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THE ITINERATION BY YALPANAM N VEERAMANI IYER THROUGH THE SOUNDARYA LAHARI OF SRI SANKARACHARYA

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ABSTRACT

Musical compositions marked a great role in conserving, promoting and preserving the rich legacy of our nation. There are so many works that have conquered human minds with various philosophical ideas. Among the intellectual and philosophical scholars, Adi Shankaracharya's name and his contribution are unique.

Soundaryalahari of Sri Sankara is a Stotra Kavya, which is a powerful prayer that teaches the path of approach to the Almighty that can be reached via genuine devotion. Here Yālpānam N Veeramani Iyer has composed this kavya in the form of kirtanas by incorporating its entire essence.

KEYWORDS

Sri Sankaracharya, Stotra Kavya, Soundaryalahari, Satakam, Yālpānam, Veeramani Iyer, Inuvil, Gayatri pedam, Sagunopāsana, Samayācāra

INTRODUCTION

Pure music can create a positive environment for the holistic development of a human being. Music influences listeners in fascinating ways based on each individual's background, personality, mood and situation. The people, who tend to focus on melody and lyrics, have a wide attention span. In this way, the significance of Sacred music is very important to take one to the higher levels of spirituality and ultimate reality.

The ultimate reality or the Vedic knowledge have influenced both philosophers and artists. Here it is describing about such a composition which brings us to the extreme level of spirituality, "the Soundaryalahari Kirtana Satakam" which is composed by Sri Yālpānam N Veeramani Iyer.

Soundaryalahari is a stotra kavaya of Sri. Sankaracharya in praises of goddess Parvati. As many controversies existing about the life and contributions of Sri Sankara, the Soundaryalahari also has some obscurity. It is an explanation of the philosophy according to which the pursuit of emancipation leads one to God. Jiva, who is purified by God's grace, attains liberation. God is the joyful go-between for man and the Absolute, and it is through his reassuring leadership and light-hearted direction that each and every man is brought back to wholeness. In this regard, it is possible to distinguish between two types of worship: Sagunopāsana and Nirgunopāsana. In the former, upasana through Bhaktiyoga is mentioned. In the latter, belief in the Maya doctrine is implied along with the concept of Nirgunabrahman as the ultimate reality. Śri Sankara accepts Nirgunabrahman, or non-dual knowledge, as humanity's ultimate aim.



Soundaryalahari of Sri Sankaracharya

The tantric devotional work Soundaryalahari by Śrī Sankara (780–820 A.D.) explains transcendental meditation and the microcosmic and macrocosmic aspects of the Goddess through the six magic plexuses that are revealed to tantric meditation practitioners. The entire poem is written in śikharīṇī meter and having 100 stanzas. However, some people believe that it only has 98 stanzas, while manuscripts with 103 stanzas have been found as well. According to the manuscript, it is divided into three sections: 1) The first, called Anandalahari (wave of pleasure), contains 41 verses that discuss the concept and execution of Samayācāra, the Goddess's microcosmic and macrocosmic aspects, and her dwelling in the six plexuses; 2) The second, called Soundaryalahari, consists of 50 verses that describing the Goddess's physical beauty from head to foot; 3) The remaining 12 verses, titled Svarupalahari, focus on devotion as a means of achieving bliss.*⁽¹⁾

There are roughly thirty-three Sanskrit commentators on this text and so many translatory works too. Out of all the stotras attributed to Sankara, this work holds the highest ranking. Within the hundred verses, the mystic philosophy of the Śricakra is authentically explained, and the soul-moving depiction of the Devi's form, beauty personified is provided. When Sankara describes the Samayācāra, the Vaidika mode of the Śākta discipline, he informs the devotee that Advaita realization is the ultimate goal of Sakti worship.

The splendor of Lord Shiva and his consort Shakti is shown in the beginning stanza. It is said that, Shiva is powerless without Shakti and is unable to move at all. In the second stanza, it is also further highlights how great is Shakti. Brahma makes the world from the tiny dot on Her feet; Viṣṇu's serpent Śeṣha somehow sustains the world with his 100 hoods; Hara pulverizes the world during the great deluge and smears it on his body. The 3rd stanza says that, the goddess is the island of sun that drives away the darkness of ignorance; she is the stream of ambrosia of consciousness to the mentally immature. She is the jewel that grants wishes to the impoverished. She is the tusk of the giant boar, Mura's nemesis, to those who are submerged in the ocean of births and deaths.

The virtues got for those who worship the Goddess are mentioned in verses four to six. It says that Parvati is the only goddess who does not wear abhaya varada mudras on her hands like other goddesses and therefore the goddess bestows all kinds of blessings on those who take refuge in her feet. As an example, the prayer of Rathi Devi is also mentioned. Then the body and form description of the goddess is described in verses 7 and 8. In verses 9 and 10 tantra yoga or kundalini sakti and six plexuses are explained. In the eleventh sloka, Śricakra is described and it is said that, Devi resides in that Śricakra. All the other varnanas and upasanas of the goddess are given in the subsequent verses. Since it is not possible to write about all the 100 verses in this one article, only a few parts of it are included in this work.

Soundaryalahari Kirtana Satakam of Yālpānaṁ N Veeramani Iyer

Brahmasri Mahavidwan Yālpānaṁ. N Veeramani Iyer was born in 1931 at Inuvil, Jaffna, as the son of the great violin Maestro Brahmasri. N Nataraja Iyer (Chinnathurai Aiya) and Sundarambal. He was a legendary vaggeyakara as well as a dancer and he contributed so many great works to the Carnatic field. His magnum opus dance drama, 'Mylai kuravanji' based on the deities of Kapaleswaram Temple and "karpakavallinin" the Ragamalika Composition from this Kuravanji,



gave him an untold fame throughout the Carnatic world. He is very popular in Srilanka but unfortunately, not that much popular in South India, and this work aims to refer and popularize his great talents.

