



Puthukkode Krishnamoorthy: ‘The Kerala Tyagaraja’

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Abstract

Puthukkode Krishnamoorthy (1923–1985) occupies a distinguished place in Kerala’s Carnatic music tradition as an accomplished vaggeyakara who harmoniously combined literary excellence, musical scholarship, and spiritual devotion. This article examines his life, musical lineage, compositional output, and artistic philosophy, while exploring the striking parallels between his musical ideals and those of Saint Tyagaraja. Through an analysis of his multilingual compositions in Malayalam, Tamil, Sanskrit, and Hindi, the study highlights his thematic collections, kshetra kritis, ragamalikas, and innovative compositional techniques, including the use of raga mudras, rhythmic variety, and literary devices. It also examines his contributions as a teacher, broadcaster, and promoter of Kerala’s Carnatic heritage. Particular attention is given to the shared devotional outlook, introspective style, balance of simplicity and scholarship, rejection of narastuti, and common affinity for Kharaharapriya that unite Krishnamoorthy with Tyagaraja. The study argues that the appellation “The Tyagaraja of Kerala” is musically, philosophically, and aesthetically justified, affirming Krishnamoorthy’s enduring contribution to the Carnatic tradition.music.

Keywords:

Puthukkode Krishnamoorthy; Carnatic Music; Vaggeyakara; Tyagaraja; Kerala Composers; Malayalam Kritis; Bhakti; Kshetra Kritis; Raga Mudra; Kerala Musical Heritage.

Introduction

In the Carnatic music tradition, the term vaggeyakara denotes a composer in whom musical and literary excellence are harmoniously united. Purandaradasa, Tyagaraja, Muthuswami Dikshitar, Syama Sastri, and Maharaja Swathi Thirunal stand among the most illustrious representatives of this lineage. In the musical and literary history of Kerala, Sri Puthukkode Krishnamoorthy occupies a distinguished place within this tradition.

An extraordinary creative genius, Sri Puthukkode Krishnamoorthy composed hundreds of kritis in Malayalam, Tamil, Sanskrit, and Hindi, integrating music, literature, and philosophical thought into a unified artistic expression. The striking parallels between his life, musical ideals, compositional features, devotional outlook, and artistic legacy and those of Saint Tyagaraja invite a closer comparative study.



Musical Lineage and Formative Years

Sri Puthukkode Krishnamoorthy was born on 28 February 1923 at Puthukkode in Palakkad district, Kerala, to Krishna Sastri and Bhagavathi Ammal. He received his earliest musical instruction from his mother and later trained under Sesha Bhagavathar and Krishna Bhagavathar. His advanced studies were undertaken with Palakkad Rama Bhagavathar, a distinguished representative of the Tyagaraja Sisya Parampara.

During the 1940s, while residing in Delhi, Krishnamoorthy studied Hindustani music at the Gandharva Mahavidyalaya and composed several works in Hindustani forms, including Khayals. Although many of these compositions are no longer extant, efforts to recover and preserve them have been undertaken by musicologist Dr. Baby Sreeram.

Krishnamoorthy began his teaching career at the Chembai Memorial Music College, Palakkad, in 1950. He later served as Professor at the Swathi Thirunal Music College, Thiruvananthapuram, and retired as Principal of the Chembai Music College in 1976. Subsequently, on the advice of Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer, he moved to Madras and joined the Kalakshetra Foundation, marking a new phase in his musical life.

The Influence of M. D. Ramanathan

During his years in Madras, Krishnamoorthy came under the influence of the great musician and composer M. D. Ramanathan (MDR). This influence extended beyond the realm of concert performance and was reflected in Krishnamoorthy's approach to composition itself. Both musicians displayed an exceptional ability to reveal the subtle emotional shades hidden within ragas through deliberate and aesthetically refined musical treatment. Their creative processes exhibited a shared concern for bringing out the inner spirit of a raga rather than merely its external framework.

