

The Sage of Kanchi (1894 - 1994)

Devotion through Music

B.M.N.Murthy

HIS HOLINESS Sri Chandrashekharendra Saraswati, the 68th Pontiff of the Sri Shankara Matham, Kanchi, well known as the Paramacharya, had an intellectual distinction that set him apart from the other saints of our times. In addition to his profound knowledge of and rare insight into the scriptures, he had deep scholarship in a variety of subjects like Music, Dance, Archaeology, Temple Architecture, English Literature, Sanskrit Literature in addition to a thorough knowledge of the Indian Constitution, Property Rights, Income Tax etc which astounded even experts in the line. In particular, his depth of scholarship in Carnatic music was so deep and professional as would be evident from the following few anecdotes in his life.

Madurai Mani Iyer [1912-1968]: Madurai Mani Iyer was one of the most popular musicians in the fifties from Tamil Nadu. He gave his first public performance at the age of 12 in the distinguished presence of the Paramacharya in Shivaganga at the Kumbhabhishekham ceremony of the Shivaganga Temple. The Acharya was moved by his music and blessed the young lad.

Sometime in 1954 he moved to a house on Luz Church Road, Mylapore, Madras. While he was staying there, once the Paramacharya happened to pass that way along with his entourage. He stopped outside Mani Iyer's house and asked for Mani Iyer. When Iyer who



was practicing music in the rear courtyard was informed that the Paramacharya had come to his house and wanted to meet him, Iyer was stunned at this unexpected visit of the Acharya. He was hesitant to come out and meet His Holiness since he had not taken bath, as custom demanded that no one could appear before a holy person without having a bath. However, Iyer was prevailed over to come and meet the sage. The Paramacharya asked him to sing but Mani Iyer excused himself by saying that he had not taken bath. To this, the Acharya

replied "Since you always swim in the Sangeetha Sagara [Ocean of music], there is no need for you to have another bath. Go ahead with your song". Moved to tears, Madurai Mani fell at the feet of the Paramacharya and said that there was no mridangam player to keep the beats. Acharya said "Don't worry. I will keep the talam for you". Mani Iyer sang and the Paramacharya kept beats with his hands when Iyer sang.

Once Mani Iyer was singing alone without any accompaniment in a residential house in T. Nagar, Madras. During the performance, the Paramacharya came and sat on a raised platform near the dais. Iyer was completely immersed in the Nada Brahmam and was oblivious to the external environment. The Paramacharya, sitting close to Iyer, was keeping rhythmic beats with his hands for the music. After the music was over, Mani Iyer enquired as to who was keeping the beats all the while. Someone said "Periyava", meaning the Paramacharya. "Is it so? I was wondering who would keep such perfect beats with accuracy, I was extremely lucky that Periyava himself was accompanying my music! Where is Periyava sitting?" he asked. To this Periyava himself replied "I am sitting very near you". Moved visibly and thrilled by the proximity of the Paramacharya, Madurai Mani regretted "Oh My God! I didn't know it all. I have lost my eyesight and I am unable to have the Darshan of my Lord, so near but yet so far"

Singing Mangalam at the end of a concert:

Many decades ago the Paramacharya was camping at Kalahasti near Tirupathi. Late at night he was listening to the Veena played by a budding artiste by name Vasu. After two keertanas [songs], Paramacharya stretched himself and was relaxing. By this time, the third song had ended and the sage had started snoring mildly. Presuming that the Parama-

charya was deep asleep, Vasu rounded off quickly and went away as it was getting late for the train. Within minutes, the Acharya opened his eyes and enquired why Vasu had concluded without rendering Mangalam, the customary valedictory song to conclude the programme. He was told that Vasu concluded hurriedly as he thought that the Paramacharya had gone to sleep and it was getting late for him to catch the train. "No, No" replied the Acharya "I was following it intensely. He played so well but left abruptly without playing the obligatory Mangalam. Go to the railway station, bring him back and ask him to play the Mangalam and then go". Immediately, two close aides of the Acharya ran to the station, ran in opposite directions on the platform, shouting "Veena Vasu, Veena Vasu". Vasu who heard his name jumped out from a coach with his Veena, as the train was just starting. He returned, concluded the recital with the Mangalam before the Acharya and left for Madras the next morning.

