

Sankeerthana for Salvation

Expressing devotion through bhakthi is a well-known Hindu tradition. Bhakthi is love, attachment, and dedication to a personal god. However, bhakthi also implies that a bhaktha (a devotee) will strive for pure thought and proper conduct at all times and will love god without expectation of benefits in return. The Bhagavad Geetha says that when a bhaktha is sincere in devotion, the bhaktha would eventually attain salvation.

How should one express bhakthi? The Bhagavatha Purana describes nine different ways one can express bhakthi.¹ Of the nine, the Hindu sages consider Sankeerthana or expressing bhakthi through music to be the most desirable and the most effective path to salvation. Sankeerthana to express one's devotion gained prominence after the Vaishnavite Azhwars and the Saivite Nayanmars composed the musical hymns Naalayira Divya Prabhandam and the Thirumurai respectively. Because the hymns were written in easy to follow lyrics and in the local language, they were enthusiastically adopted for group singing. Unlike more traditional rituals, where one must have knowledge of the mantras or the ritual processes, joining a group of bhakthas and repeating simple hymns is easier to do. And, one can be part of such a community, regardless of one's caste, creed, or class. The only qualification required is sincerity and devotion to god.

Since the time of the Azhwars and Nayanmars, other saints and scholars also have contributed to the Sankeerthana tradition by composing musical hymns that facilitate group singing². The most well-known proponent of the Sankeerthana (Nadopasana) tradition, however, is Saint Thyagaraja, one of the trinities of Indian classical music. He composed the Divya Nama Kritis (or hymns in praise of god's name). In the Ritigowla kriti, "Raga Ratna Malikase," Thyagaraja Swami explains why he composed the Divya Nama Kritis. "As the sole means of my salvation, with the authority of all Scriptures, as the path to happiness of all Yogis and for all Bhagavathas to sing together, I composed these songs" (Ref: Divya Nama Kirtanas, by P. Sreenivasan, Vidyarthi.org). In the Divya Nama Kritis, Thyagaraja Swami describes what makes one a true devotee. A true devotee is one who considers his body a temple – pure and sacred; his conduct free of selfishness, his thoughts unwavering from divinity, and his efforts directed at relinquishing the rewards from his evil deeds (Ref: Paripalaya, Ritigowla). Thyagaraja Swami also emphasizes that Sankeerthana or Nadopasana will lead to salvation not only for the purest among us but also for the worst sinner – one who had succumbed to poor conduct and character in the past (See, Rama Krishnayanare, Gowlipanthu).

¹ Shravana (listening to stories of god), Smarana (reciting god's names), Pada-Seva (worship god's feet), Archana (ritual worship), Vandana (prostrating before god), Dasya (service to god), Sakhya (friend of god), Atma-nivedana (dedicating oneself to god), and Keerthana (worship god through music)

² For example, Arunagirinathar's (Thirupugazh) on Lord Muruga, Annamacharya on Thirupathi Balaji, Purandaradasa on Purandaravittala, Bhardrachala Ramadas on Sri Krishna and so on.

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