

## **15. Sri Tyagaraja and Sri Swathi Tirunal**

The period covering the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th centuries is a unique period in the history of the Indian Music, especially in South India. In one sense we may say that the South Indian music of to-day is mainly the outcome of the musical upheaval which came about as the result of the contribution of the great musician-composers who flourished in that period; Thyagaraja, Syama Sastri and Muthuswami Dikshitar in Tanjore and Sri Swathi Thirunal in Travancore worked almost a miracle in the musical world. The western ghats were a real barrier to mutual intercourse between the east and the west coasts of South India in those times, but no earthly barrier could obstruct the cultural communion of great souls. I personally believe that the almost simultaneous appearance of these great personalities is not mere chance. In this world governed by laws (Natural or Divine) little that happens is by chance. There is a Great Purpose behind and our ineffective intellect, limited and handicapped as it is, is naturally incapable of understanding this Purpose. But that does not mean that the Purpose does not exist. We often find that at certain periods in the history of a nation some great souls are born and they give such a turn to the march of events that subsequent history moves altogether in an unexpected direction. It is also true in the case of great religious and cultural movements. It looks as if it was designed by Great Powers that these four great musician-composers

should be born about the same time so that a new and vibrant impulse may be given to the music of South India.

Among the trinity (as generally Thyagaraja, Syama Sastri and Dikshitar are called), Thyagaraja is unique; for variety, richness and prolific compositions he is unrivalled. It is not my purpose here to compare him with the other two of the trinity; I propose to refer to Thyagaraja and Sri Swati Tirunal. There is considerable similarity between these two composers. Both were intensely devoted to their family Deities. Sri Rama was no abstract God-head to Thyagaraja: to him He was a living friend, guide and philosopher in intimate contact with him, encouraging him and admonishing when necessary. The compositions of Thyagaraja are but the reactions of this relationship existing between him and Sri Rama. Similarly to Swati Tirunal Lord Padmanabha was an intimate Reality. The royal composer lived, breathed, sang and did everything but to please Sri Padmanabha. To serve the Lord was his goal. He was verily a Padmanabha Dasa. The cares and anxieties, worries and troubles of a reigning king sat lightly on his shoulders, because he discharged his duties as a servant of the Lord, in His name and for Him. Though he was a king he was in his heart of hearts a true ascetic, a real Vairagi. Both were proof against the temptations of earthly splendour and riches.

There are also some points of contrast between them which may also be referred to here. Thyagaraja composed in homely tongue which can be understood by general people, while the compositions of Sri Swati Tirunal are mostly in sonorous Sanskrit with its majestic flow. Also in the compositions of Sri Swati Tirunal there is a touch of the impersonal, as utter self-surrender to the Deity overshadowed every other expression of his devotion. In the case of Thyagaraja his personality is revealed in a mass of detail in his compositions. The various expressions of human

emotion, exhilaration, ecstasy, dejection, despair and various other phases of devotion abound in Thyagaraja's compositions. His intimate emotional reactions are revealed in many of his compositions.

Thyagaraja had the good fortune to have a sishya-parampara which carried on the traditions set by the master and this parampara is mainly responsible for the great popularity and wide circulation of his compositions. In the case of Sri Swati Tirunal, as he was a ruler, such a parampara was naturally impossible. This is one of the reasons why his compositions could not get that currency which one would have expected and which would also have been achieved had he not been a ruler. Thyagaraja lived a life of poverty. He shunned wealth even when offered. The only wealth he valued was the wealth of the devotion to Sri Rama. Sri Swati Tirunal on the other hand was a ruler but in his heart of hearts he was detached, and no earthly temptation had a place in his life.

It is really the good fortune of us here in Southern India that these two great saints who were also Divine bards were born. To them the musical world owes a great deal and every lover of music feels grateful to them.