

Distinctive contributor

Ottukkadu Venkata Kavi



Chitravina N. Ravikiran

Ottukkadu Venkata Kavi's genius is felt and experienced in all of his compositions, writes Chitravina N. Ravikiran in the first of his two-part series on the composer.

One of the greatest composers that India has produced, Oottukkadu Venkata Kavi (also referred to as Venkata Subbaiyer) is said to have lived sometime between 1700 and 1765 AD. He composed hundreds of brilliant songs in Sanskrit and Tamil and a few in Marathi. Around 500 have survived of which more than 60 per cent have been published. Though his versatility and predilection for music, dance, drama and poetry are obvious even at first glance, the depth and breadth of his works demand years of study by scholars of music, Sanskrit, Tamil and Srividya worship.

For over 200 years, these compositions were almost hidden from the mainstream music field but preserved by a small number of family members and a close circle of disciples. Around 1940, they gained wider exposure through noted Harikatha exponent Needamangalam Krishnamurthy Bhagavatar, a direct descendant of Venkata Kavi's brother. Those who learnt from him include artistes such as Rudrapatnam Brothers, Aruna Sairam, Savitry Sathyamurthy and Kunjumani Bhagavatar, nephew of Papanasam Sivan.

Today, his torch is borne primarily by Alamelu and Subbaraman. The latter's thesis on Venkata Kavi's Tamil compositions proves the poet's erudition in Sangam literature, divya prabandhams, tevarams and tiruppugazh. Similar studies by others have established his mastery over Lalitopakhyanam, Periya Puranam, and the works of Kalidasa, Jayadeva and others.

Growing awareness of Venkata Kavi's colossal contributions has increased his aura among music lovers and also among musicians and musicologists of competence, objectivity and integrity. The doyen Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer was so awe-struck by these compositions that he pronounced: “sangeeta mummanihalodu samamaaha idam petrulla vaaggeyakaarar Venkatasubbayier” (Venkata Kavi is in the same echelon as the Carnatic Trinity).

His greatness

However, one of the earliest artistes to realise Kavi's greatness was G.N. Balasubramaniam. A luminous musician and composer himself, he wrote a glowing article in the 1950s for a Tamil magazine.

The Music Academy, Journal (Vol XXVII) mentions a demonstration by Krishnamurthy Bhagavata in the 1955 Music Conference and records that “Venkata Kavi's 190th Anniversary fell a few days ago”. The president of the conference, Marungapuri Gopalakrishna Iyer said, “These compositions, the echoes of which could be seen in the works of the Trinity, could thus be deemed as filling the gap between Purandaradasa and Kshetragna on the one hand and the Trinity on the other.”

Thus Venkata Kavi's creations dispel the widespread belief that Carnatic music suffered through a dark age between the periods of Purandaradasa and the Trinity. His sophisticated compositions with dazzling fast passages and gait (gati) changes bear testimony to the evolved state of music of the period. But they also demand huge efforts from the artistes. Viewed against this backdrop, perhaps a striking contribution of the Trinity (especially Tyagaraja) was to make compositions more accessible by decreasing or eliminating such demanding sections.

To a reasonable and intelligent scholar, the works of a composer are the best evidence, more than accounts or eulogies by others. Secondary corroborations, if available, are only a bonus (when not powered by myths). The primary evidence of the large body of available compositions in a fairly consistent style and quality (and continuity of themes in operatic works based on Bhagavatam, Ramayanam and so forth) is the most eloquent proof of Venkata Kavi's thoughts, attitude and mastery. As Prof. T.V. Subba Rao affirmed, “These creations blend bhava, raga, tala, sahitya, shabda and swara.”

Venkata Kavi's compositions also give an indication of the places he visited such as Chennai, Kanchipuram, Madurai, Tiruvarur, Udipi, Pandharpur and Pazhani. His references to historic personalities such as Jayadeva and Purandaradasa provide a vital clue to his time period, since Tulasidasa seems to have been chronologically the last personality the poet mentioned.

