



Neelakanta Sivan: A Life of Bhakti, Poetry, and Musical Illumination

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Abstract

This document presents a detailed compilation of select compositions by Mahatma Neelakanta Sivan (1839–1900), a revered Tamil composer and staunch devotee of Lord Shiva. Unlike his contemporaries who often composed in Sanskrit or Telugu, Neelakanta Sivan chose Tamil as his primary medium, imbuing his works with both literary depth and devotional fervor. The collection highlights his profound spiritual insights expressed through accessible language, simple melodic structures, and powerful emotional content. Each song in the compilation reflects his bhakti-driven life, often beginning with viruttams and flowing into kritis that emphasize self-surrender, detachment from worldly ties, and the yearning for divine grace. The compositions are predominantly set in popular Carnatic ragas, yet exhibit a unique style rooted in personal experience rather than formal courtly training. This work not only serves as a musical anthology but also as a testament to the transformative power of devotion in shaping South Indian musical traditions.

சுருக்கம்

இந்த ஆவணம், 1839–1900 காலகட்டத்தில் வாழ்ந்த மகாத்மா நீலகண்ட சிவன் அவர்களின் தேர்ந்தெடுக்கப்பட்ட சில கீர்த்தனைகளின் விரிவான தொகுப்பை வழங்குகிறது. தமிழ் இசைக்கலைஞரும் பரம சிவபக்தருமான இவர் , தன் காலத்தினரிலிருந்து மாறுபட்டு , பெரும்பாலும் சமஸ்கிருதம் அல்லது தெலுங்கில் இயற்றுவதற்குப் பதிலாக , தமிழையே தன் முதன்மைப் படைப்புமொழியாகத் தேர்ந்தெடுத்தார். அவரது பாடல்கள் இலக்கிய ஆழமும் , பக்தி உணர்ச்சியும் நிரம்பியவை. எளிய சொற்கள் , சுலபமான ராக அமைப்புகள் , மற்றும் ஆழமான உணர்வுகளின் வெளிப்பாடு ஆகியவற்றின் வழியாக அவர் பகிர்ந்த ஆன்மீகப் பார்வைகள், இந்தத் தொகுப்பில் சிறப்பாகப் பதிவு செய்யப்பட்டுள்ளன.

ஒவ்வொரு பாடலும் அவரது பக்தி நிறைந்த வாழ்க்கையின் பிரதிபலிப்பாகத் திகழ்கிறது. பல பாடல்கள் விருத்தத்தால் தொடங்கி , பின்னர் கீர்த்தனைகளாக நீள்கின்றன. அவற்றில் தன்னை இறைவனிடம் முழுமையாக ஒப்படைத்தல் , உலக பாசங்களிலிருந்து விலகல் , தெய்வக் கிருபைக்கான ஏக்கம் போன்ற கருக்கள் வலியுறுத்தப்படுகின்றன. பெரும்பாலான



படைப்புகள் பிரபலமான கர்நாடக ராகங்களில் அமைந்துள்ளன ; இருந்தாலும், அவை ஆழ்ந்த தேர்ச்சியுடைய இசைப் பயிற்சியைக் காட்டிலும் , அவரது தனிப்பட்ட ஆன்ம அனுபவத்தில் வேரூன்றிய தனிச்சிறப்பைக் காட்டுகின்றன. அவரது பாடல்கள் , தென் இந்திய இசைப் பாரம்பரியத்தை உருவாக்கவும் வளர்க்கவும் , பக்தி வழங்கும் மாற்றுவாய்ந்த ஆற்றலின் சான்றாகவும் விளங்குகிறது.

Aim

To explore the life, spiritual philosophy, and musical legacy of Mahatma Neelakanta Sivan, highlighting his contributions to Tamil devotional music and their significance in promoting bhakti, poetry, and spiritual illumination.