Paramacharya's intimate knowledge about music and his love of music was a source of inspiration to several musicians of repute who wanted to practise devotion through music. For them he was a Path-Finder to Divinity and when they sang in his presence they actually felt the presence of Divinity. Probably this explains why internationally reputed musicians like M.S.Subbulakshmi, famous violinist Yehudi Menuhin, Madurai Mani Iyer and a host of others never missed an opportunity to seek his blessings. The classic example of the Princess Irene of Greece who herself was an accomplished singer of Western music and a great devotee of the Paramacharya clarifies this point.

Princess Irene from the Royal family of Greece and her mother Queen Frederica of the Hellenes, Greece, met the Paramacharya

for the first time in 1965 at Kanchi. Ever since their first meeting, they missed no further opportunity to meet His Holiness and be blessed by him. In an excellent essay under the title 'Music as A Path to the Highest' contributed to a souvenir released on the occasion of the Paramacharya's seeing the one thousandth moon in 1975 [Sahasra Chandra Darshanam] and an event celebrated with grandeur at Kanchi, the Princess writes:

"What is striking when one comes across a Sage [like Paramacharya] is that events are speeded up with great intensity inside one as well as outside in the form of Destiny. Beautiful experiences can take place due to the association with such a Person, even painful ones; no price is high enough to equal the benefit to be derived from finding oneself in the presence of one such utterly pure and infinitely good ascetic.

He holds the position of an official religious ruler. Yet, instead of living in a palace He has chosen to live in a hut and that, after having spent most of His life walking all over India in order to spread peace and comfort. Knowledge is His decoration and unlimited kindness and love His authority".

The Princess continues "During one of the meetings with His Holiness, He enquired as to what my interests were. He has a habit of asking the awed visitor questions like that. In this way also He puts one at ease. I answered that music was my great love. His advice was that I should dedicate my life to devotion and music. Elated I found myself inwardly dedicating my whole life to Him. He inspires such unbelievable love of a kind one never thought oneself capable of. I thought I would practise devotion through music. In this way, enjoyment could be maintained; yet at the same time devotion would not be neglected".

Even though the Sage of Kanchi appeared immersed in mundane affairs, all along he was deeply immersed in the Eternal Bliss of Self-Realisation. It would be easy to visualize such a noble soul, if only we study Oliver Goldsmith's poem "The Deserted Village" wherein the poet refers to the Village Preacher in these memorable lines:

As some tall cliff that lifts its awful form,
Swells from the vale, and midway
leaves its storm.

Though round the breast the rolling clouds
are spread

Eternal sunshine settles on its head" •

It makes me happy to find rejuvenation of the Bhajan tradition in recent times. Even in this day, whence our Vedas, Aagamas, scriptural injunctions ['Achara'], etc. have almost disappeared, the only phase of our Religion that has not died out, but is growing day by day, is 'Rama Bhajan'.

Singing the Divine Name of the Lord has been in practice in our country since ancient times, as a means for the 'Jivatma' to commune with the 'Paramatma'.

When doing Bhajans, we fix our mind on the Lord by singing His Divine Names, His 'Gunas' and His 'Leelas'. Melodious Bhajans with musical accompaniments easily draw all minds and hearts to the Lord.

'Nama' possesses all the powers of the Lord. By singing the Kirtanas that have been born out of the lips of those holy souls who have attained God-Realization through Nama Sankeertanam, 'paapas' are eradicated and 'punya' earned.

These are not difficult but easy sadhanas to fix the thoughts of the Lord in the mind, by singing blissfully. Srimad Bhagavatam says 'Kalau Sankeertya Kesavam' which means that Nama Sankeertanam is the only way to Liberation ['Moksha Upaya'] in this Age of Kali when one does not have the requisite strength and favourable circumstances for practicing difficult Sadhanas.

The only criterion for the performance of Nama Sankeertanam is the feeling of devotion ['Bhakti bhavana']. Knowledge of music, raga bhava and melodious voice are secondary.

- Kanchi Mahasvami