Venkata Kavi has employed compositional forms like krti, tillana and chindu apart from shlokas, free verses and poems. As Rangaramanuja Iyengar notes in *The History of South Indian Music*, “Venkata Kavi's krti pattern is quite varied” and “The tillana attained aesthetic heights in his hands.”

Weighty masterpieces such as Padminivallabha (Dhanyasi), Prasannagopalakrishnam (Dvijayavanti) and Rajagopala (Manji) are deep and meditative while Mundivarumishai

(Bhairavi) and Ennadan inbam (Devagandhari) are full of sublime charm. Besides, there are pieces with just two sections like Senapate (Gowla) and those like the saptaratna krtis which have a pallavi, anupallavi and up to 10 charanams. His handling of ragas like Nadanamakriya, Deshakshi, Paras, Manji and Balahamsa are distinctive.

Few composers have employed madhyamakalas with the degree of creativity and craftsmanship as Venkata Kavi.

As Sangeeta Kalanidhi T.N. Seshagopalan asserts, “A very improper view has gained currency among musicians — a plethora of words is an impediment to evocative appeal. Venkata Kavi’s works emphatically debunk this.” The faster sections make his creations more fluid, attractive and multi-dimensional. Moreover, he has created unique musical movements by inserting these contrasting sections between two slower passages within a section and not merely at its conclusion.

Venkata Kavi’s pre-climactic passages in songs like Kuzhaloodi (Kambhodhi), Marakatamanimaya (Arabhi) and finishes in Alavadennalo (Paras) and Bhuvanamoha (Dhanyasi) are melo-rhythmically so effective even sans percussion accompaniment at times.

Venkata Kavi has embellished more than a few compositions with names of ragas, talas, gamakas and other music-related details. There are also interesting consonant (vadi-samvadi) phrases in krtis like Ekadantam (Nattai) and plentiful instances of swarakshara (matching lyrics for the solfa notes). He also used the concept of anchor charanams (secondary refrain around which other charanams are built) especially in his saptaratna krtis.

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Dazzling and deep



Chitravina N. Ravikiran brings to light Oottukkadu Venkata Kavi's rhythmic and lyrical genius in the concluding part of his series on the composer.

Venkata Kavi's choice and mastery over both Sanskrit and Tamil — each with completely independent grammar and norms — is almost unique among music composers. In compositions such as Chintittavar (*Nattai*), his Tamil is as erudite as his Sanskrit. Many of his Sanskrit pieces have the conversational felicity of his native Tamil rather than just descriptions with an odd verb inserted randomly. But the stand-out feature in either language is the personalised emotive appeal.

Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer affirmed that Venkata Kavi's Sanskrit was “as first rate” as his Tamil. “*inda samskruta krtihal, avarudaiya tamizh keertanaihalai polave, mudal taramaanavai...*”

The composer has shown a penchant for extrapolating Tamil style rules in some of his Sanskrit compositions such as Satyamparam (*Shankarabharanam*) where brahma has been used to rhyme with *janma*. Conversely, he has ‘Sanskritised’ Tamil compositions such as Tyagarajaparamesha (*Chakravakam*). “sharanagata varunalaya karunalaya kamalalaya tatam ahala aaroor Tyagaraja”

Studying Venkata Kavi's works is a definite learning curve for any music, literature and culture-aficionado. His colossal vocabulary is almost concealed in the elegance of his expressions. Seldom-used words such as *dukoola*, *aakalpa*, *rohishajaa* would only stand out if one was intent on word meanings. References to azhwars, nayanmars, rare incidents and hardly known devotees such as Devala, Saraswatha, Pippalada expressed with poetic imagination testify to his exhaustive knowledge.

Range of emotions

Perhaps the most striking feature of his lyrics is the spontaneous combination of power and elegance. Even without music, his soul-stirring words express a whole range of emotions, portray scenes vividly but with a clear current of sublime devotion. Passages such as *tadhikka taam ena viditta talamum tudikka daam ena madittu gati pera* (*Alavadennalo – Paras*), *mukhadhara smita rashimikara smarana* (*Kshanameva - Bhoopalam*) and are as much about divine inspiration as they are about skill and scholarship.

