



## **CREDIBILITY OF AUTHORSHIP IN MUSIC COMPOSITIONS**

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### **Abstract**

Music compositions comprise of two main elements –the *Dhāthu* or the music of the piece and the *Māthu* or the lyrics. Together they convey a musical expression, representative of the times in which they were composed. In Karnatak music, a person who is the creator of both the *Dhāthu* and the *Māthu* is usually referred to as the *Vaggeyakārā* or composer. This paper throws light on certain key parameters that help ascertain the authorship of a music composition and the problems they pose are discussed based on certain compositions of Swathi Thirunal and Muthuswamy Dikshitar.

**Keywords-** *Mudra, Authorship, Composer, Vaggeyakara*

### **Introduction**

Traditionally, many composers were nurtured by royal patrons in their courts. While some composers were saint musicians themselves and composed to propagate philosophical values through their compositions, others spearheaded revolutionary movements and used musical compositions as a medium to profess their ideologies to the masses. Then, there were Kings who composed several musical pieces not just for the love of art but to also showcase and preserve the cultural heritage of their kingdom.

While we have a wide gamut of composers who have enriched the Karnatak repertoire, the Trinity of Karnatak music namely Tyagaraja, Mutthuswamy Dikshithar and Shyama Shastry occupy a



pivotal position. They have inspired many composers in terms of their unique style of composing, be it in the form of lyrics, spontaneity, melodic appeal or rhythmic content. Some of these musical treasures have been carefully preserved and handed down through various *Shishya Paramparās* or disciples, whilst few others have been discovered from manuscripts by later musicians. In the early days, musicians themselves were composers unlike the present times. Hence, a music concert of the early times is said to have comprised a lot of creative element or *manōdharmā*. The idea of adorning a music concert with a variety of compositions emerged in the late nineteenth century and a lot of credit to the current day concert format is attributed to the great musician *Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar*.

Music history has it that many compositions were mere outpour of divinity. Hence, the record of such compositions may not have necessarily translated to notations. Nevertheless, a few compositions have found its way to posterity through ardent disciples who may or may not have embellished these compositions over and above the composers' spontaneous version. These manuscripts apparently give a primary account of such compositions.

In the twentieth century, erstwhile principles of authority of patrons were overlaid with modern principles of authorship. Let us analyse some of the lingering queries w.r.t credibility of authorship in music compositions by taking certain examples.

### **Establishing Authorship in Karnatak music compositions**

#### **Problems with the *Mudras* in compositions**

Authorship in music compositions have been ascertained by studying the composing styles of different composers. For instance the signature of a composer has played a significant role in attributing a composition to a composer. A majority of Karnatak repertoire had been composed at a time when publishing was yet to find its light. Hence, a vast majority of compositions had existed



in hand written or palm manuscripts for a long time. The first known published work- “Oriental music in European Notation” by A.M.Chinnaswamy Mudaliar was sometime in the year 1893. In 1904 at the behest of A.M.Chinnaswamy Mudaliar, Subbarama Dikshithar published his magnum opus –Sangeetha Sampradaya Pradarshini in *Telegu*, which gives an exhaustive account of the compositions of Mutthuswamy Dikshithar. Subbarama Dikshithar was a direct descendant of the Mutthuswamy Dikshithar tradition. Hence, this monumental work acts as a gateway to a bygone era in music.

Many Karnatak composers including the trinity resorted to the use of *mudras* or formulaic phrases, typically incorporated in the last line of their compositions to subtly denote authorship. Many compositions of Tyagaraja employ *mudras* which translate as “Tyagaraja entertains you” or “May Tyagaraja be your servant” or “Protect Tyagaraja”. The author’s name here is incorporated in such a way to subtly convey the emotional state of the composer. Similarly Shyama Shastry incorporated “Shyama Krishna Sodari” meaning sister of Shyama Krishna. Dikshithar employed the mudra *Guruguha*, the meaning of which varied contextually in his kritis.

Certain composers incorporate the name of their patron in the composition. For instance, Veena Seshanna in one of his *thillanas* employs the following phrase with the patron’s name- the then Maharaja of Mysore.

*“Raja Maharaja Sathvidvajanula Bhoja*

*Ravi koti Tejasri Chamaraja Sukumara Krishna Raja Chirayu”*

In the case of Maharaja Swathi Thirunal’s court- the Maharaja and the composers employed the name of the royal deity –“Padmanabha” in their compositions. This had led to questioning the authenticity of the authorship of Swathi Thirunal’s compositions by veena vidwan S.Balachander. Balachander claimed that these compositions were merely a compilation of works of several court



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musicians, which were later attributed to the Maharaja of Travancore. The criteria of authenticity that operated in the royal courts of the nineteenth century were different from the connotations of originality and individual work in the twentieth century. The nineteenth century practices on authorship centred on the idea- *art for its own sake*, free of any political motivation.

Erstwhile Musicians used to move around the courts of south India, composing in the name of whoever happened to be their patron. In the words of K.P.Sivanandam and K.P.Kittappa, descendants of Tanjore Vadivelu-certain compositions of the Tanjore quartet produced in the Travancore court were mere translation works of their own compositions in Telegu presented in King Serfoji's court in Tanjore. With the ulterior objective of gaining acceptance in the Maharaja's court, the *mudra Padmanabha* was generously used, making it challenging to trace the provenance and verify the authorship of these compositions. For instance, the composition "Jayasugunalaya" in bilahari raga is attributed to Swathi Thirunal in Chidambara Vadyar's publication whereas in "Muhana Prasantyaprasavyavastha", this has been cited as a composition of Seshayyengar by Swathi Thirunal himself.

