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SANKĪRTANĀÇĀRYA ŚRĪ ANNAMĀÇĀRYA

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ABSTRACT

Śrī Tāḷlapāka Annamāçārya is one of the early vāggēyakāra-s in Telugu. He is well-known as ‘*Pada Kavita Pitāmaha*’ and ‘*Sankīrtanāçārya*’. His Sankīrtana-s contained the essence of Vēda-s, Itihāsa-s and Purāṇa-s. They were sung by him with great Viṣṇu Bhakti and Śaraṇāgati Bhāva to Lord Śrī Venkaṭēśwara of Tirumala. They came out from the depth of his heart and hence are of great interest to the sādḥaka-s of the Bhakti-cult. Hearing them rendered musically is a great feast to the ears. They bring happiness to the mind. It is therefore no wonder, they are popular.

The present paper focuses on throwing some light on the sankīrtana-s of Śrī Annamayya, hailing his prowess as ‘Sankīrtanāçārya’.

Key words: Annamāçārya, Sankīrtanāçārya, Sankīrtana, Bhakti, Vāggēyakāra

INTRODUCTION

India is a land of spirituality and Indian music is mostly spiritual in nature, finding its roots in the Sāmavēda with bhakti being an important factor ruling over it. It has been enriched with a large and vast repertoire of devotional literature by many Vāggēyakāra-s. Music became the vehicle to many of them to express their longing towards the Supreme Bliss and to outpour their feelings and emotions to the Almighty they strongly believed in. Thereafter, the Bhakti movement influenced music invariably for centuries.

Both North and South India made their own significant contributions towards the field of music with their divine writings. We had Jayadēva, Līlāśuka, Tulsīdās, Kabīrdās, Mīra etc., in the North whereas in the South, Aḷvārs – following the philosophy of Viśiṣṭādvaita of Śrī Rāmānuja propagated bhakti through the hymns of Nālāyira Divya Prabandham and Nāyanār-s, the Saivaite saints expressed their devotional emotions through Tirumurai and Tēvāram-s in Tamil. Meanwhile, in Kannada the ecstatic outpourings of Haridāsa-s called ‘Dēvaranāma-s’ and ‘Dāsara Padaḡaḷu’ gained tremendous popularity along with the ‘Vaçana-s’ of Śīva śaraṇa-s. Before the advent of Annamāçārya, in Telugu we had Kṛṣṇamāçārya’s ‘Simhagiri vaçana-s’ and ‘Narahari vaçana-s’. Annamayya’s arrival on this scenario of India’s devotional literature marked the beginning of a new era in the 15th century.

“Nāma sankīrtanam yasya - Sarva pāpa praṇāśanam” ||

(Bhāgavatam 12-13-23)

Endowed with a fertile imagination, Annamācārya was a great scholar, Saint poet and his works described as ‘Padakavita-s’ are repositories of ancient wisdom. Through his Pada-s he sang the praise of the auspicious qualities of the Lord of the Universe embedding those songs with great philosophical truths. He brilliantly employed music and literature as tools to give spontaneous expression to his Bhakti Bhāva.

Life Sketch

The life sketch of Tāḷlapāka Annamācārya can be known from the diligent work titled “Annamayya Jīvita Čaritramu” by Tāḷlapāka Tiruvēngalanātha (Śrī Annamācārya’s grandson) presented in the genere of “Dvipada kavya”. Annamayya was born in 1408 in a small village called Tāḷlapāka of Cuddapah district in Andhra Pradesh. His father was Nārāyaṇa Sūri and mother Lakkamāmba. They belong to Smārta Nandavarīka Brahmin family and are devotees of Lord Viṣṇu. Annamayya is said to be the incarnation of ‘Nandaka’ (the sword of Lord Viṣṇu).

