

## **20. Superstition in Music**

Superstition is a seasoned sneak who can insidiously worm his way into any field of human thought or activity. There is practically no department of human life where he does not rear his ugly head. And music is no exception. One of the basic causes which tend to perpetuate this sneak's exploits is mental inertia. As long as no urgent necessity arises to exercise the grey cells in my brain why not simply go along the line of least mental resistance, why not simply follow what X or Y or Z does irrespective of whether what he does is supported by reason or common-sense?

Superstition is generally defined as blind belief or action which has not the support of reason. Superstitious people

do a thing simply because other people do it or tradition demands it. The following story gives a striking picture of typical superstition.

A guru was living in an ashrama with his disciples. A sick cat one day strayed into the place and the guru tended it and brought it back to normal health. The cat became a pet of the hermitage and stayed there. As time went on it began to take liberties with the guru and started disturbing him when he was in meditation. So he tied it to his cot before sitting for meditation. All the disciples noticed it. In due course the guru passed away and the senior disciple took his place as the head of the ashrama. As time went by, tying the cat to the cot became an important item in meditation, and accent shifted from meditation proper to tying the cat. The cat died. As meditation cannot begin without the cat-tying item they got hold of another cat for the purpose. After sometime meditation reduced to tying the cat to a cot and nothing more. Every disciple got hold of a cat and meditation started and ended with tying the cat to a cot!!

The idea of superstition in music was forcibly brought home to me when I happened to attend a music competition at which there were two judges one of whom was a well-known musicologist and so dominated the show. The lady who was to me obviously the best singer did not get the first prize. I was greatly surprised. The musicologist judge was asked to say a few words at the end. He referred to a ragamalika sung by the best singer (who did not however get the prize) and said that it was not right to have used the raga *Saveri* as the last in the raga series, it being associated with the sentiment of sorrow and it was usual to finish with auspicious (mangala) ragas like *Sourashtra*, *Surati* or *Madhyamavali*. I was greatly amused to hear the savant indulging in such a fabric of fanciful assumptions, probably based on hearsay. For one thing his remarks show-

ed an utter confusion in the ideas of ragabhava and rasa. Also his assumptions are not acceptable at all. I wonder if he forgot or did not know that the song usually sung or played on nagaswaram at the most auspicious moment in a marriage or consummation ceremony in a South Indian household is in *Saveri raga*! So alas the ragas Sourashtra and Surati do not hold exclusive monopoly for the final auspicious point; we have several standard kritis in these ragas which have no relation to any mangala or auspiciousness. Because Shri Thyagaraja happened to compose one of the mangalams in Sourashtra this savant generalised that Sourashtra was an auspicious raga; and on a similar reasoning averred that Saveri was a sorrow-suggesting raga! What about the pieces "Ramabana" (Thyagaraja), "Sri Rajagopala" (Dikshitar), "Yentanerchina" (Pattanam Subramania Aiyar), "Yethanaisonnalum" (Padam)? They are all in Saveri, and evidentially they do not suggest or provoke the emotion of sorrow. This is clearly a case of superstition in music. I can give many parallel cases. *Mukhari* is generally called a "weeping" raga, simply because one or two compositions composed in it were suggestive of grief. But there are several compositions in mukhari, like "Yentanine varnintunu", "Sangita shastra", "Yelavatara" which are all in *Mukhari* but bear no relation to sorrow or grief.

Here is another striking example of superstition. Till a few years ago it was usual to begin a classical concert with the piece "Vatapiganapatim" in raga Hamsadhwani by Dikshitar. It had many advantages and set the right atmosphere at the beginning and was in praise of Ganapati, the remover of all obstacles. Hindus generally begin any important function with the worship of Ganesha. After some time I noticed that some performers began their concerts with the kritis "Raghunayaka", "Sri Raghukula", "Manasukaruga", all in Hamsadhwani. I asked one of the musicians

why they did not begin with a piece on Sri Ganapati as per tradition. His answer simply floored me. He said that the intention was not to propitiate Ganapati but to begin with raga Hamsadhwani in which "Vatapiganapatim" was composed. Can superstition go further? So "meditation" became a matter of a cat being tied to a cot.

Take again the case of the unfortunate raga *Ahiri*. It is sincerely believed by some that if one sings it in the morning he will have to go without food the whole day. This superstition developed almost on the lines of the cat story given above. A musician tied his foodpacket to the end of a bent bamboo and started singing *Ahiri* raga. As the day got hot the bent bamboo straightened itself and the food packet went up high in the air and beyond possibility of being reached. So the man missed his lunch. From this solitary instance developed the superstition about *Ahiri* raga. Poor *Ahiri* !

Instances can be multiplied. What has been given is however enough. An unfortunate thing about these superstitions is that they find their way into text books used in institutions and successive batches of students accept them as facts and this tends to perpetuate such absurdities. It is time something is done to prevent such perpetuation of superstitions.

There are many other types of what may not seem to be superstition but are really superstitions *incognito*. Blind and unwarranted imitation of the mannerisms of the teacher by the disciple is probably based on the sub-conscious idea that these mannerisms make the merit of the teacher's music !

Lowering of the *adhara shruti* to an unwarranted extent is another type of what may be called para-superstition. A prominent musician had, on account of some physical trouble, to lower his *adhara shruti*, quite to a marked extent. And the modern witch, the mike, came agreeably to his rescue.

This led, I do not know why or how, to an implied idea that this lowering of the shruti was a privilege of top-rank artists. And so, one by one, the musicians started lowering their shrutis, even singers with gifted voices who can sing to 4-kattai shruti lowered their tonic note to 1-kattai or ½ kattai, and in some cases, as low as 6-kattai lower octave.

When we come to anecdotes about musicians there are a number of fertile brains which can manufacture all kinds of stories most effortlessly. Some of the anecdotes are certainly authentic, but there are many which can be traced to the imagination of some admirers. Mr. T. L. Venkatrama Aiyer, in a recent article, showed the utter impossibility of some of these stories being true. We must have heard the fantastic story explaining why Sri Thyagaraja did not compose pieces in *Anandabhairavi*—there is a view based on valid reasons that the solitary piece “Neka theliyaku” in *Anandabhairavi*, attributed to the saint, is not a composition of Thyagaraja. On the face of it the story does not ring true. There may be other reasons for his not handling *Anandabhairavi* or *Kuranji* or *Dwijavanti*, or even *Navroj*, except in a *Divya-namakriti*. Some people do not feel happy unless the lives of great people abound in fantastic occurrences; they mistakenly think that such stories (and miracles) add glamour to the lives of such great saints and sages. The truth is just the other way about. The greatness of Sri Thyagaraja stands rooted in his music and his unparalleled devotion to Sri Rama; he does not need any boosting up with stories and miracles.

Before closing I wish to refer to a very subtle, and hence dangerous, form of superstition. Some persons think that they are above any kind of superstition and so they look down upon anything which appears as superstition to them because they are not able to understand or find a rational basis for it. Such an attitude is in itself a form of

blind acceptance of their personal capacity to understand or explain, as the standard to judge whether a belief is superstition or not. Certain miraculous and hidden powers are attributed to music; some of these have been proved to be true. Psychological effects of music are profound; in recent years investigations have been carried on in the realm of musical therapy and they have revealed startling effects. Here are fields in which research may be carried on with beneficial results.