

## **17. Syama Sastri, the Oldest of the Musical Trinity**

Syama Sastri, the oldest of the famous musical trinity of South India, was born at Tiruvarur (Panchanadikshetra, where the other two of the trinity also were born) in the year 1763, about four years earlier than Sri Thyagaraja. He belonged to the Tamil-speaking Vadama community of the Northern sect. His ancestors lived originally in Kurnool district and later on came to and settled in Kanchipuram. Tradition has it that Brahma the Creator Himself installed the Deity Kamakshi at Kanchipuram and Adi Sankaracharya installed this family to be in hereditary charge of worship in the temple.

After the fall of Vijayanagar in 1565 evil days fell on the family, but they kept their trust to be in charge of the deity Bangaru Kamakshi (so called because the idol was of gold) and left Kanchi for the south; they wandered for years through forests and strange places till finally they came to Udayarpalayam where they found temporary safety and stayed there for about seventy years. Internal dissensions, however, necessitated their leaving the place; they

moved further down, touching a few places on the way, till they came to Tiruvarur where they stayed for more than forty years. It was here that Syama Sastri was born. He was given the name Venkatasubramania as he was born in Krittiga Nakshatra. His pet name was, however, "Shyama Krishna" by which name he has been so well known. In his early years he had sound instruction in Telugu and Sanskrit; he learnt the fundamentals of music from an uncle of his who was not by any means a great musician. It is rather remarkable that none of the ancestors of Syama Sastri, paternal as well as maternal, were musicians. It was his *vasana*, inborn instinct, brought over evidently from previous births, that made him a great musician composer.

In his eighteenth year his family migrated to Tanjore consequent on the fear of invasion from Hyder Ali and sought the aid of the then Raja of Tanjore to ensure the safety of the idol of Kamakshi. Ultimately a temple was built for Kamakshi and lands were endowed for it as *sarva-manyam*. On the occasion of the installation ceremony the king also gave large free-hold estates to Syama Sastri's father. Thus Syama Sastri was above want.

As in the case of the other two of the trinity Syama Sastri also had, as it were, his initiation into the science and art of music at the hands of a great yogi, Sangita Swami who seems to have taught him, among other things the secrets of the science of *laya*. After his tutelage under Sangita Swami he was directed by the Swami to go to Pachemiriyam Adiappayya, the author of the immortal *Varna Viriboni* in Bhairavi raga. [This one composition is, in my view, enough to canonise him and build a temple for his worship.] Syama Sastri made rapid progress under Adiappayya and all his rare, inborn faculties flowered and developed into fullness, so much so that Adiappayya himself came to

regard "Kamakshi"—the pet name given to Syama Sastri by Adiappayya—as a divinely gifted genius.

In appearance he was striking and majestic. His commanding personality impressed everyone who came into contact with him. His diamond ear-rings, the gold mounted *rudraksham* on his neck, the bright-coloured shawl he usually wore and the striking kumkum mark on his forehead added to his impressive personality.

He was a great devotee like his compeers Thyagaraja and Dikshitar. His *Ishta devata* was Sri Kamakshi who was a living Presence and who even occasionally spoke to him. It is said that it was Syama Sastri who initiated Muthuswami Dikshitar into "Sri Vidya Upasana." As we know, Dikshitar was twelve years younger than Syama Sastri.

Syama Sastri's contribution to Karnatic music is unique. He had great mastery over the technique of the art; he commanded polished diction. His compositions are replete with ragabhava. He had given special charm and beauty to the raga *Anandabhairavi* and enriched it to a remarkable degree. Even his swarajathis are brimming with ragabhava; the swarajathis *Kamakshi anudinamu* in Bhairavi and *Kamakshini* in Yadukula-Kambhoji are scintillating masterpieces. He has illustrated how jathis in a tala can enhance the beauty of a piece e.g., *Sankari Samkuru* in Saveri, *Ninnu Vinaga* in Purvakalyani and *Himachala tanaya* in Anandabhairavi. [The last piece which ought to be sung in Aditala Misrajati is nowadays sung in simple Aditala, thereby taking away all the majesty and beauty of the composition.] He gave special prominence to Misra Chapu tala (or Triputa) and composed comparatively the largest number of songs in it. I once chose samples of the compositions of each of the trinity and worked out the proportion of songs in the more prominent talas. (The results are given in the chart above.) The percentage of Syama Sastri's compositions in Triputa (or Misra) preponderates.

