across the fence and ask her to render Mukhari ragam. If she would protest that she did not know the raga, he'd pinch her hard and as she weeps in pain, he'd say, 'This is Mukhari for you!'

Venkata Kavi has made use of the well known view that Mukhari raga is best suited for sorrowful situations. This also reveals that this view on Mukhari has prevailed for a few hundred years at least!

## Reverence

The above should not mean that Venkata Kavi's opera on Krishna is one whole disrespectful work. There are several songs which brim with devotion and reverence.

Example 1: Mun sheida tavappayane (Bhoopalam), a gopi says:

Mun sheida tavappayane - engal

mukti tarun Madhavanai bhakti sheyya kidaittadu

It is the fruit of my prior good deeds that I am devoted to Krishna.

Munnoru kaladiyil moovulahalandon - ippo

Moovulahum vaazha gana mazhai pozhindon...

He measured the three worlds with his feet once upon a time, today he plays great music that nourishes the three worlds...

This is a remarkable piece a la his Saptaratnas (with Pallavi, Anupallavi and multiple Charanams with swara sahityam) and he concludes by saying -

enai aalum eerezhu ulahaalum adiyavar manamaalum yadukulam tanaiyaalum Kannanai

munaindodum yamunait turaivanai evvuyirkum iravanai en mana niraivonai ...

(It is my fortune to be able to sing the praise of) the Lord who is the resides on the banks of the river Yamuna, who is the master of the world, who fills my heart and rules me, the 14 worlds, the hearts of devotees and the whole of Yadava race...

2: Sharanam gopa bala - Manirangu

In the charanam, he declares:

Sattiya lokamum sharnda vaibhogamum un

Sannidhi munnale kaikkude

Saaloka saameepa saaroopa saayujyam

Talir padam kandal poikkude...

You are my sole refuge Oh Lord. Even Brahma's abode, Satya Loka with its abundant luxury cannot stand anywhere near your sanctum sanctoram. Various things like Saloka, sameepa etc seem unreal with one look at your feet.

## Terrific Scholarship

Even the above examples are more than sufficient to show that Venkata Kavi's scholarship stands even taller because of the imaginative manner in which they are expressed.

In one of his pieces, 'Alankara gopiyar talam poda' - Atana, he has depicted a scenario where Krishna is deliberately playing a sophisticated pallavi in a complex tala. He has incorporated the names of the seven principal (sapta) talas here in a very natural manner.

Anupallavi:

vilangada talattil venumenre Kannan

vishama pallavi ishaittalum  
vidaadu gatilayam kedaadu  
orumurai kodaadu gurulayam edaadu - azhakai (alankaara)  
Despite Krishna's attempts to play a pallavi in an incomprehensible tala, the gopi maintains the tala flawlessly  
Charanam:  
Ata Triputa Roopaka Dhruva Eka  
Ananga Matya Jhampai  
Aksharam kedaadu lakshanam tavaraa...  
Koodavum Govindan paada mani tandai  
Kulungudu shruti laya vyavahaara shandai  
Krishna now dances to the other main talas like Ata, Triputa etc and so goes this wonderful battle between  
melody and rhythm.

## Cultural Values In Krtis Of Venkata Kavi

Until recently, due to the early popularity of some of the songs in his opera on Lord Krishna such as Alaipayude (Kanada), Kuzhaloodi (Kambhodhi), Pal vadiyum mukham (Nattaikkuranji) etc, the whole image of Venkata Kavi was almost unidimensional - a Krishna aficionado. Krishna definitely seems to have been the favourite deity (ishta devata) of Venkata Kavi. This is not surprising since he resided in Oottukkadu where the temple of Kalinga nartana Krishna captured his heart and soul. He is also said to have spent some part of his life in Mannargudi, singing the praise of Lord Rajagopala, the presiding deity of a magnificent temple there. Venkata Kavi has composed a whole opera on Lord Krishna in Tamil that consists of hundreds of songs, besides several krtis in Sanskrit. Though there is no doubt that he was fervent follower of the Lord, as he considered him his spiritual guru too, several songs of his on other deities have now come to light, revealing his familiarity and fondness for these as well.

### Compositions On Various Deities

Venkata Kavi has composed on almost all the major deities in the Hindu pantheon and on several minor ones as well. His compositions on the other deities are as grand and evocative as his pieces on Krishna, revealing his deep conviction that all these deities are but manifestations of one supreme power. Thus, he has been able to infuse the same warmth in his pieces on all deities. His intimate knowledge and mastery over details about each individual deity makes his creations even more astounding. But it must be noted that his compositions do not reflect just bookish knowledge coming through in a report like form. They brim with emotional feeling and which results in felicity of passionate \_expression.