Although Krishnamoorthy lived in Madras only for a relatively brief period, it was during this time that the wider music world began to recognise the depth and originality of his musicianship. He had opportunities to perform alongside eminent musicians such as Umayalpuram Sivaraman, T. K. Murthy, Vellore Ramabhadran, T. V. Gopalakrishnan, Lalgudi Jayaraman, and V. V. Subrahmanyam.

Puthukkode Krishnamoorthy as a Vaggeyakara

Among Kerala composers, Krishnamoorthy stands out as one who truly fulfilled the classical definition of a Vaggeyakara. While many poets wrote lyrics later tuned by musicians, he himself created both text and melody and meticulously documented them in notation, thereby ensuring their transmission to future generations. Like Maharaja Swathi Thirunal, he also demonstrated remarkable versatility by composing in multiple languages. He composed roughly two hundred kritis in Malayalam, Tamil, Sanskrit and Hindi, of which around seventy-five were in Malayalam.

Malayalam is often regarded as a language not naturally suited to Carnatic composition because of its phonetic characteristics. Yet Krishnamoorthy succeeded in creating Malayalam kritis that flowed effortlessly within the conventions of Carnatic music.

A fine example is his Malayalam composition in Saveri raga:



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*“Bhavataarakamam Sri Raghunayakan
Tiru naamam padiduvay rasane
Anavaratam bhaktiyodu...”*

The composition demonstrates how Malayalam, in the hands of a master composer, can attain remarkable musical grace without sacrificing linguistic authenticity.

Kritis on the Greatness of the Guru

The concept of the Guru as spiritual guide occupies a central place in Indian artistic traditions. Tyagaraja’s celebrated composition *“Guruleka Etuvanti...”* in Gowri Manohari raga extols the indispensability of the Guru in attaining wisdom. Following this model, Puthukkote Krishnamoorthy composed a Malayalam kriti in Gowri Manohari raga beginning with the words:

“Guru kadaksham nalu purusharthavum arulum...”

In one of its most striking passages, he says:

“Like a drop of water trembling upon a lotus leaf, the compassionate Guru guides the wavering mind onto the path of truth.”

This composition reveals not only his devotion to the Guru principle but also his ability to express profound philosophical ideas through accessible poetic imagery.

Sacred Rivers in Composition

Tyagaraja composed several kritis celebrating the sanctity of the River Kaveri, which he regarded with immense reverence. Similarly, Muthuswami Dikshitar immortalised the sacred River Ganga in compositions such as *Gange mam Pahi*. Puthukkote Krishnamoorthy continued this tradition through his own devotional works. In Anandabhairavi raga, he composed the Sanskrit kriti: *“Sukrita Tarangavali...”* dedicated to Goddess Ganga. Within this composition, he refers to the confluence of the sacred rivers Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati at Prayag.

At the same time, Krishnamoorthy extended this sacred symbolism to Kerala’s own beloved river, the **Nila** (Bhaaratha puzha). In his Hemavati raga composition: *“Sri Viswanatham”* he describes the deity of Kalpathy as:

“Janhavi-sama pavana Nilanadi tatasthitam”

meaning, “He who abides on the banks of the Nila, holy and purifying like the Ganga.” Through this evocative imagery, river Nila is elevated to the spiritual stature of Kerala’s own Ganga.

Krishnamoorthy’s compositions also reflect his deep attachment to the cultural and religious traditions of Kalpathy. His Śaṅkarābharaṇam composition *“Kanman Kannukal Kodi Vēṇam...”* vividly portrays the grandeur and splendour of the renowned Kalpathy Ratholsavam, one of Kerala’s most celebrated temple chariot festivals. Another noteworthy example is the Kāṇaḍa rāga composition *“Kalasodbhava Munivara”*, dedicated to the sage Agastya. By addressing the sage as ‘Kalasodbhava’ (“the one born from the pot”), Krishnamoorthy draws upon the rich corpus of Purāṇic mythology associated with Agastya, revealing both his literary sensitivity and his grounding in the Sanskritic tradition.