Pilgrimage to Tirumala

Annamayya left Tāḷlapāka village at the age of eight. He wanted to climb the Tirumala Hills on foot. At the very sight of the Tirumala Hills, Annamayya sings in ecstasy as follows

“Adivō Alladivō Śrīharivāsamu – padivēla śēśula paḍagala mayamu”

While climbing the hills, he was tired and slept under a cool bamboo groove at a spot called ‘Mōkāḷḷa Miṭṭa’. The Tirumala hills are said to be full of Sālagrāma stones and he committed the mistake of wearing the foot wear unknowingly while climbing such auspicious hill. Goddess Alamēlumanga, the divine consort of Lord Venkaṭēśvara came to his rescue with abundant motherly affection. She blessed him with Lord’s prasādam with which he regained his vigour and strength and resumed the journey. Inspired by the divine mother’s flow of mercy, he spontaneously rendered one hundred verses in Her praise and dedicated to Goddess Alamēlumanga.

Vaiṣṇavism

Annamayya stayed in the sacred hills for eight years. He was initiated into Vaiṣṇavism fold by a sanyasi ‘Ghana Viṣṇu’, after completing ‘Panča samsakara-s’. From the age of 16, Annamācārya took a vow to offer at least one composition a day to the lotus feet of the Lord. This mission was carried on by Annamācārya till his last breath (Phālguaṇa Bahuḷa Dvādaśi – 1503).

Back to Tāḷlapāka – Marriage

Annamācārya’s parents came in search of him and obeying Lord’s advice, he returned to his village with them. He married Timmakka and Akkamma and had three children, Peda Tirumalācārya being one among them.

Annamācārya was greatly influenced by the pontiff of Ahōbala Muṭṭ – ‘Śrī Ādivan Śaṭhagōpa Yati’, and gave the essence of Viśiṣṭādvaita Philosophy to the understanding of the common folk, in his sankīrtana-s.

Sāḷva Narasimharāya

Annamācārya adorned the court of King Sāluva Narasimharāya of Penukonda. One day, overwhelmed by the sweetness of a particular sankirtana - “*Emokō çiguruṭa dharamuna – eḍaneḍa kasturi ninḍenu*” composed by Annamayya, the king requested him to compose such a song on him also. Annamayya refused to do so, declaring that his songs are dedicated only and only on Lord Venkaṭēśvara and that he will not compose in praise of human beings, however great they may be. Felt insulted by this refusal, the king ordered the imprisonment of the saint composer. Annamayya prayed the Lord through the following Sankīrtana –

“*Ākaṭi vēḷala alapaina vēḷala – tēkuva Hari nāmamē dikku mari lēdu*”- who came for his rescue by breaking the chains. The king realised the greatness of Annamayya and fell at his feet. Annamayya disgusted with the court service, returned to Tirumala and settled there for the rest of his life.

Annamayya composed innumerable songs covering different aspects of life and afterlife. His sankīrtana-s cover all temple rituals, utsavam-s, processions etc. It is said that the famous dāsa saint of Karnataka – Purandaradāsa praised Annamayya as the incarnation of Lord Venkaṭēśvara and his sankīrtana-s as ‘Parama Mantra-s’. Annamayya’s sankīrtana arçana was carried by his son Peda Tirumalācārya and his grandson Çina Tirumalācārya. Another grandson Çina Tiruveṅgaḷanathuḍu known as ‘Çinnanna’ wrote his biography. Çina Tirumalācārya also translated ‘Sankīrtana Lakṣaṇamu’ of Annamayya which was originally in Sanskrit and currently obsolete into Telugu language. This treatise explains the lakṣaṇa (theory) of the form Sankīrtana for which lakṣya (practical) can be found in Annamācārya’s sankīrtana-s.