### Vinayaka

There are several krtis on Vinayaka. Venkata Kavi has worshipped Vinayaka as one who bestows of the fruits of sacrifices, meditation and yoga and knowledge of music such as raga, tala etc. In Ekadanta Vinayakam bhajami - Nattai (Anupallavi), he states:

Yaga yoga japa tapa dhyanaadi karya phala prasiddham akhila loka palakam sangeeta shastra raga tala bhava pradam

He also used the phrase, srividyaupasana bodhakara (one who elucidates the method of Srividya upasana, in his krti on Vinayaka in his Navavarana set, Sri Ganeshwara - Shanmukhapriya (Pallavi). Venkata Kavi seems to have had a particular liking for Nartana Ganapati, the dancing Vinayaka. There is a small sanctum of this God in the Kalinga Nartana Krishna temple in Oottukkadu. The piece Ananda nartana Ganapatim bhavaye (Nattai) was most probably addressed to this deity. Some of the other krtis on Vinayaka include: Chintittavar nenjil iruppadu Shivayoga Ganapatiye, Mummada vezha (all Nattai), Pranavakaram Siddhivinayakam (Arabhi), Sri Vighnarajam bhaje (Gambheeranattai) and Umaganeshwaram (Umabharanam).

### Rama

It has recently come to light that Venkata Kavi has composed a set of songs based on the Ramayanam. Though the entire set is not available, the few that are available are mind boggling in their details and captivating allure. Besides this opera, there is his Ragamalika opus, Srirama jayame jayam, which brings out the entire

Ramayana in a nutshell. Other songs on Rama include Kalyanarama (Hamsanadam) and Raghukulottama Rama (Nagaswaravali)..

## **Vishnu**

Though the several hundred compositions on Krishna and Rama can be taken as songs on Vishnu since both are only his avatars, Venkata Kavi has composed a few songs which are address directly to the Lord. The glittering example among these would be his second Saptaratna in Gowla, Aganitamahimadbhuta leela.

## **Devi**

Venkata Kavi's Kamakshi Navavarana songs are second to none in terms of sheer excellence and stand testimony to his comprehensive comprehension of the details of Devi worship. Besides this set of songs, he has composed numerous pieces on various forms of Devi such as Meenakshi and Rajarajeshwari.

## **Subramanya**

Venkata Kavi definitely displays a lot of warmth in his works on Subramanya, a particular favourite among Tamilians. Senapate - Gowla was composed in Sikkil as the word Shaktyayatakshi literally translates to Nedum-vel-kanni in Tamil, which is the name for the Goddess Parvati in that town. Aadinan vilaiyadinan - Sama describes Kartikeya playing with his brother Vinayaka. Other songs include Gajamukhanujam - Kedaram, Varam onru tandarulvai - Shanmukhapriya and Alaivai - Mohanam.

## **Shiva**

Anyone acquainted with Venkata Kavi's Saptaratna in Paras, Alavadennalo and his Saptaratna piece in Todi, Jatadhara Shankara will find his amazing reverence for Shiva and intimate knowledge of Shaivism, Shiva puranam and Periya puranam. These songs, composed in a flowing style, abound in such minute details that they just leave one totally speechless. The Paras piece has the names of each of the 63 nayanmars (mega Shiva devotees), which makes it an unparalleled creation in Indain musical literature.

## **Aghora Veerabhadra**

Aghora Veerabhadra was specifically created by a fuming Lord Shiva to destroy the arrogant King, Daksha, who had insulted him and his wife, Sati, Daksha's own daughter. Venkata Kavi has composed a magnificent set of verses on this creation of Shiva, who instilled the fear of the very devil in everybody's hearts. The words in the shloka and the meter bring out the poet's ability to create any atmosphere he intended. His variations in the last line of each verse, which in many instances would be kept constant, add extra sparkle to this work of art.

## **Ranganatha**

Venkata Kavi's Ranganatham anisham vande ham - Gambheeranattai is a masterpiece, composed in the Saptaratna style. It has six charanams, five of them renderable as madhyamakala swara and sahyam. The 5th one mentions several prominent devotees of Vishnu including most of the azhwars. The wonderful tune, meter and the choice of words in finales in the Anupallavi and the main charanam only add to the sparkle of the song. Venkata Kavi has also composed a beautiful shloka on the Lord of Srirangam known as Ranganatha panchakam, set in a meter of five units (khanda gati).

## **Parthasarathy**

That Venkata Kavi visited Chennai and some of its temples are obvious through compositions on Lord Parthasarathi (Triplicane) such as Parthasarathi parama dayanidhi and Allikkeni karayinile.

## **Saraswati**

One of the best compositions in Kalyani is Venkata Kavi's Sarasija bhava jaye, on the Goddess of learning, abounding in lovely swaraksharas and pre-beat structural rhythmic usages.

## **Nrsimha**

Nrsimha panchakam - a thunderous shloka on this raging manifestation of Vishnu. The words superbly depict the atmosphere.

## Anjaneya

Venkata Kavi has composed a set of songs that are known as Anjaneya Pancharatnam.