Thematic Compositional Collections

Alongside his numerous individual compositions, Puthukkote Krishnamoorthy also enriched the Carnatic repertoire through several thematic groups of kritis conceived as unified musical collections. These include the Devi Pancharatnam, Aaru Padai Veedu Kritis, Navagraha Kritis, Kshetra Kritis, and Ragamalikas. Each of these collections reflects a distinct devotional or thematic focus while simultaneously demonstrating his command over raga, tala, language, and compositional architecture. Much like the great vaggeyakaras of the Carnatic tradition, he viewed composition not merely as isolated works but as carefully conceived musical cycles that combined literary elegance with devotional purpose.

Devi Pancharatnam (Malayalam)

Inspired by Tyagaraja's celebrated Ghana Raga Pancharatna Kritis, Puthukkote Krishnamoorthy composed a set of five Malayalam kritis collectively known as the Devi Pancharatnam. Unlike Tyagaraja's Pancharatna kritis, all of which are set in Adi tala, Krishnamoorthy employed different talas for each composition, thereby introducing rhythmic variety into the cycle.

The five compositions are:

1. Nattai – Adi tala - *Janani Nin Tiruvadi Tamarayinaye*
2. Gowla – Rupaka tala - *Kanivode*
3. Arabhi – Misra Chapu - *Sri Vidya Swarupini*
4. Varali – Khanda Chapu - *Tamasam Tellu Mini Aruthennil Kaniyuvan*
5. Sri raga – Misra Jhampa - *Sarva Mangalavum Tarum Sarva Nayike*

This collection demonstrates Krishnamoorthy's command over both melodic and rhythmic dimensions of composition.

Aaru Padai Veedu Kritis (Tamil)

Among his most significant thematic collections is the set of Aaru Padai Veedu Kritis, dedicated to Lord Subrahmanya as enshrined in the six sacred shrines of Tamil Nadu: Tirupparankundram, Tiruchendur, Palani, Swamimalai, Tiruttani and Pazhamudircholai . These six temples collectively constitute the celebrated Aaru Padai Veedu tradition of Murugan worship. One of these compositions is written entirely in Tamil, while the others in Manipravalam - a graceful blend of Tamil and Sanskrit.

The series stands as a testimony to Krishnamoorthy's familiarity with Tamil devotional traditions and his capacity to adapt his compositional style to different linguistic contexts.

Navagraha Kritis

Puthukkote Krishnamoorthy also composed a set of Navagraha Kritis in Malayalam. Unlike the celebrated Navagraha Kritis of Muthuswami Dikshitar, which incorporate complex references to astrology and tantric concepts, Krishnamoorthy's compositions adopt a simpler and more accessible approach. These kritis portray the nine celestial deities with devotional warmth and poetic elegance, making them comprehensible even to listeners without specialised knowledge of astrology. The simplicity of expression does not diminish their musical value; rather, it broadens their appeal and facilitates greater emotional engagement.



Kshetra Kritis

Like Tyagaraja and Muthuswami Dikshitar, Puthukkote Krishnamoorthy composed numerous Kshetra Kritis on deities enshrined in temples across India, including Sree Padmanabhaswamy, Pazhavangadi, Guruvayur, Vaikom Mahadeva, Nelluvai Dhanwanthari, Kalpathy Viswanatha, Puthukkote Temple (Kalady), Kollur Mookambika, Madurai Meenakshi, Tirupati, and Kashi Viswanath. A distinctive feature of these compositions is the inclusion of Sthala mudras (references to the place) and Kshetra mudras (references to the temple), enabling listeners to identify the specific shrine being praised.

For instance, In his kriti on Pazhavangadi Ganapathy, Krishnamoorthy employs the Sanskrit expression “**Phanindra-pura Purvapana Mandiresa.**” The phrase is noteworthy for its elegant Sanskritisation of the place-name Pazhavangadi: **Phanindra-pura** denotes Ananthapuri (Thiruvananthapuram), **Purva** signifies “ancient,” and **Apana** means “marketplace.” Thus, the composer preserves the semantic essence of the original name while rendering it in refined Sanskrit. In a similar manner, he transformed his native place-name, Puthukkote, into the Sanskrit equivalent Navakroda, reflecting both literary ingenuity and linguistic sophistication.