Keywords

Neelakanta Sivan, Tamil devotional music, Bhakti, Carnatic compositions, Lord Shiva, spiritual philosophy, Tamil kritis, ragas, bhakti poetry, South Indian music, mysticism, divine grace, Tamil culture, musical spirituality

In the history of South Indian music and spirituality, the name of Mahatma Neelakanta Sivan (1839–1900) shines like a lamp lit by divine fire. His life was not one of grand external feats, nor was he propelled by the trappings of courtly achievements. Yet, his music carved an immortal niche in the hearts of bhaktas and vidwans alike. His compositions were not composed for performance—they were sung from the soul, soaked in tapas, born of surrender, and chanted like mantras. Neelakanta Sivan was a mystic whose every verse was a step toward moksha. Through his Tamil kritis, verses, viruthams, padigams, and ragamālika prayers, he established himself as a rishi in music, a rare saint who merged poetry, melody, and devotion into a single stream of spiritual experience.

Roots in Vadiveeswaram: The Making of a Saint

Born as Subramanian in the sacred village of Vadiveeswaram, part of Nagercoil in Tamil Nadu, he came from a devout Tamil Brahmin family. His father, Subramania Iyer, and mother, Alagu Ammal, were known for their piety and uprightness. From an early age, Subramanian showed a rare contemplative nature. He preferred solitude, displayed a keen intellect, and was drawn toward temple rituals and Vedic chanting. Even without formal training, he absorbed the melodic rhythms of bhajans, the poetic cadences of hymns, and the emotional language of Tamil devotional literature.

By age 14, he married Lakshmi Ammal. Yet, his role as a householder never interrupted his deeper quest for divine understanding. His detachment from material distractions was visible early in his life. Later, he served as a village magistrate for fifteen years, delivering justice with unimpeachable integrity. But when he was pressured to fabricate evidence in a sensitive case, he stepped down without hesitation. This event broke his heart, and he poured out his disillusionment in the composition



“Ennavidam Pizhaippom” (Mukhari), with the line:

*“Veli vidhai kaakkum naal poyidudhe
Veli vidhai unda idamum poyidudhe...”*

“Gone are the days when fences guarded the crops; now the fence devours the field itself.”

Here, “fence” stands metaphorically for institutions of protection turning into threats. It is not just a social critique—it is an existential cry for dharma to be restored. This phrase also beautifully refers to the location “Thiru Nel Veeli” in Tamil Nadu.

Penance and Revelation: The Padmanabhapuram Turning Point

His renunciation was not theatrical—it was inner and complete. At Padmanabhapuram, he performed severe penance inside a temple garbhagriha, fasting without food or water for three days. He meditated on Neelakanteswara and Goddess Anandavalli, and at the end of his austerity, legend says the deities manifested before him in a vision and fed him milk and fruit. From that moment, he ceased to compose as a man. His pen became divine, and his words, vibrations of truth. The first composition after this experience was “Tiruneelakanta Dasakam”, a set of ten Tamil verses in praise of Lord Neelakanta, blending Saiva Siddhanta with Vedantic thought. His compositions from then on became the outpourings of divine grace—simple in diction, yet loaded with spiritual intensity.

The Alchemy of Music and Bhakti

Neelakanta Sivan’s musical output was immense and varied. Over 2000 compositions are attributed to him, ranging from kritis, viruthams, padigams, ragamalikas, dasakams, ashtakams, and spiritual stories like Savithri Puranam. Though he had no formal training in music, he had a natural, instinctive command over raga and tala, and his songs bear witness to this rare intuitive genius.

His mudra was “**Neelakanta**,” and he preferred Tamil as his primary medium. His themes were rooted in bhakti, but his compositions also reflect philosophical inquiry, ethical introspection, yogic insight, and tender emotion.

In the iconic kriti “Enraikku Siva Krupai Varumo?” (Mukhari), he asks:

*“Enraikku Siva krupai varumo,
Innarul puriyum daivame?”*

“When will Lord Shiva’s grace fall upon me? O compassionate One, when will you bless me?”

The despair of the seeker in this song is not passive—it is a plea burning with spiritual urgency. The use of Mukhari, a raga soaked in karuṇa rasa (compassion), amplifies the mood of viraha bhakti—longing for the beloved Lord.