Surya (Sun God)

There is a magnificent piece in Dhanyasi, Padmini vallabha dehi pradehi where Venkata Kavi talks of the Sun as the sustainer of life on earth.

## Compositions Of Historic Significance On Personalities

Venkata Kavi is one of the few composers to have composed whole pieces on some of his idols and other great personalities such as Jayadeva, Shuka, Vyasa, Andal, Valmiki and Dhruva. Many of these pieces are of historic significance and they also reveal the extent of the poet's knowledge of and reverence for quite a few great personalities before his times.

There is little doubt that Venkata Kavi was inspired much by Jayadeva, creator of the Geeta Govindam, a series of songs on Krishna in a melliflous style. In Padmavati ramanam (Poorvikalyani), he refers to Jayadeva as Kavi raja (king among poets). He held Valmiki, creator of the Ramayana in equal esteem as his piece, Vande Valmiki kokilam (Atana) demonstrates. In his piece, Nee sheida upakaram (Umabharanam), he thanks sage Vyasa for having given volumes of great works like the Mahabharata to the world. His composition in Gowrimanohari, Arum iyalada tavamana is a tribute to sage Shuka, creator of the Bhagavatam. In the song Tale sharanam amma, in Todi, the poet offers salutations to Andal, a great Vaishnavite composer.

### REFERENCES IN COMPOSITIONS

Venkata Kavi's incredible expertise in epics and legends stands out in several of his creations where rare personalities, more than a few of them never seen anywhere else in Carnatic literature, are given special mention.

### REFERENCES TO CHARACTERS IN EPICS

Vibheeshana, Sugreeva, Angada, Manu, Mandata, Dileepa, Sagara, Bhoorishena, Rantideva, Anbareesha, Pippilada, Utanga, Muchukunda, Raghu, Nahusha, Shantanu, Bali, Prahlada etc.

### REFERENCES TO SAGES

Narada, Tumburu, Matanga, Sanaka, Vyaghrapada, Parashara, Markhandeya, Dindimakavi, to name a few.

### REFERENCES TO RELIGIOUS OR CULTURAL LEADERS

Purandaradasa, Tulasidasa, all the 63 Nayanmars and all the 12 Azhwars, Ramanuja, Neelakanta Yazhpanar and so forth.

### REFERENCES TO MAJOR INCIDENTS

Since Oottukkadu Venkata Kavi has composed whole operas on quite a few themes; it is only natural that he was familiar with all the major incidents in these. He has referred to several incidents in many of his other compositions as well. To illustrate, in Raghukulottama Rama - Nagaswaravali (Charanam), he says: kukuranga Mareecha khandana. This refers to Rama slaying the demon Mareecha, who taunts him in the form of a golden (but evil) deer.

### REFERENCES TO MINOR INCIDENTS

Venkata Kavi has cited several small incidents from many different sources seldom mentioned by other composers. In the same song, Raghukulottama Rama - Nagaswaravali (Anupallavi), he says: maghavat arpita ratha vaibhava. This refers to an incident during Rama's war with Ravana. Rama was fighting from the ground while Ravana had the advantage of a fine chariot. Indra (referred to here as Maghavat) offered his chariot to Rama. In Jatadhara Shankara - Todi (Anupallavi), the poet talks of kreedha kirata. This refers to a small story where Shiva playfully took the form of a hunter in order to temporarily fool and test Arjuna, before gifting him the pashupata missile.

### REFERENCES TO RARE THINGS

There are several references to rare things in Venkata Kavi's works that reveal his incredible scholarship and awareness of minute cultural details.

Rajarareshwari - Kannada (Anupallavi): santana vatikadi panchaka tarodyana vanacharini - The five celestial trees such as santana.

Neelalohita ramani - Balahamsa (Charanam): samyadi panchasthita simhasana sthite - A reference to the 5 corpses, which is the seat of Devi in some avarana worships.

### REFERENCES TO SHLOKAS

That Venkata Kavi was well versed in works by other authors is evident from the fact that his compositions resonate with words, phrases and general usages seen in several other great works. He has used the endings of one shloka each from the Ramayanam and the Bhagavatam as his starting point of krtis: Vande Valmiki kokilam (Atana) and Satyam Param dheemahi (Shankarabharanam). Venkata Kavi's compositions also resound with rare words and expressions used by great poets such as Kalidasa, Banabhatta, Bhartrhari etc.

