

SELECTED ESSAYS

MAHA RAJA GARBHA SRIMAN
SWATHI THIRUNAL

Recently on the 19th April 1935, Sri Swathi Thirunal Day was held under the auspices of "The Sangitha Tatva Sabha" and "The Sangitha Vidvat Sabha," when Brahmasri Krishna Bhagavather entertained the audience with some sample compositions of that Prince of Music. This celebration was held exactly on the 122nd anniversary of the birth of Sri Swathi Thirunal. Among the Hindus, the day of nativity is reckoned by the star (*Nakshatram*) in which a person is born and not by the day of the month. But it so chanced that in 1935 the day of the month, 6th Chitray, and the star

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Swathi coincided with the day and the star of the birth of that great Prince. From conception he was Maha Raja, as there was then no male member to rule over Travancore. Hence the Maha Raja had the distinctive title of "*Garbha Sriman.*" Born in 1813 A. D. His Highness assumed ruling powers only in 1829 and passed away in 1847. Within this short span of thirty-four years of life, he attained to such a climax of culture and glory, as to eclipse the stories of the renowned scholar-monarchs, Vikramaditya and Bhoja. My wonder is that it took almost a century for his countrymen to start a movement in commemoration of their great talented sovereign.

Should any one observe the star *Swathi* on the sky through the telescope, he would be struck by its variety of colours and lines making it a beautiful picture. Even so picturesque was His Highness's life, and he reflected his brilliance on the world in varied colours

and lines. We do not know which to admire most, His Highness's outstanding personality or his statecraft and powers of organisation or his erudition and command of languages or his innate aesthetic sense of beauty. His Highness was indeed one of the builders of Travancore. If Maha Raja Veera Martanda Varma extended his dominion by conquest, and if his great successor, the renowned Dharma Raja Rama Varma, consolidated it and brought order out of chaos during his long and glorious reign of forty years, it was Garbha Sriman Swathi Thirunal Maha Raja who laid the foundation of modern Travancore by inaugurating civilised constitutional administration and enhancing the dignity and prestige of the Royal House. It may not be so widely known as it ought to be, that it was His Highness who conceived and created a really Royal Court with all the paraphernalia of regal equipage and laid down the formalities, customs, and

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manners which still adorn it. His aesthetic sense of beauty of form and fitness is reflected in every detail. He adopted what was good in ancient Hindu conceptions, mediaeval Mahomedan imperial courts, and modern social formalities, and blended them into a harmonious whole. All social, political, and ecclesiastical functions and ceremonies were refashioned under this new dispensation. Whether it is the Dasara or the Utsavom, or a Darbar or an Audience, they still bear the impress of that Prince of Beauty. In his own person he carried that dignified mien, which, even in pictures, compel implicit obeisance. His athletic and strong frame, his proverbially long limbs (*Ajanubahu*), his brilliant large eyes, and prominent nose bespoke the strong and large heart within. He was really a lion among crowned heads (*Raja Simha*), so much so that a look from him cut all obstacles through. There is a current anecdote that, once during an *Arat* procession of

Sri Padmanabha in Trivandrum, one among the howdah elephants got wild and the large crowd which had gathered to witness the festival ran pell-mell for safety, while His Highness stood firm and cast his fiery glance on the animal which cowed it down for the mahouts to chain. Thence the people believed him to be really an *Avathar* (incarnation) of Narasimha, or as some say, a true devotee (*Bhakta*) of that Deity. Truly, he inherited not alone the throne but also the heroism of his great predecessors, Maha Rajas Martanda Varma and Rama Varma.

How happy should a country feel under the paternal rule of such a *Veera Kesari*, a hero among Rulers! How evanescent was such happiness, as the reign extended for not more than 18 years! Although the reign was short, the results achieved were enormous and lasting. No war had to be waged against foreign foes nor invasions to be guarded against as in the previous reigns, thanks

to the friendly alliance with His Great Britannic Majesty; but the domestic enemies of ignorance and ill-health had to be won and the incursions of injustice and disorder guarded against. It is the latter who insidiously suck the life out of a nation more than any foreign foe. Truly did Sri Rama despair of any remedy when he was told that his banishment to the forest was at the instigation of his own half-mother, Kaikayi, by exclaiming,

“ദേഹത്തിൽ മാത്രം പരിവന്മി തച്ചിടും
ചേതസ്സിനെത്താൻ സ്വജനം ഹനിക്കുമേ”

that is to say, an external enemy will hit the body only, but the kith and kin will kill the heart.