It may be incidentally pointed out that the number 7 which gives the number of time units in Misrajiati appears to have fundamental importance in Nature. In most of Nature's processes this number turns up at every turn as it were. We have seven days in the week; we have seven lokas, seven rishis, twice seven manas, seven colours in the spectrum, seven notes in the musical scale and so on. Certain diseases reach critical stages on the 7th, 14th, 21st, 28th days, all multiples of seven. It is no wonder 7 was considered a mystic number by our ancients. Many of our folk tunes (chindus, temmangus etc.) which are a natural expression of the musical soul of the nation seem to be in Misra pattern. Kavadi chindus such as "*Bhoomi mechidum*," "*Chendil managar*," "*Palaivaykamakil*," and the popular Anandakalippu tune—"Nandavanathil Orandi"—are in this tala. Many of the devotional hymns lend themselves naturally to this tala pattern; very many of the well-known padas of Kshetrajna are in Triputa tala. There is something remarkable therefore about this tala. May it not be that because of the uniqueness of the number 7 that Syama Sastri gave that special prominence to Triputa tala?

Another distinctive contribution he made is that he gave shape and life to some rare ragas. Whoever can forget the subtle, unique charm of *Manji* raga after hearing "*Brovavamma*." *Kalgada* is another raga he handled. His kriti in *Chintamani* raga has a history of its own. In the reign of King Sarabhoji in Tanjore there was a renowned musician called Bobbili Kesavayya who had the title "*Bhuloka chapa chutti*" (implying that in his hand the whole world lay as a rolled mat). He went out to various places on a tour of musical contest, defeating the foremost musicians in all the places he visited. In due course he came to Tanjore. But the court musicians of the time felt unequal to any contest with Kesavayya and in one mind all of them considered Syama Sastri as the only person who

could save the reputation of Tanjore. Though he felt difficult at first, Syama Sastri finally agreed to the contest relying solely on Divine help. The whole of that night he spent in prayers to his goddess Kamakshi in her temple. It was there that he sang this kriti "*Devi brova samayamide*" in Chintamani raga. The story goes that at the open contest in the royal durbar next day he easily humbled Kesavayya in the latter's own special field of tana-singing. After this incident the reputation of Syama Sastri spread far and wide.

Another special feature of his compositions is the abundant use of *Swara sahityam*, chitta swaras and sahitya corresponding to them coming together in the same piece. He is also supposed to have left behind a book on *Layaprastara* and also charts illustrating possibilities in the field.

He did not compose numerous songs like Thyagaraja, not even as many as Dikshitar. He is supposed to have composed about 108 songs—some would put it at 300. In any case he is the least prolific in his musical output. What he composed were uniformly of a high order. He so fitted the sahitya to the tala that at every stage of the kriti the basic pattern of the tala was maintained. No one could mistake the tala at any stage. In some of the standard kritis we know that the tala pattern is not obvious at the start, unless the singer shows it by beats and waves as usual. For example, if one sings the kriti "*Telisi rama chintanato*" without indicating the tala, a listener who hears it for the first time might take the tala to be rupaka, so also in the Bhairavi raga kriti "*Sri Raghuvara sugunalaya*." Such duality is not likely to occur in the case of the kritis of Syama Sastri.

He did not travel much; he visited only Pudukotta and Madurai. At Madurai he composed the *Navaratnamala* kritis on *Meenakshi*; the famous piece "*Saroja dala netri*" was one of them.

His compositions did not gain great currency. Even of the 108 pieces composed by him only a few are in current use e.g.

<i>Kanaka saila</i>	in Punnavagarali
<i>Sankari samkuru</i>	in Saveri
<i>Ninnu vinagamari</i>	in Purvakalyani
<i>Birana varalichi</i>	in Kalyani
<i>Durusuga krupa</i>	in Saveri
<i>O Jagadamba</i>	in Anandabhairavi
<i>Mari vere gati</i>	in Anandabhairavi
<i>Saroja dala netri</i>	in Sankarabharanam
<i>Palinchu kamakshi</i>	in Madhyamavati
<i>Ninne namminanu</i>	in Todi and
<i>Brovavamma</i>	in Manji

The reasons for this lack of popularity are obvious; he had not many disciples to spread his compositions; also the technique of the pieces was of a high order.

He passed away in 1827 in his 64th year. He is said to have predicted his end. He has left behind a treasure of musical gems of which any country may be justifiably proud.