#### THE TRAVELLER-KSHETRA KRITIS

That Venkata Kavi composed numerous krtis on Kalinga Nartana Krishna of Oottukkadu, his native town and spent some time in Mannargudi, known as Dakshina Dwaraka, singing in praise of Lord Rajagopala is well known. However, recent findings reveal that Venkata Kavi travelled extensively and composed on the deities in quite a few temples. The places he has been to and composed on include

| PLACE            | COMPOSITION   | RAGA              |
|------------------|---|-------------------|
| Triplicane       | Allikkeni karai   | Kharaharapriya    |
| Triplicane       | Parthasarathi   | Suruti            |
| Triplicane       | Tedi arula  | Arabhi            |
| Sikkil           | Senapate namostute  | Gowla             |
| Srirangam        | Ranganatham anisham vande                                   | Gambheeranattai   |
| Srirangam        | Ranganatha panchakam  |                   |
| Tiruvarur        | Tyagaraja paramesha   | Chakravakam       |
| Pandarapur       | Bheema nadi karaiyil  | Gowrimanohari     |
| Udupi            | Ennadan inbam kandayo                                       | Devagandhari      |
| Kanchi           | Kamakshi Navavarana krtis                                   |                   |
| Madurai          | Ettai kandu nee Meenakshi                                   | Yadukulakambhodhi |
| Mylapore, Madras | Manruladi mahizhnde   | Bhairavi          |
|                  | (on Lord Subramanya's sanctum in the Kapaleeshwara temple.) |                   |

#### RANGE OF THEMES

As can be seen from the above illustrations, Venkata Kavi's compositions, encompassing a whole range of themes and his effortless portrayals of details reveal the depth of his knowledge and passion about each subject. His mastery over culture is below none and one of the main reasons for this, apart from the fact that he was blessed with innate genius and well read, is that he travelled far and wide. Other composers have seldom handled some of the themes he has touched upon or dwelt in detail. There is no doubt that he was a Mahakavi - mega poet.

## Group Kritis Of Venkata Kavi

Venkata Kavi's capability in the realm of thematic compositions is best seen in his operas on Krishna, Rama and so on. The majority of the Krishna songs in Tamil are in reality culled from one single work of his based on Bhagavatam. He has composed sets of songs specifically describing Rukmini kalyanam and Radha Kalyanam. More than a few of his Ramayana compositions, compositions on Daksha Yagam and works based on Mahabharatam, creations based on the story of Prahlada have also been found in Needamangalam Krishnamurthy Bhagavatar's notebooks. Attempts are on to trace the tunes of many of these and also the rest of the songs. A few of these have been written down in verse style (rather than with defined sections characteristic of krti) but the language and expression are arresting.

Venkata Kavi also composed sets of songs on other themes/types, the most notable being the Saptaratnas and the Navavaranam. This chapter will mainly focus on these two magnum opuses of Venkata Kavi.

## Saptaratna Krtis

One can only speculate on Venkata Kavi's source material for the musical form of Saptaratna. We don't find any other composer prior to him creating major compositions in this style. It is not improbable that smaller swarajatis comprising pallavi, anupallavi and a set of madhyamakala charanas that can be rendered as swaras and lyrics may have existed around that time in music and dance performance repertoires. It is to be noted that Tyagaraja also used the same structure for his pancharatna krtis.

Venkata Kavi's Saptaratna creations are extremely scholarly but not at the cost of instant appeal. They are profound, yet amenable to chorus renditions even by school children.

Five of these songs (the 2nd, 3rd, 5th, 6th and 7th) have an anchor charanam. (A well-known example of anchor charanam is seen in some renditions of Tyagaraja's Arabhi pancharatnam, Sadhinchane, where the line Samayaniki tagu mataladane acts as a temporary refrain.) Venkata Kavi has shown so much variety even in this small aspect of anchor charanam. In some songs, it is not the first line of the charanam but the 3rd line that is the anchor and Venkata Kavi has set the landing points in several complex ways, which again offer proof of his rhythmic skills. Besides, there are several areas where the composer's awesome ability to provide interesting melo-rhythmic finishes with appropriate lyrics comes to the fore.

From a lyrical perspective, Venkata Kavi has composed no two songs with the same theme. The first is a eulogy to devotees, the next is on Vishnu, the 3rd on Radha, the 4th on Krishna's flute, the next on Shiva, while the 6th brings to light the heroes of Periya puranam - the 63 Nayanmars while the 7th describes the 8 main offerings to the Lord during worship.

All in all, the Saptaratna pieces bring out Venkata Kavi's natural felicity, elegance and originality in expression, awesome and irrepressible imagination, attention to detail and most of all, his wonderful attitude.

1. Bhajanamrta - Nattai: This is a superb theme exactly akin to Tyagaraja's Endaro Mahanubhavulu. The Kavi mentions several great people right from Anjaneya, Prahlada, Azhwars, Nayanmars and so on. The fact that Venkata Kavi has spontaneously mentioned devotees of both Vishnu and Shiva and extols the worship of Kartikeya too is a pointer to his elevated state of true resolution, free from petty personality issues and quarrels that have dominated Indian culture over millennia. Interestingly, Purandaradasa and Tulasidasa are also mentioned. The reference to Tulasidasa is of special significance in several ways as it shows that saint's fame transcending regional borders even then and Venkata Kavi's awareness and regard for scholars of other regions. (He has composed whole songs on Valmiki and Jayadeva.) This piece also shows that Venkata Kavi lived after Tulasidasa.

