**Bhajana Movement – Makes Every Indian Proud**

In the article, “Unity in Diversity”, I had commented that while Indian music originated from religious rituals, the music itself cannot be characterized as religious music. While this is true, it is also true that religion is a significant component of Indian music. We can understand Hindu culture only when we first understand the integral beliefs, actions, and values that represent a Hindu way of life. Similarly, to understand Indian Music, an artifact of Hindu culture, we must also understand the Hindu way of life. Another important symbol of Hindu culture is bhakthi or devotional worship. An example of the devotional worship is ‘bhajana’ where worship is intermingled with music. Therefore, any discussion on culture and music of India will not be complete without a discussion on the bhakthi movement and the bhajana traditions and the twins’ contribution to the religious, social, and political history of India.

The word bhakthi originated from the word ‘Bhaj,’ meaning affection or love expressed to a personal god. Love or affection can be characterized as bhakthi only when the love or affection is expressed without expectations; it should be unmitigated and unselfish love of God. Bhakthi differs from other religious thoughts and expressions by placing greater emphasis on simple devotion over intellectual discourses. Every individual can express bhakthi. An individual’s social standing, education, or knowledge, does not limit him from being a part of the bhakthi tradition. In this ability to unite all people without differentiation, bhakthi traditions reflect the very core of Hindu culture.

One of the salient features of the bhakthi rituals is the repetition of the numerous names of a personal God. Even the Upanishads, somewhat averse to rituals and worship of numerous personal Gods, recognized the efficacy of bhakthi rituals. The Upanishads believed that the worship of numerous personal Gods could be a means to the unification with a single, all-pervading soul or Brahman. The Bhagavad-Gita also expressed a similar view, “for many are the paths of men, but they all in the end come to me.” Dr. T. M. P. Mahadevan, the philosopher, summarizes the Upanishad and Gita views as, “…through concentration of God’s names and attributes, we can rid ourselves of “our obsession with the name-and-form world.”

Bhajana is bhakthi verbalized through music. One of the great features of Indian music is that it provides the flexibility to use the music in various contexts – during a concert performance, during religious rituals, or to hold group worship. During group worship, bhajana is an effective means to visually express love and devotion to God. To participate in the group worship, the members need not be proficient in music or learned in the Vedas or the rituals. They only need devotion to a personal God and the willingness to express their devotion.

Although pageantry – performing a God’s and Goddess’ marriage ceremony and dancing during the ceremony - are common during bhajana traditions, they are far more than visual displays. The bhajana traditions are primarily philosophical thoughts expressed through a musical medium. For example, when a congregation recites the names of Rama and Seetha or Rama and Hanuman or Krishna and Radha, they are not merely verbalizing their devotion to a personal God. They are also expressing spiritual and metaphysical beliefs. Rama seeking to retrieve his beloved Seetha from Lanka is not a story of abduction but a symbol of a Being’s effort to recover his soul and uniting with it. Seetha is not only a character in Ramayana but also a manifestation of compassion, grace, and forgiveness – the female attributes that everyone should cultivate. Hanuman is not just a character with unselfish devotion to God Rama, but the image of a liberated soul who serves others without expectations or rewards. Radha is not a mere female who adores her Lord, Krishna. Radha and Krishna represent the concepts of Jeevatma and Paramatma respectively. Therefore, bhajana is not story telling through simple music, but like its parent, the Indian classical music, they contain subliminal messages that communicate spiritual and philosophical thoughts – be a compassionate Seetha, a devoted Radha or a selfless Hanuman.

The bhakthi traditions, notwithstanding their religious and spiritual dimensions, surprisingly, are also a political movement. Bhakthi traditions and group worship of a personal God had existed since the pre-Christian era; but, in later periods, the movement dissipated and lost its prominence. Particularly in Northern India, with the advancement of other religions such as Buddhism, Jainism, and Islam and conversion to these religions, Hindu faith was slowly being eroded. Both Buddhism and Jainism promoted asceticism and questioned idol worship and also, the Hindu belief in a soul. These affronts to Hindu faith created friction between the Hindus and the Buddhists and Jains. Initially, in Southern India, such religious conflicts were far fewer; however, around the sixth century A.D., tensions began to rise. Hindu religious leaders, poets, and saints in Southern India became angry at the forced conversions, denial of the Vedic teachings and the agnostic views propagated by Buddhism. Poet-musicians such as the Nayanmars (worshippers of Shiva) and Alvars (worshippers of Vishnu) took it as a crusade to mobilize Hindu communities and used bhakthi rituals as a means to achieve this objective.

The Nayanmars and the Alvars were not very proficient in Sanskrit. Consequently, they wrote their poems and other verses in local languages such as Tamil. They believed that verses written in local vernacular would be understood by the ordinary people and that would encourage them to participate in rituals such as bhajana where the verses would be repeated as a group. They also set these verses and hymns to simple musical tunes so that everyone could follow. A significant outcome of these efforts was that it brought ordinary people, regardless of their castes or creeds, to worship and sing together. Thus, the Nayanmars and Alvars not only revived the bhakthi traditions but also gave the ordinary individual the belief that through simple recital of a God’s name, he/she can attain salvation. Eventually, with the advent of the bhakthi-bhajana movement, converted Hindus began to return to their parent religion; both Jainism and Buddhism began to lose their influence in India. Therefore, we can characterize the bhajana movement, not only as a great social exercise and a cultural experiment, but also as the pioneer ahimsa or non-violent movement in human history.

The bhajana movement also gave Induia some of its greatest poets and musicians - Basava, Purandaradasa, Annamacharya, Tukaram, Jayadeva and others. Some of these poet-musicians such as Tukaram, supposedly from a lower caste, also created social equality by attracting people from all walks of life, including from the so called upper castes to join in worship rituals. Others like, Ramdas, contributed not only to the bhakthi movement but also participated in the struggles against Muslim oppression. The irony is that the bhakthi-bhajana traditions which grew as a consequence of the domination of other religions, eventually also influenced those religions. The simple worship through music and dance permeated even the Christian and Islamic worship practices; for example, Sufi Muslims, began routinely using music and dance as part of their worship rituals.

The development of Indian musical forms cannot be comprehended without examining their historical, political, and social origins and contexts. Bhajana is more than a musical expression of bhakthi. It is a socio-political movement within the foundations of religious beliefs. It is also a proof that great objectives can be accomplished in the most peaceful of ways. The Bhajana movement makes every Indian proud.