SOUNDARYALAHARI KIRTANA SATAKAM

Soundaryalahari kirtana satakam is a work containing 100 kirtanas, composed by Yālpānaṁ N Veeramani Iyer, in praise of Kannaka Parameswari Ambal at Darmashasta Gurukula Gayatri Pedam, Vattuvini. Veeramani Iyer was a prolific Composer, who is the first one who translates the Soundaryalahari of Sri Sankaracharya in to the Carnatic Kirti format. Among the 1 compositions, 98 kritis are set in Adi tala and remaining 2 kritis set to Rupaka tala. In this, 22 Compositions are set in Major Ragas. The Sudha Madhyama melas like Kharaharapriya, Todi, Sankarabharanam, Gowrimanohari, Charukeshi, Mayamalavagowla, Keeravani and Prati Madhyama melas like Subhapantuvarali, Simhendramadhyamam, Shanmukhapriya, kalyani, Nasikabhushani, Hemavati, Lathangi are the ragas used in this. In these 14 major ragas, there are 2 compositions for ragas like Gourimanohari, Charukeshi, Shanmukhapriya, Kharaharapriya, Keeravani and 3 compositions for Kalyani raga. Remaining compositions are all in janya ragas and deshya ragas like Durga, Mand, Bihag, Sindhu Bhairavi, Brindavanasaranga, Bageshri, Desh, Madhuvanti etc. Some of the peculiarities of these kirtanas may be indicated with a few examples.

In the first kriti, the pallavi commence with Rupaka tala in Hamsanadi raga in praise of Kanaka Parameshwari who resides on the Gayatri pedam. Then, as in the original text, the concept of “There is no Shiva without Shakti” has been given in the caraṇam and the whole essence of the sloka has been included in the kriti. In the fourth kriti, the Anupallavi describes that while the other goddesses shower abhaya varada blessings with their hands, Ambal showers blessings with her pada pankaja. Further the charana, giving the essence of the verse and addresses the goddess as Navarasanayaki. In the 8th kriti ‘Ananda Lahari Neye Devi’, the graha itself shows a ‘slesha’ usage which means that, Anandalahari :the name of the first part and similarly it is said that, devi you are the Lahari that gives us pleasure. As Shankaracharya says in the ninth sloka, here the 9th kriti, also mentions that, the Goddess resides in Sahasradalapadma. Also, the Kundalini Sakti and the 6 plexuses are explained in this portion. Apart from the pallavi anupallavi and caraṇam, it also contains a madhyamakala sahitya. The raga Kalyanavasantham implicitly fits this kriti when it says that the Goddess resides happily with her husband, renewing the Kundalini powers and the 5 elements.

The 11th kirtana describes the structure of Sri Chakra. The 41st kirtana on the glories of Mooladhara Chakra, the 46th kirtana explain the beauty of Ambal’s forehead, and 48-57 on the divine eyes. 58th hymn on Tirumugam, 60th hymn on sweet speech. The 67th kirtana says about the neck, the 92nd kirtana on the poorna rupa of Ambal, the 99th kirtana on the benefits of Devi Upasana. Finally, in the 100th kirtana, the author himself says that the composition is not due to his talent, but to Ambal’s blessings-Thiruvavul. Here he brings the realization that “Sarvam Brahma Mayam” to the minds of the common people.

Among the hundred kritis, all the kritis have given the essence of the original hymn along with the temple mudra as 'Vattuvinaṁ Gayatri Pedam' and the deity mudra as Kannaka Parameshwari. Also,



in some kritis innuvai as the place mudra and raga mudras were added. Even though each of the kirtanas is a mixture of Tamil and vernacular, the fact that is written in a simple manner that can be understood by any reader without losing the poetic beauty of Sri Sankara shows his unique talent. The meaningful inclusion of the raga in such a way that the ideas of the slokas are clear, underline his musical mastery. For example, the 41st Kirtana, “Adarachakratilananda” which is set in Bhairavi Raga, explain the divine dance of Siva and Sakti. Here in the 41st sloka Sankara addressed devi as ‘samaya’(the other name of Maha Bhairavi) so that, the raga Bhairavi is beautifully synchronized in this composition. Similarly, in the 42nd sloka, Devi is addressed as ‘Himagiri Sudhe’ and this Kirtana is set in Hemavati raga which means Parvati: the daughter of mountain. The 43rd sloka describes the hair of Devi, and the kirtana is set in Charukeshi raga. In the 49th sloka, while explaining the eight types of vision, devi is addressed as Kalyani who gives prosperity and it was set in the raga Kalyani by the composer. The 60th kirtana, which begins with Ambal’s sweet speech, ‘Amrtavarshanayo inimai’ is in Amrtavarshani raga. Apart from this, Ragamudra has been added in other kirtanas as well.

CONCLUSION

Poetry is said to be the ideal form of expressing gratitude to God. Expressing gratitude to God through song or writing invigorates our hearts. Soundaryalahari , a unique piece of poetry, combines the qualities of a devotional poem, a mantra sastra, and a guide for saktisim (sakti worship). The tantric type of worship is given more importance in this kavya. It is commendable that, because of an unparalleled poetic skills in Tamil Yālpānaṁ N Veeramani Iyer has translated the Soundaryalahari to easy Tamil in kirtana format as a dedication to the Kannaka Parameswari Ambal .Selection of raga according to the situation shows the author’s inner self. Similar to Sankara, Veeramani Iyer conceived every facet of Devi with immense poetic flair and beautifully captured it. Due to certain limitations, the entire concept of Soundaryalahari cannot be covered in one article. However, this work proved that, this study has great potential in literature, music, dance and drama.

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