2. Aganitamahima - Gowla: A beautiful piece on Lord Vishnu, this composition has 8 charanams in all, including an anchor charanam beginning with the words 'Namo namaste' with small variations in not only melody but also lyrics in each of its sangatis. The final madhyamakala charanam has 6 cycles. It brings to fore Venkata Kavi's deep knowledge of epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata through his mention of comparatively rare personalities such as Nahusha, Bhoorishena, Pippilada, Rantideva etc

3. Madhava hrdis khelini - Kalyani: Venkata Kavi was one of the few (probably the only) Carnatic composer to compose exclusive pieces on Radha. He has composed several pieces on Radha including a group of songs describing Radha's wedding with Krishna. In this piece, full of lilting words, he uses a lovely expression such as 'sarasa rasa rasane'. The piece is scholarly yet charming.

4. Balasarasa murali - Keeravani: A lovely work about Krishna's music. Venkata Kavi exclaims: balasarasa murali sudharasa bhava madhura lahari vihara (Oh, one who resides in the lovely waves of ambrosia that the music from the flute is...). In this piece, the composer's knowledge of musical subtleties comes to the fore in the 5th charanam where he has mentioned about graces and ornamentation like Ahatam and Pratyagatam.

5. Jatadhara Shankara - Todi: This piece is on Lord Shiva and has 7 charanams including an anchor charanam. (Most publications by Needamangalam Krishnamurthy Bhagavatars' family only have the anchor plus 4 charanams but 2 more were found in the notations in the Bhagavatar's handwritten notebook recently.) Venkata Kavi reveals his mastery over epics and mentions Shiva's casual play with Arjuna when he appeared as a hunter before bestowing him the Pashupatastra. Another lovely facet of the composer is his usage of familiar words in very rare but beautiful contexts. In this piece, there is a classic example 'chandra panchamukha'. We know that Shiva has the moon on his head but does he have it on all 5 faces? Is it a wrong usage by the great man? It appears so but actually this is not the case. A deeper study shows that

Venkata Kavi has intended the word 'chandra' to mean 'lovely' and not 'moon' in this context. There are several songs where Venkata Kavi teases the scholarship of those aiming to understand and assess him!

6. Alavadennalo - Paras: This is a remarkable piece for many reasons. It is again on Shiva but composed in lovely Tamil, making it the only Tamil song in the Saptaratna set. It mentions all of 63 Nayanmars in the madhyamakala charanams! These are set around the main charanam line - "innavaril oruvaraippole". The theme is - let me be free of births but if I am born, may it be like one of these 63... The pallavi is another illustration of his humility where he wonders when he can be at least Shiva's slaves' slaves' slave (adiyark-adiyark-adiyanai)! The finishes in the anupallavi and 5th charanam bring out the composer's intelligence in wedding rhythm and lyrics.

7. Sundara Nandakumara - Madhyamavati: A superb theme where each of the 8 madhyamakala charanas offers the 8 main articles of worship like Arghyam, Deepam, Tamboolam etc. It is quite possible that this krti was part of his daily prayers. The madhyamakala charanams have been set around the 3rd line of the main charanam but the remarkable thing is that this starts a few units before the tala. Thus, the other charanams start on the beat but end before the beat, a clear demonstration of Venkata Kavi's rhythmic command.

While the music, lyrics and scholarship of Venkata Kavi are of indisputably high standards, his attitude is even more amazing. He was himself a true mahaanubhava and well above Vishnu - Shiva distinctions and lived in a consistently high state of bliss - which no ordinary person can achieve. His works scarcely contain any autobiographical sob stories and show that he had reached tremendous spiritual and philosophical heights.

There is little doubt that Venkata Kavi's Saptaratnas, gaining in popularity now, will be revered as towering creations as long as Carnatic Music lives.

#### NAVAVARANA KRTIS

Venkata Kavi and Muttuswami Dikshitar are the most renowned composers of Navavarana krtis with specific focus on the navavarana ritualistic aspects. Though these compositions (along with Swati Tirunal's less ritualistic, but attractive Navaratri krtis) are usually rendered during the annual Navaratri festival in Sept/Oct, they have a far greater significance than this annual festival of nine nights and can be rendered at any time of the year.

