

## **THIRTY FIRST ANNUAL TYAGARAJA UTSAVAM Of Greater Houston, Texas**

*By Nalinakshi Rangala*

Sri Tyagaraja was a great music composer, a saintly devotee whose life was full of the travails of a pious soul in its path towards jivan mukthi thru saguna upasana. This is how most of us know him. However, anecdotes of his life are elevating, and lend insight into the personality of the great artist, and his lofty attitude towards life.

Tyagaraja lived during the time when south India was in great political turmoil, Tanjavur was taken over by the Nawab of Arcot; East India Company was shaking the country. Peace and people's intense faith in God and the noble spirit of sacrifice were eroded and materialism took over. The dharmic life of Tyagaraja is a moral tale. The various phases of the life of the musical genius, and his compositions during those times, seem to be connected with the development of his spirituality and ethical notions.

In earlier years his devotion to Sri Rama was in preference to all other gods, and highly ritualistic. This soon gave way, after an illness, to acceptance and openness when he sang Karunajoodavamma with the realization that all devotions lead to the path of salvation. The gradual unfolding of his spiritual temperament can be seen in his music and his compositions. Although he remained a devotee of Sri Rama as his Ishta devata, he revered all glorious aspects of the Divine. During his pilgrimage in south India, he sang the praise of all deities.

Time and again, during India's national crises of humiliation from invaders, and eclipse of Hindu dharma, musicians and saints kept alive the warmth, and reminders of the dharma through their musical genius, spiritual transparency and strength. Sri Tyagaraja's works have been likened to Adi Sankara's and the Bhagavad Gita for their timeliness in bringing solace, strength and spirituality to the people. Of Bhagavad-Gita, it is said that it contains shallows where a child may wade, and depths where a giant may fear to plunge. Similarly Sri Tyagaraja's works contain simple Kirthanas that even a beginner can learn to sing, and complex Kritis, which experts may toil with. Like Thiruvalluvar who wrote the Tirukkural verses for 'one race', Sri Tyagaraja gave songs and music for 'all people'. He consolidated the whole of south India in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with his music: besides promoting bhakthi, he raised social consciousness - Padavi nisathbhakthi - is on status; Kannathalli - talks about the superficiality of people etc., Telialeru Rama in his Denuka is about hypocrisy, and Sama kriti - Shantamulekha among many.

His life story is exemplary - for his humility and reverence toward genius in all quarters, his life in poverty, disregarding worldly wealth by conscious choice, his scorn to 'sell his soul' for wealth, and his great contribution to music. Sri Tyagaraja studied all prior musical resources and used the knowledge in his novel Kritis. He introduced the system of developing Sangatis or music phrases, he showed that prose suits music far better than poetry and used lyrics with intensity of feeling, giving much scope for sangatis.

Sri Tyagaraja crystallized into many kririts rare ragas, which may have otherwise been lost. He delved deep into the mysteries of raga development, following the Venkatamukhi

system that had prevailed in south India since 1660, but thus far not fully expounded. He selected as many as 47 Melas of the 72, in his 500 or more Kritis.

When he passed in January of 1847, he was buried (as befitting a sannyasi) in his Samadhi at Tiruvaiyyaru. Hundreds of music lovers gather there to sing his compositions every year and celebrate a music festival. Of all musicians and music festivals, the festival of Tyagaraja has uniquely captured the hearts of the people not only in Tiruvaiyyaru but also all over the world.