Mela Ragamalika by Maha Vaidyanatha Shiva Iyer
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श्रीमहावैद्यनाथशिवविरचिता मेळरागमालिका

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MahA VaidyanAtha Iyer (1844-1892 A.D.), popularly known as shivan, was born in the village of VaiyacEri, near Ta njAvUr. His father, Pa ncanada Iyer, who gave him initial training is music, was a music scholar and devotee of Lord shiva. Of the four sons, shivan was the third, and his elder brother, RAmasvAmi shivan was also a proficient musician and composer.

Later, the shivan brothers learnt the subtle aspects of music from Anayya, and from MaNambucAvadi Ve NkaTasubba Iyer, a direct disciple of Saint TyAgarAja. Even as a boy of ten, VaidyanAtha shivan could sing in all the three SthAyi-s with remarkable skill and accuracy. He used to sing in the GAndhAra shruti– the third kaTTai of Harmonium, and move between six kAla-s with great speed. At the age of 12, he gave his first public performance in KalliDaikuricci, in the distinguished presence of SubrahmaNya DEshikar and AmbalavANa DEshikar, the Adhipati-s (chiefs) of TiruvADutturai Matham. Among the audience were two reputed musicians of that time, Periya VaidyanAtha Iyer, and Cinna VaidyanAtha Iyer. Impressed with his performance and the depth of his musical knowledge, SubrahmaNya DEshikar as well as the Sadas (assembly) conferred upon him the title MahA. His favourite musical form was Manodharma sa NgItaM (extempore rendition), and at a very young age, he became proficient in rendering AlApana, tAnaM, pallavi, neraval and kalpanA svara. He was also gifted with a magnificent voice. Once, during a pallavicompetition, he thrilled the audience with an amazing exposition of nArAyaNgauLa rAgaM, and defeated one famous Pallavi VidvAn, VeNu, and won several laurels. Fiddle Ve Nkoba Iyer accompanied him on the violin. On another occasion, he stunned the Sabha with his famous pallavi in kalyANi rAgaM, set to Simhanandana tALaM, (the longest of the 108 tALa-s) consisting of 128 akShrarkAla-s, The sahityam of this lengthy and intricate pallavi reads:

गौरीनायक कनकसभा नायक
Later, he recast this pallavi into a tillAnA, "ThIM tara tiranA" in KalyANi, in the same Simhanandana tALaM. This tillAnA is also sung in rAga kAnaDa. VaiyanAtha Iyer was also a gifted performer of HarikathA kAlakShEpaM. Throughout his life, shivan enjoyed the healthy patronage of the rulers of RAmanAthapuraM.

The kAmbhoji pada varNaM, Pa NkajAkShi pai, and the nAgasvrAvali kRRiti shri sha Nkara GuruvaraM are his well-known compositions, among various other kRRiti-s in Tamil and Sanskrit. In addition, many of the compositions which are attributed to his elder brother RAmasvAmi, undoubtedly enjoy co-authorship with VaidyanAtha shivan, and contain the rAga mudrA guha dAsA. Here is a partial list of such compositions by shivan brothers:

पािहमाम ् स्री राजराजेश्वरि (जनरजनि)
मनविनि वरु (कनकाक्षि)
पठ्छ्जाष्टिः पै (काम्भोजि वर्णं)
कठेकणु (बेंगड)
एकाल्टरुं (नानकु रंजि)
मुतुकुमारव्यनि (शाङ्करार्थरण)
उन्नतु पार्वं तुणये (चकवाकं)
नटने शेष्यं (केदारगोढ़)
श्री शाङ्कर गुरुवरें (नागस्वरावलि)
मालू मरगानें (बिलहरि)

In any case, MahA VaidyanAtha Iyer’s greatest contribution to CarNAtic music is of course, his famous 72 MELa rAgamAlIkA. But this was not the first, single composition covering all the 72 mELa rAga-s. One LAvaNi VE NkaTa Rao, a court poet in the Tanjore kingdom, a scholar in Marathi, Tamil and Telugu, and a brilliant exponent of of LAvani (a type of Marathi folk style) singing, composed a version of the 72 mELa rAgamAlIkA, called “BAhattara MELakartA” in Marathi. This composition begins with the phrases shrImAn Jokari RAjya ViShNu sama, and incorporates the RAga mudrAin each line of the charaNaM. The theme is erotic, and is in praise of SakhArAm SAhEb, the son-in-law
of the ruler. MahA VaidyanAtha Iyer was entrusted with the task of setting this composition to music. He accomplished this with great ease in a short period of seven days, and was awarded 2000 rupees, besides many gifts. It is said that LAvaNi Ve NkTa Rao played the mRRida NgAM to the singing of MahA VaidyanAtha Iyer. However, MahA VaidyanAtha Iyer did not relish the erotic nature of the theme and the nara stuti(praising a human) in this composition, so, he wrote a suitable alternate sAhityamin praise of Lord PraNatArtihara (shiva) of the mammoth temple at TiruvaivyAru. This is the version that is currently in vogue as the MELaMAlkA. The entire rAgaMAlkAis set to Adi tALaM. The pallaviis sung in shI rAgaM, followed by some beautiful jatiphrases in the tillAnA style; there is no anupallavi, and the charaNaM has 72 lines, one for each mELaM, with the rAga mudra (signature) skillfully woven in each line. At the end of each mELa rAgaM, there is a chiTTa svaraM, and further, to enhance the beauty of the composition, his brother RAmaMAlkA shivan added additional chiTTa-svara-s at the end of each line, whose pUVa NgAM (the first half) is in the same mELaM, but the uttarA NgAM (the second half) is in the next mELaM. At the end of each chakraM, the pallavi is repeated in shri rAgaM, and after line 36, at the commencement of the Prati madhyama series, the jati phrases are also sung.