The establishment of regular courts of justice, the revision of law according to modern jurisprudence, and the organisation of a Police and Military force brought law and order in the land. According to the Hindu Smrithies, a Sovereign's first duty is to protect the Dharma. No adequate definition of Dharma could be given. But one of

its essential attributes is the preservation of law and order. | Next comes the fight against ignorance by imparting right knowledge. Thanks to the long foresight of the Sovereign, His Highness opened the door to welcome English education, which has transformed and brought his State to its present high level of advancement. The Maha Raja's Free School started then sowed the seed for such unprecedented intellectual upheaval as to make Travancore today one of the foremost civilised Indian States. A third attribute of Dharma is to promote the health and happiness of the subjects. This was achieved by starting a free General Hospital in the capital, by organising a Public Works Department and by encouraging agriculture and commerce. The formation of an Irrigation Department and the improvement of Ports, the survey and settlement of lands and the reduction of the burden of taxation were achievements noteworthy of the reign. The establishment of a first class astrono-

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mical Observatory inaugurated an era of original scientific research, the importance of which was woefully lost sight of since for long. The observations made then, gained such reputation among savants in Europe as the results were published in London. It may also be noted that the first printed Malayalam almanac was published in 1015 M.E. (1830 A.D.) A fourth attribute of Dharma is Charity. Nature herself is charitable in this land of Sri Padmanabha, and his vassal could no less be so. Whether it be in feeding the poor or in the matter of religious toleration, the sovereign spared no pains to sustain unimpaired the high reputation which his illustrious predecessors had gained for the State as the "Dharma Rajyom"—the Land of Charity. His devotion to Sri Padmanabha is evidenced in one and all of his works.

It is seldom that a monarch, engaged in the arduous task of government, exhibits extraordinary talents as an author, linguist, and composer. There are not many

Vikramadityas, Bhojas, and Harshas in the world. Even those reputed emperors had only developed one side of culture *viz.*, poetry, and their courts were adorned only by great authors. History does not tell us of the musical talent having found a home in them. Our Prince, however, rightly renowned as the "South Indian Bhoja," not simply by his erudition and compositions but also by the great patronage he gave to savants from all over India, was no less a master-musician than a poet. His Highness knew the classic and current languages of India, Sanskrit, Persian, Tamil, Telugu, Canarese, Marathi, Malayalam, and also English. A linguist as he was, he has composed in all languages except the European one. Besides the musical compositions to be mentioned later on, His Highness composed,

- (1) Sri Padmanabha Sathaka
- (2) Bhakthimanjari
- (3) Syanandurapura Prabandha
- (4) Utsava Prabandha
- (5) Yayathicharitha

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One and all of them brim with *Bhakti* (devotion) to the Supreme Being in language both simple and melodious. All are composed in Sanskrit, except the Utsava Prabandha which is a mixture of Sanskrit and Malayalam. Poets, authors, pundits (experts) in the various Sastras, of the first rank adorned His Highness's court and savants from even the far distant kingdom of Maha Raja Ranjit Singh came for recognition and patronage. The late Mahamahopadhyaya T.Ganapati Sastrigal, in editing Bhaktimanjari, says:—"The matters contained in this work have all been extracted from Bhagavata, Vishnu-purana and like works and are treated here, some briefly and others at length. The work is remarkable for the expressiveness and sweetness of the language generally used, the flowing nature of the style employed and the ease and naturalness of the figures of speech found throughout, which are quite in keeping with the sense of devotion with which the

work is replete.” What the learned Sastrigal has said about Bhaktimanjari form the chief features of all HisHighness’s compositions, literary as well as musical.

It is not however by his literary productions but by his musical compositions that His Highness’s fame rests on posterity. Rarely are composers of originality born in any country. Indian Music has two broad schools, the Northern or the Hindustani style and the Southern or the Carnatic style. It is in the latter style that the great Thyagaraja, Dikshithar, Venkitamakhi and other reputed composers have sung. Our Royal composer has also done so, but has earned a place in the front rank by starting a new technique in composition. The peculiarities of HisHighness’s compositions are so subtle and sensitive as could be appreciated only by masters of music. I can only state what appeals to a layman.

The first point which strikes us is the happy combination of *Sangeetham* (music)

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and *Sahithyam* (literary richness) in the pieces. Ordinarily, there is not much literary beauty in musical compositions. The words are few, while they are expanded and variegated by musical *Swaras* (notes) and the originality of the singer. For instance, the renowned Thyagaraja *Keerthanams* contain but a few simple words; but they could be sung for hours by experts. The Maha Raja's compositions, on the contrary, are set in the most supple and elegant language appropriate to the emotions which they are designed to evoke. They are not only songs but literary works as well. There is some difference of opinion among Bhagavathars (musicians) about the use of a preponderance of words in songs in so far as it restrains the performers from variegating the style by giving play to their own original interpolations of *Swaras*. It must, however, be admitted that the nicety and skill of a composer consist in having his songs sung in the style he has given them and not to

throw them to the wit of the performer to modify them as he likes. There is a peculiar sanctity and beauty in keeping up the original style.