Similarly a list of Dikshithar krithis given by Dr.Raghavan includes the kriti Rāma Rāma in Rāmakali rāga. The composer of the kriti is given as Subbarama Dikshithar in SSP<sup>1</sup> but the *mudra* 'guruguha<sup>2</sup>' is underlined in the kriti. Subbarama Dikshithar has followed this to highlight the usage of *mudra* in compositions of Mutthuswamy Dikshithar kritis in SSP. Hence, Dr.Raghavan might have considered this as a composition of Mutthuswamy Dikshithar inspite of no mentions of the same in the errata section of SSP. Subsequently we also find this listed as Mutthuswamy Dikshithar's composition in T.K.Govinda Rao's publication.

Instances like these make us wonder if *mudra* alone is a sufficient criterion to establish the

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<sup>1</sup> Sangeeta Sampradaya Pradarshini

<sup>2</sup> *mudra* of Mutthuswamy Diskhithar



### **Changing Ragas and Talas**

The worth of a musical composition is determined by its melodic, structural and aesthetic values than its lyrical content. Rāgas also change in characteristics over a period of time . India being a country with many foreign invasions, its music has undergone changes with lot of influences from others forms of music such as Persian, western and so on. When we consider the compositions of Dikshitar, most of them rendered today have acquired changes from raga influences of Tyagaraja's school of music. For instance the raga Abheri which used to be rendered with Shudda Daivatha is now rendered with chatusruti daivatha based on the popular version of Nagumomu. There are instances where even film music renditions of certain popular kritis have influenced the rendition style of such kritis.

Muttiah Bagavathar and Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer reconstructed music for most of Swathi Thirunal's compositions. Inconsistencies in Ragas can be found in some compositions where the original composition is in one raga but now being sung in a different raga. For instance, the composition *Bavayami Raghuramam* was originally conceived in Saveri set to adi tala while now it is being sung in Ragamalika using seven ragas. *Palayasadha* currently presented in Nalinakanthi was originally composed in Durbar.

Another subtle but important change is the multiple version of rendering of certain rāga-s. The raga Gowlipantu may be cited here as there are certain schools of music which render this raga with a shuddha madhyama Svara whilst some others favour the prati madhyama svara. The Dhanammal School of music devours a different graced rendering of the madhyama svara thereby employing both the shudda and prati madhyama varieties in this raga.

### **Problems with different versions from disciples of composers**



Dikshitar kritis have been passed to posterity predominantly from three major traditions- Ambi Dikshitar school, Tiruppamburam tradition and Subbarama Dikshitar's monumental work Sangita Sampradaya Pradarshini. There are different versions or *patantara* variations of the same Kriti and some kritis mentioned in publications of one school have been omitted in the other. The Thodi kriti Mahaganapathim appears in a publication of Tiruppampuram Nataraja Sundaram Pillai in 1936 titled *Dikshita Kirtanai Prakashikai*. Nataraja Sundaram Pillai was a disciple of Sattur Panchanada Ayyar who had learnt from Suddha Maddalam Tambiyappa, who in turn had been a direct disciple of Dikshitar(as mentioned by Dr.Raghavan) . This kriti in Thodi raga seems to have been omitted in SSP which raises questions on its authenticity. But this particular kriti has also prevailed in the Ambi Dikshitar tradition thus establishing its authenticity as a Dikshitar Kriti. Thereby a composition cannot be termed as spurious just because it has not appeared in a popular publication. There are certain compositions that have been recorded in SSP in the appendix section. Some examples are-

- *Gurumurte* in Shankarabarana raga which sounds more like a *nottuswara* and less as a kriti
- *Gananayakam* in Rudrapriya which sounds very similar to a kriti of Tyagaraja *Srimanini* in raga Purna Shadja

The composition Rama Rama in Ramkali raga has been mentioned as a composition of Subbarama Dikshitar in SSP which could have been a printing error as the mudra Guruguha has been underlined in the composition. Subbarama Dikshitar follows this convention in other kritis to highlight it as a Dikshitar composition. Dr.Raghavan also mentions it as a composition of Muthuswamy Dikshitar in one of his articles. Similarly there are certain suspicions in ascertaining the authenticity of certain compositions like Sri Satyanarayanam in Shuba Panthavarali and Sri Venkatesham Bhajami in Kalyana Vasantham.



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### Conclusion

Indian being a land of several foreign invasions has lost a lot of its invaluable literature. Some are available in the form of ruins. The study of historical Indian Music from manuscripts and oral traditions has many complexities due to the absence of complete information, difficulties in interpretation and variations in the music over time. Mudras or signature of a composer largely used to ascertain authorship may not be present in certain Kritis. So it is not the only metric to determine authorship. It is important to assure the style of a composer and take into consideration all the shishya paramparas to establish the credibility of authorship of a certain composition. Hence, it is the utmost responsibility of a researcher to represent these musical facts with adequate evidence and not base their research on loosely coined assumptions.

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