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The Spirit of Thyagaraja Aradhana – Thiruvaiyaru to North America

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Abstract –

The name ‘Thyagaraja’ is not only synonymous to Carnatic music, but the word ‘Thyagaraja’ is an emotion for Carnatic musicians and rasikas. While the entire world celebrates this composer for his contributions, what makes him special is that he was a very humble unassuming person, who was soaked in Rama Bhakti and lived the life of an ascetic.

This study provides an analysis of the journey of Carnatic music from its cultural origins in India to its evolving presence across the ocean in North America through the revered composer.

Key words – Carnatic, Thyagaraja, Rama, rasika, unchavrithi, devotion, samadhi, celebration, connoisseurs.

Introduction

‘60 years after my passing away, my compositions will get wider reach’, this was a prediction by none other than the greatest composer of all times Saint Thyagaraja himself about his krithis.

Though these were not the words that were directly said and documented by Thyagaraja in any of his compositions, like most of the incidents in his life, but it has been told by his disciples and it has come through generations orally.

Rightly so, after 60 years of his samadhi from 1904 his disciples Narasimha Bhagavathar and Panju Ayyar were instrumental in reviving Thyagaraja aradhana, renovating the samadhi, publishing a book on Thyagaraja krithis and institutionalising the aradhana.

Thyagaraja aradhana is one of the most globally celebrated Carnatic music events in the field of music. No other composer in the entire spectrum of classical music, may it be western or Indian or any other form of music, enjoys this kind of global reverence with grand celebrations including “Unchavrithi” as a mark of reverence to the tradition that Thyagaraja followed, where the artists walk (Sometimes even dress up like Thyagaraja) on the street singing the compositions composed by Thyagaraja. “Unchavrithi” is a tradition where the person typically a spiritual seeker, walks singing in praise of Lord with a bowl in his hand and people give him rice and pulses which in turn he cooks and consumes to quench hunger. Ascetics are seen doing this as they are renounced souls who spend their entire time doing spiritual practices and food is just for existence. Thyagaraja who was a sadhu or saint, lived a pious life bereft of any kind of comfort and luxury. He soaked himself in Rama bhakti. A person who never wanted money, fame or name, continues to be celebrated as the Hero of Carnatic music.



Thiruvaiyaru Thyagaraja Aradhana

Thyagaraja passed away in 1847 and his grandson took over the rituals of singing his compositions and doing pooja in his samadhi. He could sustain this only for 8 years and slowly around 1855 the rituals and singing dwindled. There was a period where slowly the samadhi was left unattended and it lost its sanctity and upkeep, falling into neglect and disrepair. In 1904 his disciples found the samadhi and brought it back to its lost sanctity and reverence of the samadhi, restoring it as a place of devotion. However, as destiny would have it, the disciples split ways and there were two groups, one periya katchi and one chinna katchi literally translating to big group and small group respectively. The devotees were split into two and there were two aradhanas being celebrated. It was indeed difficult for musicians to choose one because the aradhana they chose to participate, meant they belonged to that group. This went on for years, until in 1940s some musicians got together and tried to unify the groups. And in 1949 'United Thiruvaiyaru Thyagaraja Aradhana' was formed. Vidwans Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer, Musiri Subramaniam and many other musicians under the leadership of Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar made this a reality. Since then, there is one aradhana which is being celebrated by the devotees of Thyagaraja where all musicians come together and sing his magnum opus compositions, Pancharathna krithis, The five gems.

Thyagaraja Aradhana across India and beyond

The Thyagaraja Aradhana has become a congregation of musicians, who come together each year to pay homage to Thyagaraja on the anniversary of his passing. The main festival takes place in Thiruvaiyaru, while organizations across India and abroad schedule their own commemorations around the same time, usually on a weekend close to the main festival. This allows local musicians to participate without conflicting with the Thiruvaiyaru celebrations, ensuring that devotees and performers can honor Thyagaraja both locally and at the principal festival.