A second peculiarity in His Highness's songs is that the quantity of the letters in the compositions corresponds to the length of the *Swaras* required in singing them. In other words, wherever there is wanted a *deergha swarom* (long note) the word will have a *deergha*. The long and short sounds are so adjusted as to accord with the *Swara* (key note). This is a trick which a master of literature and music alone can accomplish. Ordinarily, words and letters are lengthened and shortened according to the exigencies of the singing with little or no attention to their correct form or the sense effect on the listener. Again, words are twisted and cut into unnatural syllables in singing. No such contortions are necessary for singing His Highness's pieces.

A third peculiarity is the dexterity

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with which the composer has inserted in several pieces the letters of the *Swaras* (key notes) themselves without anywise jarring on the meaning or the flow of the words. This is a device seldom met with in musical compositions, and clearly indicates his mastery over both the literary and musical arts.

Another special feature noticeable is that all His Highness's pieces have the stamp of his family Deity, Sri Padmanabha, struck on them. Thyagaraja has stamped his own name; but His Highness was a greater *Bhakta* and his *thyaga* (selflessness) was supreme, making him a greater '*thyagaraja*'. He lived for his God, as the servant of his God and was His part and parcel. That is why his songs breathe of pure and unselfish devotion. Even the love songs are of God's supreme Love and it is to Him that all appeals are made, complaints of disappointed love (*Vipralambha*) addressed, and the ecstasies of bliss sung. Hence any listener to these

masterpieces cannot but be carried away to the realms of beatitude forgetting himself in the vision of the Supreme Being.

It may be opportune to repeat here the traditional story that the great composer Thyagaraja, whose devotion to Sri Rama was unparalleled and in whose praise he had sung a thousand songs, heard of the illustrious Kulasekhara Maha Raja who was a greater *Bhakta* of Sri Padmanabha than himself and who had composed celestial songs in His praise, started from his native land to Travancore, but having heard *en route* of the demise of the Royal Hero returned disappointed.

Unlike his contemporary artists, His Highness's compositions consist of all the various classes, *Keerthana*, *Pada*, and *Varna* and they in various tunes (raga). *Keerthanas* are psalms for prayer, *Padas* are melodies adapted to dancing and *Varnas* are the elaboration of the possible harmonious permutations and combinations of the key notes of the tunes in

which they are composed. These last can be produced only by master-craftsmen of the art. Altogether, 177 pieces of these various classes have recently been published by the Curator of Oriental Manuscripts, and it is not known whether he has exhausted the collection. One and all of them are of exquisite beauty in tune and diction and are meant to be sung on ceremonial and other occasions. The *Keerthanas* are fourfold, *Navaratri Keerthanas* (songs to be sung during the Dasara festival), *Ghanaraga Keerthanas* (songs in the principal key-tunes), *Madhyamakala Keerthanas* (songs in rapid measures) and *Navarathnamalika* (miscellaneous songs). There is a convention that such and such songs should be sung by the court musicians during His Highness's dinner, or played on the flute when His Highness proceeds to the temple or during the services in the shrine. The peculiar piece—*Ragamala*—composed of several tunes (ragas) on the same burden basic song, has

won such fame as to be sung throughout South India. It is, I believe, the first of its kind, or has at least, served as the model for others to follow. None has reached his perfection however.

Puranic lore has always supplied the material for poets, painters, workers in plastic art and all other artists. It is no less so for musical composers. The Puranas are read and explained by Pandits to the delectation of the *Bhakthas* and it is considered by orthodox Hindus as a devotional means to salvation. From olden times stories from them form the theses of Maha Kavyas (epics) Natakas (dramas) Kootiattams, Kathakalis (pantomimic performances), musical dances, folk songs and a host of other national entertainments. It was His Highness Swathi Thirunal Maha Raja who introduced a new mode of devotional amusement called *Harikatha*, a musical opera, in which the performer explains the story by several appropriate songs interspersed

with harmonic verses and prose and dominated by an orchestra. It is a monologue like the *Patakam* (story telling in verse and prose by an actor) or the *Koothu* (story telling by the Chakyar adopting a *Champu* as his text and elaborating it with witty criticism of current men and events). But the *Harikatha* is different from them in so far as it is a monologue in music with little current criticism but stirring the righteous emotions and devotion to the Supreme God. His Highness composed two *Harikathas*, “the Kuchela Upakhyanom and the Ajamilopakhyanom” and had them performed in his court by experts got down from Tanjore.