In “Sambo Mahadeva” (Bowli), he rejoices in surrender:

“Sambo Mahadeva, Saranam nee!”

“O Sambo, O Mahadeva, You are my refuge!”

The choice of Bowli lends an auspicious and luminous morning feel—perfect for invocation. His “Ananda Natanam Aduvaar” in Poorvikalyani glorifies the cosmic dance of Nataraja in Chidambaram with the line:



“Ananda natanamaduvaar tillai ambalam thanil”

“He dances in bliss in the hall at Chidambaram”

In these compositions, raga is rasa, and melody is bhakti.

In the poignant “Navasiddhi Petralum” (Kharaharapriya), he warns:

“Navasiddhi petralum, Namō Narayana enra sol illai enraal pazhi”

“Even if one attains the nine yogic powers, if he does not chant the divine name, it is a blemish.”

This is not a condemnation—it is a compassionate wake-up call. For him, nama smarana—the chanting of God’s name—was superior even to yogic achievements.

The Abhirami Padhigam: A Garland of Ragas and Devotion

One of his most exquisite creations is the Abhirami Padhigam, a ragamālika in praise of Goddess Abhirami. Each verse is set in a different raga—Madhyamāvatī, Mohanam, Kalyāṇi, Churuttī, and Varālī—and captures a distinct emotional hue of surrender and divine feminine grace.

In Madhyamāvatī, he begins:

“Annaiye saranam, annayin sakalathai ennala vandhāy, kāmīyē saranam.”

“O Mother, I surrender to You—You who came as the embodiment of all womanhood. O fulfiller of desires, I take refuge in You.”

Later, in Kalyāṇi, the tone ascends:

“Duriyam aruppāy, duriyorināl theerāy... Abhirāmi Umayavale.”

“Sever the veil of ignorance, dispel my inner turmoil, O Abhirami, O Uma!”

Each raga becomes a spiritual metaphor—Mohanam for praise, Kalyani for transcendence, Varali for intensity, Churutti for longing. The padhigam is not merely a garland of notes; it is a ladder of musical sādhanā.

Savithri Puranam: Storytelling Through Raga

Neelakanta Sivan's Savithri Puranam stands as a rare gem in the corpus of Tamil musical literature. It is not a dry retelling of the myth, but a musical narrative built from viruthams, thudis, and kritis, set in multiple ragas that follow the arc of the story. The work begins with devotional thudis praising Shiva, Parvati, and Muruga.

In “Umai Arul Bālanu” (Hamsadhwani), he prays:

“Chumai noenga, vinai chumai neenga, mey jnana upadesam seydhū.”

“Lift the burdens of karma and bless us with true wisdom.”

The main story opens with a virutham in Sankarābharaṇam:

“Madru dēsathu māharājan, manam varundhi, puthiran illā kurai theera...”

“In a distant land, a noble king, distressed by childlessness, gave up all royal comforts...”

The music then journeys through Malayamarutham, Shanmukhapriya, Manolaya, and others, bringing to life Savithri’s tapas, her confrontation with Yama, and her ultimate triumph through truth and bhakti. It is not just a poetic rendering—it is a musical yajña, every raga a spiritual invocation.



Divine Miracles and Living Bhakti

Neelakanta Sivan's life was dotted with miraculous events that testified to his spiritual powers—though he never used them for spectacle. On one occasion, while composing Lalita Puranam, the oil in his lamp ran out. Undeterred, he poured water into the lamp, which continued to burn, allowing him to finish his writing. During a procession at the Padmanabhaswamy Temple, when the ceremonial torches failed, he made them ignite using only water. His bhakti was so potent that even thieves who once robbed him returned what they stole, overcome by guilt and awe.

He also saved a dying woman by tying a small twig to her body, allowing her to live long enough to witness her daughter's marriage before passing away peacefully. These were not magic tricks—they were the natural overflow of intense tapas and divine alignment.