Thyagaraja Aradhana in Chennai

Before Chennai rose as a metropolitan hub, Carnatic music thrived in temple towns and royal courts, with Thanjavur, Tiruvarur, Kumbakonam, and Mysore being the most prominent. The shift to Chennai happened with urbanization, sabha culture, and formal concert seasons in the late 19th century. The oldest sabhas being Parthasarathy Swami Sabha (1900) and Madras Music Academy (1928) is still actively organising concerts, lec-dems and other thematic music and dance events and festivals. Thyagaraja aradhana is being held in many sabhas around the Bahula Panchami day without clashing with the Thiruvaiyaru dates. Infact some organisations have a fixed date for example – one of the oldest sabhas, The Mylapore Fine Arts, founded in 1953, conducts Thyagaraja Aradhana on the 26th of January as it is the Indian Republic Day, a public holiday. Perhaps they must have also narrowed down to this date as it is easy to remember and plan for the festival every year for artists and rasikas and also because there is enough time for musicians and rasikas to rest after the very vibrant, busy and 'happening' Chennai margazhi music Festival. The artists and rasikas happily and enthusiastically partake in the celebrations by singing the grand pancharathnam followed by a sumptuous feast.

Sangeetha Vidwath Samajam in 1929 marked a pivotal moment in democratizing access to this spiritual and musical observance. Founded with the intent of enabling devotees unable to travel to Thiruvaiyaru to participate in the Aradhana, the Samajam has since evolved into a major cultural institution. It is often referred to as the "Uttara Pancha Nadha Kshetram," symbolically aligning itself with the Panchanadha Temple in Thiruvaiyaru, thereby reinforcing its spiritual and



musical legitimacy. The Samajam's annual programming includes a ten-day Aradhana celebration, a five-day Jayanthi series, and the Akhanda Gaanam, a continuous 24-hour rendition of Tyagaraja's kritis performed by a rotating ensemble of musicians. These events serve not only as devotional offerings but also as pedagogical and performative platforms for Carnatic musicians of all generations.

The most popular and foremost organisations in Carnatic music, Narada Gana Sabha and Madras Music Academy has a one day celebration with pancharathnam singing. While Narada Gana Sabha ends with the pancharathnam, The Madras music academy has a thematic concert scheduled in the evening.

Thyagaraja Aradhana in North America

While its nucleus remains at Tiruvaiyāru, where the saint attained samādhi, the festival has transcended geographic boundaries and is now observed with equal, if not greater, reverence in the United States. Here, numerous cultural organizations and music communities meticulously recreate the spirit of Tiruvaiyāru through group renditions of the Pancharatna Kritis, thematic concerts, and bhajana sampradāya processions, reaffirming Tyāgarāja's universal appeal. The dedication with which these institutions celebrate the Ārādhana highlights its role not only as a devotional observance but also as an act of cultural preservation. In the following section, I will outline some of the major organizations in the U.S. that have established the Ārādhana as an annual tradition.

Some of the organisations that conduct annual Thyagaraja aradhana are

1. SIFA (1979)
2. Chicago Thyagaraja utsavam (1977)
3. Cleveland Thyagaraja aradhana (1978)
4. Bharathi kala Manram (1969)
5. SIMA LA (1985)
6. Sacramento Thyagaraja Aradhana (2011)
7. Milwaukee Thyagaraja Aradhana (2006)
8. Jaxraaga (2002)
9. Sruti Thyagaraja Aradhana (1986)
10. Classical arts society of Houston (1993)

The Indians who migrated to USA in the early 60s being the first generation had to face various challenges in terms of settling down in a foreign land which was miles away from their mother land. The cultural orientation of the land reflected values that are strikingly different from what we are accustomed to. This forced the immigrants to form a community of people who were from their own mother land, who shared similar culture, language, food or faith. These factors unified the Indians at the same time in multiple parts of the US. We are talking of an age when communication was mostly postal or rarely by landline telephones. People were not as easily connected as today. Different people pioneered different organisations almost at the same time, the common goal of everyone being "community get together" to keep their traditions and culture alive. This was indeed a necessity not only because the people were missing 'home' but also to inculcate values and teach their children Indian culture and ways of life. It was becoming difficult for the parents to raise their children in a country which had contradicting culture compared to ours. The parents feared western influence in their children when it came to certain area of how they expressed individuality, navigated social norms, and adopted values that diverged from traditional Indian cultural expectations.



Bharathi Kala Manram was started in Toronto in 1969 for organising musical gatherings, but it was in 1972 that the Toronto Thyagaraja Aradhana began. Sri Toronto Venkatraman played a pivotal role in the formation of Cleveland Thyagaraja Aradhana as well, in addition to being one of the main founders of Bharathi Kala Manram in Toronto.

Music enthusiasts carried the idea of music organisation with them wherever they went. CMANA, Carnatic Music Association of North America, which is one of the very prominent organisations who organise coast to coast concerts bringing artists from India, year after year was founded by Sri P Rajagopal in 1976. When he moved to Atlanta, he formed 'CAMAGA', Carnatic Music Association of Georgia there. He also started a chapter in Washington DC when he was there which didn't take off like CAMAGA and it eventually closed down due to lack of human and financial resources to take the responsibility to run the organisation.