Music was to His Highness a peculiar attraction and the nectar which gave solace to his earthly cares and political perplexities. No wonder it was so. For, music has entered into the human heart from the time of creation. The music of Nature, lauded by poets as the Music of the Spheres, has blended itself into his

very being and moulded the form and action of the sentient world. Science has demonstrated how the sense of beauty and harmony pervades the entire universe of creation, whether it be in the motions of the far off constellations or the numerous atmospheric phenomena or the rhythm of physical or the psychical existence in this world. Both the vegetable and animal kingdoms are but expressions of the music of Nature. It is not therefore without significance that Godhead is realised in music much more directly than in any other form of art. It is an embodiment of the idealised entity of Brahmam realised through the sense of hearing. Hence the use of the word Nada Brahmam has come into ordinary parlance.

While all sentient beings respond to Nada Brahmam, it is in the human beings that we witness its perfection. The variations, tones, tunes, times and associations have wrapped music with a sense of celestial bliss in greater relief than all the

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other aesthetic arts. Although poetry brings the vision through the intellect and painting through the eye, it has to be admitted that they are not always open. Music does it through the ear which is ever open and has no shutters. Hence the realisation of beatitude in music is more direct and immediate. He should indeed be a great soul who combines within himself the double means of attaining heavenly bliss, poetry and music, the one sustaining the pleasure which the other has created. Such combination is rare, but our Hero is a distinguished exception.

A linguist as he was, His Highness composed in the various languages, Sanskrit, Telugu, Canarese, Hindustani and Malayalam, while Thyagaraja composed in Telugu and Dikshitar in Sanskrit only. Although his major compositions are in the Southern or Carnatic style, the pieces in Hindustani follow the northern technique. He went even to the

length of getting down Mahommedan singers from Upper India to sing the Hindustani songs. It is stated that Hindustani singer Ranga Aiyangar from Tanjore, Vynika Vidagdhan Chelapuram Raghunatha Row, Sarangi performer Chintamani Bhagavathar, and the celebrated singer Meruswami Bhagavathar of Tanjore were resident musicians in His Highness's Court. It appears that the direct pupil of the great Thyagaraja, namely Kanniah Bhagavathar, also attended the court. It was after his advent that Thyagaraja *Keerthanams* gained ground in Travancore. Besides the aforementioned musicians, His Highness got down one Vadivelu, a pupil of the renowned composer Dikshithar and expert in fiddle to put His Highness's *Varnoms* and *Padams* to action in appropriate dancing by beauties.

Among the musical stars who adorned His Highness's court, Meruswami and Vadivelu stood supreme. By his sweet voice the former earned from his Royal

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Patron the *nom de plume* of 'Kokila Kanthom' (voice of the nightingale), and his portrait adorns the walls of the Palace still. It was he who initiated the staging of the Harikathas of His Highness. These performances have since gained much popularity and many compositions of beauty have been adopted to it. No festival goes without a *Harikatha* party now.

Vadivelu, on the other hand, developed the dance which till recently was specialised by nautch girls. The movement for the emancipation of women started some time ago condemned the performance and it was ostracised from society. Although the morality of the performers deserve condemnation, yet the wholesale discarding of the art was unfortunate. Recently, however, it has revived in the guise of Bharatha Natyom and has received the appreciation of the civilised western society. Among the Nattuvans (dance managers) the name of Vadivelu stands high. His singing was reputed to

be so realistic as to captivate the audience and keep them spellbound. It is even said that he was a Gandharavan and that it was Vadivelu's singing that gave real life to His Highness's compositions.

The evening of His Highness's life was marked by a mental abstraction and concentration on the Supreme Being. He forgot worldly cares drinking deep of the heavenly bliss of music and his devotion to the Supreme Ruler of the Universe. It is said that almost his last composition is the Bhaktimanjari which remained in manuscript till it was discovered and published in 1904 A. D. by the late Mahamahopadhyaya T. Ganapathi Sastri-gal. This isolation from worldly affairs was misunderstood as indifference by the ignorant, while really it was a preparation to attain eternal salvation. It is recorded that even Nature rained abnormally, as if weeping profusely, foretelling the pass over of that Great Monarch.

It is no more than fitting that his

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countrymen and subjects should keep his memory green and build up an abiding monument by singing his songs and establishing a school of music where the technique of his compositions may be taught from generation to generation. Already the number of experts who know it has dwindled down, and it is hoped that the Sangeetha Sabha, which organised the Jayanthi celebration recently, will lose no time to establish a Swathi Thirunal School of Music.

POSTSCRIPT

Since the above was written five years ago, I have great pleasure to note that under the command of our ruling Sovereign His Highness Maha Raja Sri Chitra Thirunal, than whom there is no greater patron of arts and letters, a School of Music has been established in the Capital, where the songs of his illustrious ancestor are taught to students with a view to popularise them both in and outside the State. It has also been ordered that Swathi Thirunal Keerthanoms should be compulsorily taught in the schools of the State and that the Court musicians should sing them. They are also now sung to the radio broad-cast.