



Saint Sri Purandara Dasa

The life of Sri Purandara Dasa (1484 to 1564 AD) has been very intriguing, interesting and incomprehensible. Born to a very devout and affluent merchant couple (hailing from Purandaragad, a town in the then Vijayanagar empire, presently in Maharashtra) Varadappa Nayaka & Lakshmi bai by the grace of Lord Venkateshwara, the child was christened 'Srinivasa nayaka'. It is believed by many that Nayaka was an 'Avatar' (reincarnation) of sage Narada who descended on Earth as ordained by Lord Narayana Himself, with an agenda to profess 'Harinama Sankeerthana' to the World. Srinivasa Nayaka had his initial coaching from his learned Gurus and by virtue of his sheer brilliance, soon mastered the Vedas and Upanishads and became a scholarly genius. Alas all his scholarliness was clouded by his inexhaustible desire for wealth and worldly possessions. He quickly grasped the intricate skills of jewellery business from his father and became a very prosperous and an astute businessman. Time elapsed and he was married off to a devout woman by name Saraswati bai. Nayaka was deeply entrenched in amassing wealth, beyond anyone's imagination only to be nicknamed 'Navakoti Narayana'. His desire for wealth made him a skinflint, blinded him from doing anything charitable. It is believed that had he continued in his profession and passed it on to the generations to come, the estimated wealth in today's terms would be several zillion zillion dollars, perhaps even beyond the imagination of the likes of Bill Gates, Sultan of Brunei, so on.

Lord Narayana had His own ways of reforming and He appeared before Nayaka in the guise of an aged Brahmin, begging for alms to perform the thread ceremony (upanayana) of his son. Unmoved by the old man's predicament, Nayaka refused to give away anything and under some pretext or other made Him knock at his doors for six months. Finally when he was threatened by the old man that he would commit suicide if he didn't get some dole from him, Nayaka out of sheer desperation gave him an 'untenable coin' and ordered that he should not show up again.

The old man then went to Nayaka's residence to narrate the whole episode to his wife who while sympathizing with him expressed her helplessness to part with anything as whatever she possessed was Nayaka's wealth, could not part with anything lest she incurred the wrath of Nayaka. The old man cajoled her to part with her nose ornament (mookuthi) since it was gifted by her parents in marriage and that Nayaka had no rights over it. She obliged and he straight away went to Nayaka's shop, this time not begging for alms but to pledge the jewel to get some money. On seeing the ornament, Nayaka suspecting it to be his wife's jewel some how managed to browbeat the Brahmin to show up later for the money, locked the jewel in an iron safe, shut his shop and headed home to ascertain the truth. He yelled at her from a distance and asked her about the missing ornament on her nose. Saraswati bai sensing the anger writ on her husband's face went to her private room and decided to end her life by consuming poison. To her utter surprise and delight, she found the ornament drop into the poison cup from nowhere and she gave it to Nayaka. When questioned, she admitted to having gifted it to the old man. This incident made Nayaka very confused, curious and he ran helter-skelter only to discover that the jewel he thought he had 'locked safely' was missing.

Thus realization dawned on him that the 'old man' was none other than the Lord Narayana Himself and regretted to have made Him beg at his door step for no less than six months. He realized the worthlessness (vacuum or 'lolalotte' in Dasa's own words) of all his wealth, instantly renounced all his possessions, became a haridasa and headed straight to Hampi (in Vijayanagar) with his wife and children to seek solace from the then Asthana guru Vyasa Teertha. Guru Vyasa teertha who had foreseen this welcomed Nayaka, blessed him profusely and gave him deeksha, urged him to come out of his cloud, compose hymns in praise of the Lord. He renamed him 'Purandara Dasa' and hailed him as 'Dasa shreshta', the greatest among haridasas. In addition, gave him the penname 'Purandara Vittala', advised him to compose in Kannada, thus conveying the message of the holy scriptures to the ordinary folks, which till then were in Sanskrit, understood only by a privileged few.

Purandara dasa is known to have composed 475000 kritis over a span of 40 years under the penname 'Purandara Vittala', packing the essence of all Vedas, Upanishads and other holy scriptures in simple Kannada. His compositions have remained unparalleled in simplicity of language, message, devotion, polity, philosophy and so on. His compositions are of varied nature, devaranamas, padagalu, ugabhogas, suladis etc. His guru Vyasa named some of his compositions as 'Purandaropanishad' which was in simple Kannada. The original 'Upanishads' were in Sanskrit, difficult for the common man to understand.