This is not a composition that we hear in a concert platforms. Occasionally, in the past, one or two chakram-s of this lengthy composition has been rendered by singers like Musiri SubrahmaNyA Iyer, and Smt. M. S. SubbalakShmi. In June 1989, the Gramaphone Company of India (HMV) released an album (LP No. ECSD 40553), and simultaneously, a 60 minute cassette (No. HTCS 03B 3346) under the title: mELa rAgAMAlkA cakra, where Smt. M. S. SubbalakShmi melodiously sings the complete rAgAMAlkA with all the above-mentioned features and chiTTa svara-s. Another audio-cassette is excerpts from a live recording of a Music Academy concert by Mudikondan Venkatarama Iyer, that features selected chakram-s from the mELaMAlkA.

The theme of this rAgAMAlkAis adwaitic, and highly philosophical, and is packed with several well-know (and not so well-known) anecdotes from ancient mythology. A full-fledged commentary in Tamil, known as shivapriya, written by V.S.V GurusvAmi shAstrigAL of VaragUr is available in a 1989 Music Academy publication, The MELaMAlkA of Maha Vaidyanathan Sivan. This tamil book, edited by T.S.Parthasarathy, also includes the notations of the rAgAMAlkA, as sung by M. S.
Subbalakshmi. The text of the original Marathi language rAgamAlikA, BAhattara MELakartA of LAvaNi VE NKaTa Rao is also given in this book.

This text (with notations in English) appeared earlier in the scholarly work, The SaMgraHA CUDAmAgni of GovindAchArya (Edited by Pandit S. Subrahmanya Sastri, and published by The Adyar Library, 1938).

Another valuable book, MELarAgamAlikA of MahA VaidyanAtha shivan, edited by Pandit S. Subrahmanya Sastri, published by the Adyar Library and Research Center, Madras (1937), later revised by Smt S. Sarada (1979) (in Sanskrit and English) provides Notations in both English and Sanskrit.
हनुमतो डिण्डभवं स्तुवतः सुतनुमतोऽददा भूतिभूषण ॥
भानुकोटिसङ्गाशा महेश घेनुकासुरमारकवाहन ॥
आनन्दनाटकप्रियामरवर श्रीनन्दनाटवीहववाहन ॥
कोकिलप्रियाश्रिकसल्याश्च गोकुलपालपनपुभयभवन ॥
बहुरुपवतीह भवान मां मुहुरुहुरजितमकजनरजन ॥
धीरभ्रात्वघायकप्रिय वीरभ्रादिपालितशरण ॥
देवकुलभरणोऽददक श्रीवसुदेवकुलभरणानतरण ॥
जितमाया माठवगोचान्तर्गतमाहेशा: त्यां विन्दुन्ति ॥
चक्रवाकुचायोऽदन् तवकुष्माण्डमतिसुराः नन्ददल्लिति ॥
तंजसा जितसूयकान्त्या गौर्य ओजसात्वतमतताः ॥
शुभकर हारकामबिरिशराजनिभकर हतभकतपरिताः ॥
हवऽर्थनियतमालाघर टह्लाङनियतचाप ॥
महान्त भैरविरुतिभारतीसहायदेवनेतकोप ॥
शिव नक्षीवाणीवशं भवन इव वस मे मनसि ॥
क्षरप्रियामलोकम परात्पर हर द्रष्टां पालितवानसि ॥
गौरीमनो हरिदम्भेर सतं गौरिव वत्से रमेते भवति ॥
योंसौ अरुणप्रियादित्यः तं त्या सा श्रुतिरानन्तमाहवति ॥
मारकुलकृ निरहुबाजन भृत्यं त्यां स्तुवन्ति ॥
चारु के शिवतिघमानाच्य मेरुधन्वन सुवखमायुन्ति ॥
सरसां गीति कीर्ति दिशा मे तरसा अशोकक्रृतस्तमदन ॥
हरिकामभोधिष्मवामरदुरितिवारक स्मिरितवदन ॥
धीर श्रावशरणसंस्म त्यां घोरश्रावणा नो जाने ॥
श्रावण सुकृतवता वरदू श्रीनगान्धनन्दीनांजने ॥
यागप्रियामलत्यागिन्याय विधि द्रागप्रियेण शिशिकितवासिसि ॥
श्रीमहावैद्यनाथधिविचित्रिता मेघरागमालिका