Kapala Moksha: His Final Departure

In keeping with the lives of great siddhas, Neelakanta Sivan predicted the moment of his death. Gathering his children and disciples, he offered final advice, sang Thiruvagasam, and repeatedly chanted "Mahadeva! Mahadeva!" before entering samadhi at Thiruvananthapuram in the year 1900. It is said that the Shiva lingam he worshipped vanished at that moment—a yogic sign of Kapala Moksha, where the soul escapes through the crown of the head, merging with supreme consciousness. Such a moksha is said to be granted only to those with the highest spiritual attainment.

A Living Legacy: Disciples and Documentation

Among his most illustrious disciples was Papanasam Sivan (Ramaiah), who was deeply influenced by Neelakanta Sivan's bhajan sessions in Karamanai. So complete was this influence that Papanasam's early compositions were often mistaken for his guru's, both in style and substance. Through him, Neelakanta Sivan's kritis reached concert platforms and radio broadcasts, winning the admiration of music lovers across South India.

Other disciples like Ponnambalam Pillai and Viswanatha Sivan also spread his teachings. His great-granddaughter, Smt. Saraswathi Ram, continues to preserve and disseminate his works, having published a book of 25 kritis with proper swara and tala notation.

Padma Vibhushan Dr. Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer, in a letter dated 17 March 1995, extolled the depth and clarity of Neelakanta Sivan's compositions. He praised a particular kriti in Kedaram, where both Vishnu and Shiva are equally revered—marking a rare confluence of sects in Carnatic devotional music. He wrote:

"Sri Neelakanta Dasar was not merely a composer—he was a mahaan, a great saint whose every kriti is a gem of bhakti."

Veteran vidwans like Musiri Subramania Iyer and Semmangudi popularized many of his works through recordings. Pieces like "Navasiddhi Petralum", "Enraikku Siva Krupai Varumo", and "Ehaparam Tharum Perumal" have become part of the spiritual canon for Carnatic musicians and devotees alike.



Call to the Present: A Forgotten Sage in Need of Recognition

Despite his towering spiritual stature and musical brilliance, Neelakanta Sivan remains under-recognized in formal academia. His works are often left out of music college curricula. His life is rarely cited in the same breath as Tyagaraja or Muthuswami Dikshitar, despite the parallel depth of bhakti, volume of output, and transformative legacy.

It is imperative that the music and spiritual communities come together to:

- Include his kritis in college and university syllabi.
- Publish a comprehensive kriti collection with notations, meanings, and performance guides.
- Promote research and lecture-demonstrations on his thematic and musical contributions.
- Host Neelakanta Sivan Aradhanas and festival series across sabhas, temples, and institutions.

The Sree Neelakanta Sivan Sangeetha Sabha, established in 1977 in Karamanai, is a step in this direction. The annual aradhana conducted on his behalf is a modest yet meaningful act of gratitude. But the reach must grow—so that every Tamil household, every Carnatic student, every bhakta, knows his name and sings his songs.

Conclusion

Neelakanta Sivan was not merely a composer. He was a seer, a siddha, and a sage. His songs are not performance pieces—they are living mantras, vibrating with shakti. In his compositions, one does not just hear raga and tala; one hears the soul crying for liberation, the bhakta calling to the divine, and the divine whispering back. He has been a true inspiration for many 20th century Tamil composers based on Bhakti like Vidhushi Padma Veeraraghava, who's art was based on Bhakti and admiration of specific god. We can easily draw parallels from her art to that's of Neelakanta Sivan in the richness of literature but yet keeping it simple to understand and also musically and philosophically rich.

He was a Tamil Tyagaraja, but in many ways, even more anonymous, more hidden, more like a yogi in the forest whose fragrance reached the world through the wind. Let us not allow that fragrance to vanish. Let us remember, sing, preserve, and meditate on the music of Mahatma Neelakanta Sivan—not merely to honor him, but to awaken the bhakti within ourselves.

For in his voice echoes the timeless prayer:

“Mahadeva, Mahadeva...

Saranam, Saranam...”

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