Navavarana worship: The navavarana pooja forms the mantric-tantric ritualistic part of Devi worship, associated with the Srichakra pooja. An avarana may be understood as a covering, a veil that must be removed in order to reach the supreme Shakti, residing at the center point (bindu). It must be noted that each Avarana has its own set of rituals associated with it and the prerequisite for following these is a thorough awareness of the various facts like chakra (the geometric representative image), yogini-s (the various minor deities that are subservient to the supreme one) etc. This kind of tantric ritual is said to have originated sometime around the 10th century AD and is followed by certain sects even today.

| COMPOSITION                  | RAGA           | TALA            |
|------------------------------|----------------|-----------------|
| Sri Ganeshwara               | Shanmukhapriya | Vinayaka Stuthi |
| Vanchayasi edi kushalam      | Kalyani        | Dhyana stuti    |
| Santatam aham seve           | Deshakshi      | 1st Avaranam    |
| Bhajaswa sri tripura sundari | Nadanamakriya  | 2nd Avaranam    |
| Sarva jeeva dayapari         | Shuddhasaveri  | 3rd Avaranam    |
| Yogayogeshwari               | Anandabhairavi | 4th Avaranam    |
| Neela lohita ramani          | Balahamsa      | 5th Avaranam    |
| Sadanandamayi *              | Hindolam       | 6th Avaranam    |
| Sakala loka nayike           | Arabhi         | 7th Avaranam    |
| Shankari sri Rajarajeshwari  | Madhyamavati   | 8th Avaranam    |
| Natajana kalpa valli         | Punnagavarali  | 9th Avaranam    |

|                       |        |          |
|-----------------------|--------|----------|
| Sri chakra matangi ** | Suruti | Mangalam |
|-----------------------|--------|----------|

\* For the 6th avaranam in Hindolam, another version also exists in Khanda Matya with largely different lyrics but the one given above seems to belong more to the set.

\*\* A few people place this song as the 9th Avaranam and another piece, Haladharanujam in Manirangu as the mangala stuti.

Deity addressed

Venkata Kavi has addressed his compositions to the Goddess Kamakshi of Kanchi, which scholars assert, is of direct significance to followers of Srichakra pooja.

Complimentary pieces

Though the main pieces are 9 in number, Venkata Kavi has composed a preliminary worship piece (dhyana krti) and a concluding auspicious piece (mangala krti). Venkata Kavi has also composed a piece on Lord Vinayaka, Sri Ganeshwara (Shankmukhapriya) where he specifically refers to this Lord as 'srividyaopasana bodhakara'.

Ragas selected

Venkata Kavi has chosen rakti ragas like Anandabhairavi, Punnagavarali, Nandanamakriya, a couple of (now) rare ones like Deshakshi and Balahamsa and used a ghana raga like Kalyani in only one piece, the Dhyana stuti.

Tempo

The tempo (kalapramanam) of the Navavarana krtis of Venkata Kavi is mostly in medium pace with words akin to a torrential downpour in the faster sections. Even the slow, meditative pieces such as Yoga yogeshwari (Anandabhairavi), Neelalohita ramani (Balahamsa) and Sadanandamayi (Hindolam) have faster such sections reflecting his Niagara like flow.

Scholarship

Venkata Kavi has shown tremendous scholarship and familiarity with the intricacies of mantric-tantric rituals associated with the Srichakra pooja in their avarana krtis. The masterpieces abound in the chakra, yogini details of each avarana. Venkata Kavi prefers to reveal these early on in the piece and also makes references to the seed (beeja) mantra in a few of his compositions, like haim, kleem, eem and so on. He has also indulged in rare usages of familiar words. In his Nandanamakriya piece, he opens with the phrase, Bhajasva Shri Tripurasundari, which threw quite a few scholars off track for sometime. The verb bhajasva used this way in normal context of pray, would almost be blasphemous, as it would appear as though Venkata Kavi is asking that the Goddess worship him! But the composer uses a less known meaning of the word, bhaj to ask the Goddess to protect him.

Rhythmic command

Venkata Kavi has shown his proficiency in rhythm in these compositions by using some interesting talas, apart from Adi, Mishra Chapu etc. He has chosen some rare talas from the 35 tala system such as Khanda Triputa, Khanda Dhruvam and Sankeerna Matyam and also indulged in gati bhedam (shift of gait) in his Madhyamavati piece, Shankari where he flits back and forth from Chaturashra (4 units) and Tishra (3 units).

Signature

Venkata Kavi has used his mudra, 'Venkata Kavi' only in 3 compositions (out of nearly 500 compositions that have come down to us). One of them is the avarana krti in Madhyamavati, Shankari Sri Rajarajeshwari.

Overall Quality

The Navavarana pieces Venkata Kavi can easily be placed among the all time master works in world music. The intellectual, aesthetic, the spiritual merge to create a wonderful blend that is the delight of musicians, music lovers, students of music, Sanskrit scholars, experts in the Srichakra pooja and numerous others. These compositions speak volumes about the composer's melodic, rhythmic and literary skills not to mention their sublime thoughts.

## Lyrical Skill And Style

Venkata Kavi was a master of Sanskrit and Tamil, the two great old languages of India, both of which

developed independently and are even now poles apart, despite centuries have passed since Tamilians have become very familiar with Sanskrit and have incorporated hundreds of words from it. He was a prolific composer in both these languages and was equally gifted in both.