Copper plates - Sankīrtana Bhāṇḍāramu

Annamācārya’s yeoman services to the field of poetry, music and bhajana tradition is very significant. He is aptly hailed as ‘Padakavitā Pitāmaha’, ‘Sankīrtanācārya’ and ‘Drāviḍāgama Sārvabhauma’. He composed 32,000 sankīrtana-s, but because of some greedy people and their ignorance we lost a major part of the greatest treasure. Presently only around 14,000 are available out of them. These are engraved on copper plates under the direct supervision of Peda Tirumalācārya. The tradition of having compositions inscribed on copper plates is exclusive and unique to Tāḷḷapāka composers. They were stored in a place called ‘Sankīrtana Bhāṇḍāramu’ inside the temple premises at Tirumala, some at Ahōbilam and some in Śrīrangam. We find some palm leaf manuscripts of the same at Tanjore Sarasvati Mahal Library and Madras Oriental Manuscripts Library. It was A.D. Campbell who first mentioned the existence of these compositions way back in 1816. But these copper plates came to light only in 1922 through the discovery of The Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams, TTD. The Sankīrtana Bhāṇḍāramu’ in Tirumala temple holds the statues of Annamācārya and his son Peda Tirumalācārya on either side. Even to this day, the Lord of Seven Hills wakes up to Annamācārya Sankīrtana which has become a part of the daily rituals at the hill temple.

Sankīrtana Legacy

Annamācārya’s sankīrtana-s can be broadly classified under two categories – Adhyātma sankīrtana-s (the devotional and philosophic compositions) and Śrīngāra sankīrtana-s (the erotic compositions replete with madhura bhakti concept). His compositions were mainly in Telugu language and a few in sanskrit language. His sankīrtana-s were a confluence of language and literature, the music and musicology and the philosophy and message. The style of the sankīrtana-s is simple, direct and colloquial. The common vocabulary of the contemporary age was liberally used and the native idiom is well expressed.

He adopted song as a mass medium to convey his ideas and ideologies and to propagate the ‘Srinivasa Tatvam’. He called his song “Sankīrtana”. Sankīrtana form was systematised and streamlined by Annamayya with a Pallavi, Anupallavi (rare usage) and Çaraṇam-s. The Pallavi contains the central idea of the sankīrtana and the theme is elaborated in the çaraṇam-s following. Only rāga names were mentioned on the copper plates for the 14,000 odd compositions we have inherited of Annamāçārya, only 89 rāga-s have been employed out of which 25 have been used frequently. Though there is no mention of tāla-s on the copper plates, their pattern of singing employing different tala-s can be inferred from the pada singing tradition followed in Karnataka and Andhra according to Śrī Rāḷḷapalli Ananta Kṛṣṇa Śarma. He says, the bhava and language of the song itself leads us to infer its music. Many renowned Musicologists and contemporary musicians have composed tunes and published notations to the sankīrtana-s of Annamayya.

Annamayya extols the greatness of Sankīrtana in many of his own compositions. The following are a few of them:

- Annamayya conveys that Sankīrtana of Viṣṇu only is the pure eternal knowledge and that there is no other tool beyond Sankīrtana to attain eternity,

“Mādrśānām bhavāmaya dēhinām -----

-----kēçidapinā viṣṇukīrtanam prītyā – sūçayantō vā śrōtum nanatiḥ”

- **“Çāladā bramhamidi sankīrtanam – jālella naḍagiṇçu sankīrtanam
Sāmajamu gāçinadi sankīrtanam – sāmamuna kekkuḍī sankīrtanam
Sāmīpyamindariki sanakīrtanam – sāmānyamā Viṣṇu sankīrtanam”**

- **“Çaladā harināma soukhyāmṛtamau tamaku -----
Tagu vēnkaṭēśu kīrtanamokaṭi çaladā – jagamulō kalpabhūjammu valenunḍa”**

- In the following sankīrtana he says – one sankīrtana is enough to protect me, let the rest be hidden in the treasure house.

“Okka sankīrtanē çālu oddikai mamu rakṣimpaga

Takkinavi bhāṇḍārāna dāçiyunḍanī”

Conclusion

Annamāçārya’s sankīrtana-s dazzle in poetic excellence and with a chiselled structure, carryout understanding musical element along with strong emotional element, enhancing their melodic, aesthetic and rhetorical value leading us through a great spiritual journey to attain the eternal bliss. Thus, Annamāçārya is hailed as ‘Pada Kavita Pitamaha’ and ‘Sankīrtanāçārya’ in the right way.

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