Yet, the colloquial, casual style in a handful of songs (that got known initially) such as *Alaipayyude* (*Kanada*) and *Kuzhaloodimanamellam* (*Kambodhi*) confused scholars when viewed against *Madhuramadhura* (*Athana*) or *Padmavatiramanam* (*Poorvikalyani*) which were in a different league. It has only recently been appreciated that the first two are examples of operatic pieces composed from the perspective of Krishna's *gopis*, who were essentially simple people.

Melodic variations are an integral part of several composers and the Tyagaraja school has taken it to great heights. While these feature abundantly in Venkata Kavi's works, it is fascinating to note that he also employed lyrical variations in compositions such as *Mahashaya* (*Abhogi*), keeping a major part of the melody constant but changing the lyrics.

Venkata Kavi has blazed a rhythmic trail that few have ventured into. His choice of intricate *talas* such as *Khanda Dhruvam* (17 units) and *Mishra Atam* (18) would alone proclaim his class. But the manner in which he has handled them without sacrificing melodic or lyrical appeal reaffirms his stature. He has also employed features such as changing gait (*gati-bhedam*) from *chaturashram* (4 units) to *tishram* (3) or *khandam* (5).

Complex tala

But his change of unit beat measure from 8 in the first 2 sections to 4 in the final section (from 2 *kalais* to 1 *kalai*) in *Sadanandamayi* (*Hindolam*) in a complex *tala* like the 20-unit *Sankeerna Mathyam* is unparalleled.

Further examination reveals that he has composed not merely keeping the whole *tala* in mind but also its constituent parts. For instance, instead of merely bisecting an 18 unit *tala* like *Mishra Atam*, he would sometimes structure his lyrics along its parts of 7+7+2+2. However, he took partitioning the *tala* in equal measures also to great heights in songs like *Yogayogeshwari* (*Anandabhairavi*, *Khanda Tripata*) where the fast passage in the 2nd section is split into 4 equal parts of 2.25 units each. Further, he has dexterously handed take-off and landing points before or after the beat (*ateeta*, *anagata eduppu*).

Apart from the oft-seen even or random patterns (*sama* or *vishama yati*), Venkata Kavi has employed increasing patterns (*srotovaham*) in pieces like *Mummadavezha* (*Nattai*) and decreasing ones (*gopuchcham*) in *Jatadhara* (*Todi*).

It is not known whether Venkata Kavi had formal training in dance but his descriptions of dances involving Krishna, Vinayaka and Shiva are so vivid that most top-notch dancers have gravitated towards them. In compositions such as *Aadinaan* (*Sama*), which describes Subramanya and Vinayaka playing together, his eye for detail stands out. His versatility and variety in embedding *jatis* (rhythmic syllables) in compositions like *Vaiyamalandu* (*Nadanamakriya*) and *Vanamali* (*Nattaikkuranji*) give further scope for dancers. The *jatis*, *swaras* and *yatis* readily fall into place and seamlessly blend with abhinaya-centric lyrics.

As Dr. Vyjayantimala Bali says, “His divine creations are inspiring; his references to rare episodes and treatment of themes like **Ramayana** are refreshingly original.” It is important to note that in his times, Oottukkadu was a major centre for *bhagavata mela* tradition which blended music, dance and drama. The composer has also cited specific types of dances like *kutuka*, *chalachala* and *haahaakaara natana* in his compositions.

Based on the degree of effort required to savour compositions fully, scholars have compared Tyagaraja's compositions to the grape, Syama Sastri's to the banana and Dikshitar's to the coconut. Venkata Kavi's approach, which unquestionably forms one of the five distinct styles in Carnatic music, can be likened to the mango, which is as alluring with or without the skin. They are dazzling, yet deep. All the above notwithstanding, only a small body of his works has been studied so far, a smaller set that have been learnt and presented in mainstream performances. Therefore, only a small part of his genius and mammoth contributions has been understood. Further studies by objective scholars would enrich several fields.