The hallmark of real scholarship is to reveal it spontaneously but without making any effort to showcase it. Venkata Kavi's compositions are excellent examples of this fact. In several compositions, we find him speaking most naturally of things in a very personal manner but his erudition cannot help standing out. Be it Sanskrit or Tamil, there are certain sections which compel attention, admiration, nay awe for the manner in which he has constructed them.

A study of Venkata Kavi's lyrics reveals that not only were his expressions superb but his thoughts even more amazing. He himself was most modest about his skills, attributing it all to the grace of God, who was also his guru. In the anupallavi of his composition in Sriranjani 'Guru padaravinda komalam ennul kondapode kolahalam', he declares

paramayogayagam vedam padittilen

Padittadu pol nadittilen

Parvai onrile vilainda bhagyamidu

Yarkkumidu aridanadu parimala sad (guru padaravinda komalam).

I have never studied the scriptures or yoga nor pretended to have done so. I received my whole fortune in a trice through the benevolent glance of my guru.'

## Characteristics

### Multi Lingual

Venkata Kavi has composed with equal felicity in Sanskrit and Tamil and also tried his hand in Marathi, which was prevalent in the Tanjore region during the reign of the Maratha kings like Ekoji, Sarfoji, Tulajaji etc. Though his knowledge in Sanskrit was awesome and he composed 100s of pieces in it, all of his operas were in Tamil.

### MULTIPLE LEVELS

There are several places where he has composed in very scholarly pure Tamil, other places where he uses very Sanskritised Tamil and some others instances where he has opted for colloquial Tamil usages almost bordering on the casual.

### PERSONALISED STYLE

Venkata Kavi's language is very personalised. Many Sanskrit pieces have also been composed as a direct address to God (sambodhana prathama vibhakti). Despite this personal touch to the pieces, it should be noted that almost none of them is autobiographical (save for a few songs on the greatness of guru).

### NATURE OF COMPOSITIONS

Most compositions are positive pieces, cheerful, even humorous, or just descriptive of God's greatness or play. There is very little of sorrow, self pity, anger at the world or at other human beings, complaint about life and such things in Venkata Kavi's compositions, except in the operatic portrayal of stories like Ramayana, Bhagavatam, Daksha yagam etc, where he gets into the shoes of the various characters in a most telling manner.

### FLOW OF THOUGHT

There is a Niagara-like flow of thought, which most often results in a similar flow of words, one reason why his compositions abound in madhyamakala (faster) passages. There are very few who have matched him here.

Most of his pieces abound in high quality rhyme (prasa) and alliteration (anuprasa).

### COMPOSITION OF WORDS

He has often used complex compositions of words (samahas) in a spontaneous manner.

### RARE THEMES

His songs on rare themes like Jayadeva, Valmiki, Vyasa, Andal, Shuka etc reveal his immense command over and love for many subjects.

### EYE FOR DETAIL

Venkata Kavi's eye for details is awesome. His compositions reveal this aspect most tellingly.

Here are a few examples

Gajamukhanujam (Kedaram)

Ksheeravarna bhasmankita phalam madhyduti kunkuma dharam ati shobham

(Lord Subramanya wears) milky white ash on his forehead with a glowing red vermilion in the centre.

Ranganatham anisham vande (Gambheeranattai)

mangalakara nishkalanka dakshina mandakini kaveri madhyastam

(Lord Ranganatha) resides between the rivers Dakshina Mandakini and Cauveri. Many other Carnatic compositions speak of the Lord residing on the banks of Cauveri but hardly mention the other river, which makes Srirangam an island.

INTERESTING USAGES

Venkata Kavi revelled in usages such as madana-madanaya, bhasaka-bhasakaya, ezhiluk-kezhilana

MASTERY OVER OTHER WORKS

The intricate details in his compositions and usages reveal his familiarity and mastery over several other works of greats before his times such as Vyasa, Valmiki, Kalidasa etc.

## Vocabulary

venkata kavi is in the top league where vocabulary goes. his songs abound in liting words but rare usages. Apart from being a thorough intellectual, he was also a very creative composer. He was able to weave several new words and phrases, which adds to the joy of one viewing his works solely from a lyrical perspective.

Many of his words are rarely found elsewhere in Carnatic literature. Numerous examples can be offered.

Senapate namostute - Gowla

Pulinda kanya - hunter's daughter (Valli)

Gajamukhanujam - Kedaram:

rohisha ja - born to deer (Valli)

Raghukulottama - Nagaswarawali:

kukuranga Maareecha khandana - slayer of the evil deer, Maareecha.

Balasarasa murali sudharasa - Keeravani:

kanaka dukoola - one clad in golden dress.

Madhava panchakam (shlokam) and Sri Govinda nama - Nattai:

Aanakadundubhi - another name for Krishna's father, Vasudeva.

