

Muthutandavar : A Landmark Composer

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The prolific output and the glory of the Musical Trinity in the first half of the 19th century has eclipsed the contribution of all the earlier pioneers to a large extent. Of these, Purandaradasa's reputation has remained intact, with his recognition as Sangeeta Pitamaha, while Kshetragna's work has been kept alive by dancers. The work of others such as Annamacharya has been revived and refurbished more recently as a product of the efforts to rediscover our pre-Tyagaraja heritage. The work of the Tamil pioneers however is being treated not as part of the main stream but as something separate of the mainstream but as something separate called Tamil Isai. Of these pioneers, Muthutandavar has suffered most, being recognized only as a composer of pada-s or being forgotten altogether. In fact, his work marks the transition from the earlier Tamil pann corpus to the new corpus of kriti-s in Tamil, and the burgeoning of a more professional scientific system of music. Some Tamil scholars like Mu Arunachalam would like to recognize him as the founder of Carnatic music. We need therefore to know more about the man and his music.

A basic difficulty is setting the historical period in which he flourished. There is little doubt that he was much earlier to the Trinity. It is also clear from international evidence that he flourished well after the 13th century, after the decline of the Cholas and the brief rise of the Pandyas. He refers to the Chidambaram temple with gopurams built by (Chera, Chola and) pandya, to the shrine of Sivakami, to Lord Ganesa and to the Linga, all of which were added to the temple between the 11th and 13th centuries. There is no cross reference to any contemporary king or chieftain the way Arunagiri refers to Prabudadeva. But his chinna melam caste origin and his family attachment to the Seerkazhi temple, and his Tamil idiom, place him broadly in the late Nayaka period before the conquest of Tanjavur by Vyankoji and the establishment of Maratha rule there. We can broadly place him in the mid-17th century to the middle of the 18th century. Arunachalam would place him in the early 17th century.

We know pretty little about his personal life but the legends about his creativity indicate that he was regarded by his contemporaries as divinely inspired. He was born in a musical chinna melam family (traditional nagaswara players) attached to the Seerkazhi temple. Being afflicted with some disease (cancer or just asthma), he could not meet hereditary obligations in the service of the temple. He spent much of his time listening to the devotional songs at the home of a devadasi attached to the temple. But his family was later estranged from this dasi's family while Tandavar continued his visits. As a result, he was alienated from his own family. On one evening, he was hungry and tired and fell asleep inside the temple, and the authorities locked the temple up at the usual time. Legend has it that goddess Parvati, in the guise of the temple priest's daughter, woke him up and fed him with temple prasadam. Tandavar then asked her to suggest a remedy for his affliction. The goddess advised him to go to the Chidambaram temple everyday and compose a song in praise of the Lord, beginning with the first word or phrase he heard in the sanctum. When she disappeared, Tandavar realized that he had been fed and blessed

by goddess Parvati. In the morning the temple authorities inquired about how and why he came to be there. Tandavar's story was confirmed as he had the temple's prasadam carrying vessel with him, which the priest took with him the night before. He was therefore named Muthutandavar, in recognition of his receiving Devis blessings. (His earlier name is not known).

The next day, when he visited Chidambaram as commanded by the goddess, he heard the words 'Bhooloka Kailasam with which he started his first composition. From then on he continued to compose a song each day. One day, he could not go to the temple as the Kaveri river was in flood and so he composed a song as saying how his day was wasted without seeing the Lord (Kaanamal veeniley Kaalam). On a snake, he composed a song on the Lord as the rare medicine (Arumarundu oru tiru marundu) and was revived. Finally when he grew older, he prayed to the Lord to take him into his Jyoti as in the case of Manickavasagar. The Lord granted his wishes.

These legends replicate the miracles attributed to saint Gnanasambandar. They indicate clearly that Muthutandavar was regarded as a divinely inspired composer in his own lifetime and later.

To assess the musical contribution of Muthutandavar, we need to know something about the history of musical composition before his time. Both Sanskrit and Tamil had contrived rules of prosody for poetry early and admitted new and varied forms as the centuries passed. While such poetry could be set to music, there was no special structure of parts or limbs and rules about using vowel sounds to emphasize raga-s or phrases. Bharata's Natya Sastra discusses different types of compositions for dance, indicating their content and context. In fact, contemporary Hindustani musicologists like Jaideva Singh have liked to trace back the origins of khayal, ghazal and thumri to these prescriptions. But all said and done, these descriptions of structure of various genres of songs are too vague and general. There is no precise definition of limbs and their musical relations to each other and to the beats of the tala, in the sense we now use 'aasu' for a pallavi. There was probably some flexible structure not set down precisely and whatever structure there was, transmitted orally through a student- teacher personal relationship.