सदानन्दे त्यि रागवर्धनी मुदा पुनितवती रक्षितवानिस || ३२||
श्रीतगजवदन गाजीय भूषणीकृतभुज नतसुरकदम्व || ३३||
वाणधीधरीश्रीय यदिजसममवे भोगमोक्षदा जगदम्वा || ३४||
शूलकी तया धर्मपर्वर्धन्या खेलसिद्धया सुरवरिष || ३५||
केलासाचलनाटनकृतज्ञजयदुत्रकचरणाज्ञं || ३६||
(प्रणतारिद्र प्रभो पुरारे)

(प्रतिमाणममेश ३७-७२)
प्रतिविन्दुसालतगफलसमा विषया इति विम्बाधरा: सन्त्यज्ञति || ३७||
ये भवजलरत्नं सन्तरितं ते भवद्विकितं भजन्ति || ३८||
श्च शतवराचिचित्मालाधर जलप्रणाशनाभुजमन्दर || ३९||
सुरदानवनीतामृतविमुख वरदाननिरत तारक || ४०||
भो: पावनीपिद्धस्वादन रसिकभूप अव नीपवसुन्दर || ४१||
रघुप्रियार्चितराजीवचरण मध्यप्रणाशन भुजमन्दर || ४२||
गामभोधि: तीर्थ इव यया भवाभोधि: तव दयया || ४३||
इह प्रसतयो भव प्रयतमया सय प्रमथय प्रागुमया || ४४||
सर्वशुभापं तु वराष्टिकारं कुर्वनुग्रहं तया वन्देदहम् || ४५||
सदय पश्चात्मार्गिणि मनुने हदयभा न कुर्व सन्देधम् || ४६||
सुवणा गीतं समुपिदशि प्रथमवर्णाङ्गीकृतवक्षण || ४७||
दिव्यमाणिन्येव बदनागकषणं भवमणिलिंधसंकक्षण || ४८||
सुकलारिमुखार्मप्रपृजित धवलाम्बरीपातनेद्वेद्वरं || ४९||
सुस्थनामनारायणीसहचर स्वरुपभासकारं || ५०||
धर्मकामवर्ध्नीविलुप्त सिद्धसर शुभदायक || ५१||
नितरं अप्रियवादिनि विमुख नतराम अप्रिसायक || ५२||
चिदम्बरगमननाथमाघरण कदम्बरमण मम दीयताम् || ५३||
श्रीमहावैद्यनाथशिवपरिचिता मेल्लागमालिका

विशेष भरितं त्वायायमूर्त्यां शाखडनमाधीयताम् ॥ ५४॥

िथामाध्यिकृतवामभाग कोमठाँजजशरभि ॥ ५५॥

षणपुरप्रियात्मुक्तजनक हिरण्याङ्गनत शरभाज ॥ ५६॥

हर सिंधुनदमण्यांचन नरसिंह अजिनाम्वर ॥ ५७॥

पुरह हेमवतीमनोधर हर रक्षितसुरक्षित ॥ ५८॥

विदितथर्मां अतिकायजिताम् मुदितमना: लव रक्षितवान् ॥ ५९॥

नीतिमति: जनेवतिपियोदसी प्रीतिमतिरहितान् शिखितवान् ॥ ६०॥

िथ्रोपोधिका तां अणिमार्दां परोधिकान्तामणिसंविताम् ॥ ६१॥

धर्मपर्वंशी सुर्यभिमां निर्मलभंकैंविताम् ॥ ६२॥

मननशीलतं गीवारापते: जननवर्जितामुक्तवतीम् ॥ ६३॥

भूमिपु वाचपरितसम्बन्धमामिने ज्ञान दत्तवतीम् ॥ ६४॥

मेचकत्याणि वाच दिशाती मोनकदारिनी रमसे ॥ ६५॥

विचिन्ताम्बृविशर्दभाग सचिननुसयमाग: क्षमसे ॥ ६६॥

सुधिरित्रमुखकतस्नीत सुधिरित्रमुखरितवाच ॥ ६७॥

ज्योति: स्वरूपिणि त्वति प्रसन्ने भाति स्वरूपं कि नाय: ॥ ६८॥

धातुवर्नी: तवाभिभाषुः पातुकांमती मम रसना ॥ ६९॥

सुचिरां आसिकामुबूणि हि सतां मुखे नासिकेव विवसन ॥ ७०॥

कोसलप: त्वासस्तृपूर्णां हित्वा समापते मुनुदे हि ॥ ७१॥

भक्तापदानसिंधिय त्यक्तापदानन्दे मम देहि ॥ ७२॥

(प्रणातारितह प्रभो पुरारे)

॥ इति श्रीमहावैद्यनाथशिवपरिचिता मेल्लागमालिका समासा ॥

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