There are numerous other instances when he uses familiar words in unfamiliar contexts that are proved absolutely correct after much search and research in dictionaries and other treatises. This often challenges scholars who are used to seeing certain words only in certain contexts.

Pallavi of his 2nd avarana kriti-Nadanamakriya

bhajasva sri tripura sundari

pahi shodasha dala sarvasha paripooraka chakreshwari mam api (bhajasva)

This sparked off a controversy in some circles as scholars found it baffling to see a person asking the Goddess to worship him! This is because the word 'bhaja' is almost always used to mean 'pray'. The word 'mam api' also added to this as it means 'me also'. People wondered who else the goddess was supposed to worship! But it was later found that Venkata Kavi has used it to mean, 'accept me also'.

Main charanam ending of his Saptaratna-Gowla (Aganita mahimadbhuta leela)

sarvada bharita gogana

Bharita generally is used to mean filled with, abundance etc but Venkata Kavi has used it to mean 'nourish', 'maintain'.

3rd charanam of his Saptaratna-Todi (Jatadhara Shankara)

bhasakara chandra panchamukha

That Shiva has Chandra (moon) on his forehead is well known but how could he have the moon in each of his 5 heads, which is what chandra panchamukha suggests?! But Venkata Kavi uses 'chandra' to mean 'lovely' and not the moon.

There are apparent extra words or even tautologies but resolved upon deeper research.

The 6th charanam of his Saptaratna in Todi (Jatadhara Shankara)

aghora tatpurusha aanana sam vadana

Now, aanana and vadana can mean the same thing - face. But Venkata Kavi has used 'vadana' to mean speech rather than face.

Madhyamakalam in samashti charanam of Senapate namostute - Gowla

Pulinda kanya mana mohana lola

Apparently, the usage, mana mohana lola may sound needless extra words as mana mohana could easily suffice but the extra word adds to the precision of description.

Venkata Kavi sometimes indulges in play with similar sounding words.

Anupallavi of Saptaratna in Gowla, Aganita mahimadbhuta leela

Kamalaa mukha kamala shileemukha

Bee of the lotus face of Lakshmi.

The 2nd charanam in Kshanameva ganya manye - Bowli

mukha dhara smita rashimikara smarana

Meditate upon the one (Lord) who has a smile on his face, one who does good

But most importantly, it must be noted that the spontaneity of the lyrics do not suggest a designed effort to play with words for their own sake. They only reveal Venkata Kavi's knowledge naturally asserting itself in various ways.

He has created new words depending on the contexts. In Narasimha Panchakam and Kalinga Nartana Pravaha shlokas, radanambaram is a word he seems to have coined to mean lips from a similar word, danta-vastra in Sanskrit. Both literally mean covering for teeth.

## Meters In Madhyamakalams

Meters bestow structure to poems and verses. They are one of the best lyrical devices to capture the reader's attention and admiration. Indian literature abounds in great poets who have composed their verses in compelling meters.

Venkata Kavi was not only a great musician but also an equally distinguished poet and scholar. He has made use of several interesting meters (chandas) in his compositions. These give such a wonderful lilt to his compositions that they are automatic choices of several dancers. While meters are almost normal in Sanskrit poems and several musical compositions composed in Sanskrit, it is interesting to note that Venkata Kavi has probably 'imported' and incorporated - if not exact Sanskrit meters, some very similar structures in his Tamil compositions as well, giving them a new flavour. Here are a few examples.

The second line of the song, Nalladalla enru sholladi - Shankarabharanam.

Nanda vanam tanil - anda natam idum - nanda mukundan Go- vindanidam sholli

The last line of the anupallavi of Paras Saptaratna, Alavadennalo.

Tadhikka tam ena - viditta talamum - tudikka dam ena - madittu gatipera

Madhyamakalam in the pallavi of Eppadittan en ullam puhundu (Neelambari).

Ishaitaru kuzhalodum kundalam olira - ivaitaru shuvai inil vandinamurala

Some of these sections, especially when blended with tongue twisting phrases, remind one strongly of Arunagirinathar's Tiruppugaz.

Example: Madhyamakalam in the charanam of Palvadiyum mukham (Nattaikkuranji)

Karutta kuzhalodu niratta mayil ira- hirutti amaitta tirattile

Gana mayilada mona kuyil pada neela nadiyodum vanattile

Kural mudal ezhil ishai kuzhaiya varum ishail kuzhalodu milir ila karattile

Kadirum madiyum ena nayana vizhikal iru nalinamana chalnattile...

This is not surprising because Venkata Kavi was a big admirer of Arunagirinathar and seems to have composed a few pieces on Lord Krishna in Tiruppugaz like sophisticated, non-even meters.

But there is no doubt that on the whole, use of meters is one of the significant contributions of Venkata Kavi to Carnatic compositions in Tamil.