Purandara dasa traveled length and breadth of our country, visiting all the famous shrines, composed kritis pertaining to the presiding deity of each shrine. His relationship with the Lord was unique in itself, he reveled adoring the Lord in all nine possible ways – 'Navavidha Bhakti'. During his travail he came across people of all walks of life, composed thousands of kritis (known as Dasara padagalu), each of them packed with gospels, counsels fit for all occasions for all men for all time to come. He preached and practised what he composed. Some of his kritis revealed his own life's experience, to name few:

1. Adaddella Olithe Aayitu
2. Namma bhagya doddado
3. Muiyage Muiya Teeritu
4. Mosa hodenello
5. Naa madida karma
6. Dari yavudayya vaikuntake,
7. Badukidenu, badukidenu, bhavavenage hingitu.
8. Dasanenthaguvenu Dare yolage nanu,

and countless others.

He and his contemporary Kanaka (another great haridasa of Karnataka) became very close to their Guru Vyasa by virtue of their 'true bhakti', a fact many hardcore orthodox disciples found it hard to digest. When Purandara dasa's attention was drawn to criticism of some of his jealous detractors that his compositions were too simple and lacked 'literary excellence', he is known to have composed a few "Mundige kritis" which even the pundits found it difficult to decipher. Eg.,

1. Mullu koneya mele mooru kereya katte
2. Madu sikkadalla
3. Brahmandadolage arasi nodalu
4. Tarakka bindige

So on.

It is a pity that only a few thousand of those 475000 are in print and the rest have remained unpublished, perhaps not even traceable. In the opinion of several modern day scholars such persons are a rare phenomenon, perhaps once in a millennium one may get to see such a legendary genius composer. Hypothetically if all the 475000 kritis were to be traced out and if one attempts to publish all, even to compile at modern computing speeds it would take approximately 80man-years !!, such is the vastness of his work. It is opined by some litterateurs that he doesn't fit into the class

of conventional composers or 'vaggeyakaras' nor should he be regarded as one. His spontaneous utterances became 'kritis, ugabhogas and suladhis' and all the 'rules' of composing such as prasa (rhyme), alliterations, Chandassu (poetic grammar), etc. fell in place! He was a 'Yuga Purusha', never will anyone come anywhere near to his composing skills.

His contributions to Indian classical music (both Carnatic and Hindustani) have been immense and he is rightly regarded as 'Sangeeta Pitamaha'. His composing style namely the second letter rhyme (dvitiyakshara prasa) had a strong influence on subsequent generation of composers including Thyagaraja. It is on record that Saint Thyagaraja (who took birth a couple of centuries later) adored Dasa and endeared him as his 'manasika guru' on the advice of his mother. Purandara dasa systemized the method of teaching Carnatic music which is followed till the present day. He introduced the raga "Maya malava gowla" as the basic scale for music instruction. Pillarigeete in raga Malahari (janya raga of Mayamalavagowla) for beginners is followed by all music tutors even today. Saralevarase, jantivarase, saptatala alankaras were all his creations.

Hindustani musician Tansen's guru Swami Haridas was a disciple of Purandara dasa. Several Western thinkers and philosophers showed keen interest in his compositions and a 19th century German monk Hermann Mogling took pains to learn Kannada and is known to have translated some select kritis of Purandara dasa into German language.

Like all humans Dasa too experienced bereavements, losing his wife and one of his sons fairly early. But he went on undeterred – finally after attaining 80 ageing took its toll and he ascended to Vaikunta (believed to be on 15th Jan 1564) leaving behind a host of followers and an invaluable treasure, his 475000 kritis!

SAD PART

It is unfortunate that society (which includes several rulers, successive governments over several centuries) failed to accord him the place and recognition he richly deserved. Even after 500 years of his birth, there is not an Idol or a statue worth a name, even the one carved on one of the pillars of the dilapidated 'Purandara Mantapa' in Hampi is an apology. There is not even a street or a circle named after him anywhere in Karnataka.

SPDMT – Present & future

With a sense of deep concern, Sri Purandara dasa memorial trust (SPDMT) built a memorial for Sri Purandara dasa in Bangalore, perhaps the only one of its kind in the entire state, inaugurated by HH Vishwesha teertha swamiji in June 2013. It has also taken upon itself the onus of propagating his kritis in various forms like music, lectures, harikathas, etc.

SPDMT took the initiative to bring out a 'Harikatha' DVD on Sri Purandara Dasaru, (titled 'Navakoti Narayana') lucidly and emotionally rendered by Keerthanalankara Vidwan Nittur Mohan kumar drawing excerpts from his life. The DVD was released on March 1, 2014 to mark the occasion of the 450th Aradhana of the great saint. It carries introductory remarks & good wishes by Ganakalabhushana Vidwan Sri R.K. Padmanabha.

The TRUST believes that this heart rendering narration will kindle the minds of several viewers to dedicate themselves to spreading the message of the great saint apart from imbibing a bit of his preaching, to make this World a better place for mankind, to put it in Dasa's words, "Manava janma doddadu, Ida haani madalu bedi", which seems to be more relevant in today's context than ever before.