Ragamalikas

Among his extant works , four notable Ragamalikas are :

1. Siva Panchakshara Ragamalika, structured around the syllables “Na-Ma-Si-Va-Ya”;
2. Sridevi Ragamalika.
3. Ramayana Ragamalika in Malayalam;
4. Utpaleksha Ragamalika, based on the ten incarnations (Dasavatara) of Lord Vishnu.

Compositional Craftsmanship

Puthukkote Krishnamoorthy employed raga mudras with remarkable subtlety. Rather than stating the name of the raga explicitly, he often embedded it naturally within the sahitya, following the example of Muthuswami Dikshitar. For instance, in his Kambhoji raga kriti beginning with “Kalaye Kamita Dayaka...”, the phrase “Kamita Dayaka **Amboja** Charane” conceals the raga name **Kambhoji** within its syllabic structure. He also made effective use of the prosodic device known as Mukta Pada Grastam, wherein the ending word or syllable of one line becomes the opening of the next. Such prayogas testify to the high literary quality of his compositions.

Krishnamoorthy’s compositional craftsmanship is further evident in his incorporation of chittaswaras and chittaswara sahityas, reminiscent of the compositional style associated with Syama Sastri. His Mohana raga composition “*Jaganmohanamam Nin Mandahasam...*” is a fine example. His familiarity with rare rhythmic structures is likewise reflected in his use of Viloma Chapu talas, another feature encountered in the works of Syama Sastri. These elements reveal that Krishnamoorthy was not merely a gifted lyricist but also a highly accomplished musician with a profound understanding of compositional architecture..

Musical Contributions through All India Radio

Puthukkote Krishnamoorthy made significant contributions to the dissemination of Malayalam compositions through All India Radio. Recognising the importance of promoting Malayalam



within the Carnatic idiom, he set to music poems by major Malayalam poets, including Vallathol Narayana Menon and Kumaran Asan, presenting them through radio broadcasts. He also produced thematic programmes featuring groups of compositions such as the Navavarana Kritis and Navagraha Kritis, involving numerous musicians and thereby expanding public awareness of these repertoire traditions. Through these initiatives, he helped nurture a distinctly Kerala-based Carnatic identity while remaining firmly rooted in the broader classical tradition.

A saintly Departure

In 1985, Puthukkode Krishnamoorthy returned from Madras to Thiruvananthapuram. On 23 August, during the observance of Varalakshmi Vrata, he completed the recitation of the eleventh chapter of the Devi Mahatmyam, Darshanam, and soon thereafter attained eternal rest. Tradition holds that Saint Tyagaraja attained moksha while his disciples sang Giripai Nelakonna in Sahana raga. In a similar manner, Krishnamoorthy's passing occurred in an atmosphere of profound devotion and spiritual contemplation.

Tyagaraja and Puthukkode Krishnamoorthy: A Shared Spiritual Vision

Puthukkode Krishnamoorthy's compositional style reflects the diverse influences of the Carnatic Trinity. His works exhibit the devotional accessibility associated with Tyagaraja, the structural sophistication characteristic of Muthuswami Dikshitar, and, at places, the rhythmic refinement reminiscent of Syama Sastri. Yet, among these influences, it is with Tyagaraja that Puthukkode shares the closest affinity, particularly in his understanding of music as an expression of bhakti and spiritual experience. In Tamil musical circles, Papanasam Sivan is often reverentially hailed as the 'Tamil Tyagaraja'. In a similar sense, Puthukkode Krishnamoorthy may justifiably be regarded as "The Tyagaraja of Kerala," owing to the striking parallels between their musical ideals, devotional outlook, and artistic contributions.