Sri Nat Ramachandran, founder and first president of the Vindhya Cultural Association in Columbus, Ohio, recalls the organization's unexpected beginnings, sparked by a modest incident in Toronto. A Tamil film, en route from Canada to Detroit, was sent through him to bypass customs formalities. Seizing the moment, he invited about fifteen friends to watch the film at his home before forwarding it. To his surprise, nearly forty people turned up, an overwhelming response that revealed a strong appetite for cultural connection among the South Indian diaspora. This spontaneous gathering planted the seed for a more structured initiative, leading to the birth of Vindhya. The name was chosen with symbolic resonance: just as the Vindhya Mountain range marks the geographical divide between North and South India, the association aimed to unify individuals from various South Indian states under a shared cultural banner. What began as an informal film screening evolved into a vibrant community institution, rooted in the spirit of cultural preservation and collective identity.

Among Carnatic music enthusiasts, the concept of organizing a musical gathering often defaults to the celebration of the Thyagaraja Aradhana, a tradition that honors the legacy of the saint-composer Sadhguru Sri Thyagaraja. This cultural impulse has led to the establishment of numerous organizations across North America named explicitly after the Aradhana itself, such as the Cleveland Thyagaraja Aradhana, Chicago Thyagaraja Utsav, and Milwaukee Thyagaraja Aradhana. While many of these organizations do host formal Aradhana observances, including rituals such as pooja, unchavriti, the singing of Utsava Sampradaya kritis, and the collective rendition of the Pancharathna compositions, several have evolved beyond their original devotional scope. These festivals now function as broader platforms for the performance and appreciation of Carnatic music, encompassing a wide range of composers and styles.

The degree of adherence to Thyagaraja centric programming varies across organizations. For instance, Bharathi Kala Manram maintains a strict focus on Thyagaraja's compositions, whereas the Cleveland Thyagaraja Festival permits performances of works by other composers as well. Notably, although the Cleveland festival continues to be held in its namesake city, many of its core organizers have relocated elsewhere and return annually to oversee the event. Over time, the Cleveland Thyagaraja Festival has grown into a cultural brand, recognized not only for its scale but also for its organizational sophistication and artistic breadth.

The general structure of these festivals typically begins with devotional components such as pooja, bhajan singing, and Utsava Sampradaya performances. While unchavriti is included in some festivals, others omit it. However, the singing of the Pancharathna kritis remains a central and non-negotiable feature of any Thyagaraja Aradhana. Following these collective rituals, the program often transitions into individual and group performances by students of local Carnatic



music teachers. The duration of these festivals varies, for example, the Sacramento Thyagaraja Aradhana is a one-day event, while Chicago Thyagaraja Utsav spans three days, and the Cleveland Thyagaraja Festival extends over thirteen days, making it the longest of its kind. Scheduling the date for the aradhana celebration also differ. Some organizations, such as the Classical Arts Society of Houston, are particular about aligning the Aradhana with Bahula Panchami, the traditional date of Thyagaraja's samadhi. Others opt to schedule their events around long weekends to accommodate broader community participation. The successful execution of such festivals involves extensive logistical planning, including arrangements for food, venue, and financial management. The continued vitality of these events is sustained by the dedication, passion, and resilience of their organizers, who navigate challenges ranging from unpredictable weather to fluctuating community engagement. Central to the ethos of these festivals is the active involvement of students, who are trained to perform Thyagaraja's compositions and the Pancharatna kritis, ensuring both the pedagogical continuity and the communal spirit of the Aradhana tradition.

Conclusion –

The journey of Thyagaraja Aradhana from the sacred banks of the Cauvery in Thiruvaiyaru to the concert halls of North America is a testament to the enduring power of devotion, music, and cultural memory. What began as a humble homage to a saint-composer has evolved into a global phenomenon, uniting generations of musicians and rasikas across continents. In India, the Aradhana has grown from fragmented rituals into a unified celebration of Carnatic heritage, while in the diaspora, it has become a lifeline for cultural continuity, bridging the emotional distance from home and nurturing identity in foreign lands. Whether in the form of a one-day gathering or a thirteen-day festival, the essence remains unchanged: a collective offering of gratitude through song, sustaining Thyagaraja's legacy and reaffirming the soul of Carnatic music across time and space.

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