Bhakti as the Essence of Music

Both composers regarded bhakti not merely as a subject for artistic expression but as the very essence of music itself. Their compositions rarely seek material prosperity, worldly recognition, or supernatural powers. Instead, they express humble spiritual aspirations such as the yearning for unwavering devotion, divine compassion, righteous conduct, and spiritual fulfilment. Puthukkode Krishnamoorthy's kritis repeatedly echo these sentiments through prayers that seek God's grace and guidance rather than temporal rewards. This shared devotional outlook constitutes one of the most significant parallels between the two composers.

Introspection and Self-Dialogue in Composition

Another notable point of convergence between Tyagaraja and Puthukkode Krishnamoorthy is their use of introspection as a literary and spiritual device. Tyagaraja frequently addressed his own mind in kritis such as Manasa Etulo, Manasu Swadhina, Manasu Loni, and Manavi Nalakincha, transforming the kriti into a medium for self-examination, admonition, and spiritual instruction. Puthukkode Krishnamoorthy similarly employs self-dialogue in several of his compositions, addressing the mind and the inner self with counsel, reflection, and appeals for moral and spiritual awakening. In both composers, the kriti transcends the boundaries of artistic expression and



becomes a vehicle for introspection and inner refinement, revealing a deeply personal dimension of devotion that further strengthens the comparison between Puthukkote Krishnamoorthy and Tyagaraja.

The Balance between Simplicity and Scholarship

One of the defining characteristics of Tyagaraja's compositions is the balance between simplicity and scholarship. Most of his kritis, set in simple and colloquial Telugu, convey profound devotional sentiments that resonate with all sections of society. At the same time, compositions such as Jagadanandakaraka reveal his remarkable literary sophistication and musical excellence. A comparable balance can be seen in the compositions of Puthukkote Krishnamoorthy. Alongside Malayalam and Tamil kritis distinguished by their simplicity and devotional warmth, he also composed Sanskrit works of great literary and musical merit, including Pancharatna-type compositions that bear testimony to his scholarship and compositional skill.

Rejection of Narastuti: Music Beyond Worldly Patronage

Like Tyagaraja, Puthukkote Krishnamoorthy did not encourage 'Narastuti'—the glorification of mortal patrons for material gain. For him, music was neither a means to acquire wealth nor a vehicle for social prestige; rather, it functioned as an instrument of spiritual discipline and artistic fulfilment. The devotional intensity that permeates his kritis reflects this commitment to higher ideals.

A Shared Affinity for Kharaharapriya

The twenty-second Mela Raga, Kharaharapriya, attained its fullest artistic expression through the majestic compositions of Saint Tyagaraja, such as *Rama Nee Samanam evaru*, *Chakkani Raja Margamu*, and *Pakkala Nilabadi*. These masterpieces established the raga as one of the most profound and expressive in the Carnatic repertoire. Kharaharapriya was likewise Puthukkote Krishnamoorthy's favourite raga, and he was widely admired for his scholarly and deeply emotive renderings of it. His composition *Samana Rahitam Rama Namam* may be regarded as a counterpart to Tyagaraja's *Rama Nee Samanamevaru*, as both compositions proclaim that there is none equal to Lord Rama. This shared thematic vision, coupled with their common affinity for Kharaharapriya, further strengthens the artistic and spiritual parallels between the two composers.

Conclusion

Puthukkote Krishnamoorthy occupies a distinctive place among South India's greatest vaggeyakaras. His compositions represent a harmonious blend of literary excellence, musical sophistication, and profound spirituality. Writing in Malayalam, Tamil, Sanskrit, and Hindi, he enriched the Carnatic repertoire through thematic collections, kshetra kritis, ragamalikas, and numerous devotional compositions, reflecting both creative versatility and a deep grounding in the classical tradition. Beyond composition, his contributions as a teacher, broadcaster, and scholar played a significant role in strengthening Kerala's Carnatic heritage.

While his music reflects the devotional fervour of Tyagaraja and the compositional ideals of the Carnatic Trinity, it retains a distinctive artistic identity. His unwavering commitment to bhakti, simplicity of expression, and musical scholarship fully justify the appellation "The Tyagaraja of



Kerala.” His enduring legacy continues to inspire musicians, scholars, and lovers of Carnatic music alike.

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