For several centuries, there was no clear distinction between the prosody of poetry and the prosody of a song as such. It begins to emerge with Jayadeva in Sanskrit and with the Tevaram singers in Tamil. Jayadeva bypassed the standard forms like Arya, Anushtubh or Bhujangaprayata in his main songs even if he used them at the beginning of each chapter. There is still no division into parts but each of the eight songs (ashtapadi-s) in each chapter has a repetitive part like a burden of the song and the vowel distribution is clearly more musical than poetry-oriented. A little earlier in Tamil Nadu, the great lady who organized Tevaram songs into pann-s for singing in the 11th century introduced the mode of kondu kootti in which words are added on and on in a string, as in the Tevaram-s Aduthanai, or Siraiyaarum.

At some later stage, the idea of the three anga-s or limbs - pallavi, anupallavi and charanam took shape and the setting of a song to a tala structure was firmed up. It was

given to Purandaradasa to popularize this structure but it is not clear whether the anupallavi was separated from the other two limbs. Possibly what passes for anupallavi in his songs now is either obtained by splitting the pallavi as in Naaneke Bhadavanu, naaneke paradesi, Srinidhe hariyanage nee Miruvadhanaga or by converting the first charanam into an anupallavi as in Jagadodddharana. His songs were also labelled pada-s (Dasara Padagalu)

Anyway the three-limb structure set to precise tala and gati was emerging slowly. The man who firmed it up in Tamil Nadu fully and finally was Muthutandavar. The three limbs are clearly marked out and the tala structure is harmonized with the wording and the three-limb format. Somewhat earlier to him Arunagirinathar had set a different model in his Tiruppugazh away from poetry but also away from the three-limb model. He used a different talagati format for each of his songs, and each song had a studied asymmetry in structure without three separate limbs. Tamil musical composition might have followed this format but it did not, as Muthutandavar refined and firmed up the three-limb model.

In his time and down to the time of Tyagaraja, music and dance were much related and this is reflected in his use of tala words in several of his compositions. We find this usage in Oothukkadu Venkatasubbier, half a century later. In fact this practice persisted down to Muthuswami Dikshitar. It was Tyagaraja who broke this practice and cut off the connections with dance, with his ill concealed aversion to dance as made clear by his stern refusal to refer to Siva even once as a dancer.

There was much gain from this separation and some loss. (The mutual influence of dance and music on the credit and debit sides is a separate subject). Muthutandavar really set the model for subsequent Tamil composers from Marimutha Pillai to Arunachala Kavi, to Gopalakrishna Bharati, Ghanam Krishna Iyer, Kavikunjara Bharati down to Neelakantha Sivan. He was also the last towering figure in the Tamil melam caste tradition before Venkatamakhis scientization of the raga system divided the musical community into supporters and critics of that system, the latter drawn largely from melam castes.

Muthutandavar was again the great link with the nayika bhava devotional poetry in Tamil. He took it over smoothly into his pada-s, and provided the model for Ghanam Krishna Iyer and other 19th century composers. His pada-s have the same three-limb structure as his kriti compositions but are of course characterized by the erotic romantic approach with their varied srngara from virahotkanthita to kalahantarita. In fact the padam Teruvil vaaraano made famous by Balasaraswati, portrays a vasakasajjika, not of the classical type but the 'Kaikkilai" type characteristic of Muththollayiram and the various ula-s.

Won't he come along this street

Won't he turn and look at me

Won't he half by my door

Won't he say a word or two to me
Won't I entice him and embrace him with love
That teacher supreme
That Lord of Devas, the dancing Lord of Chidambaram.

Another song from the waiting woman - Varuvaar varuvaar - tells a slightly different tale.

My friends console me saying he will come,
he will come but I don't see him coming.
My friends walk from the door to the street
and to the temple to plead for lovelorn me
but yet I don't see him coming.

But when the Lord does come at night, the lady plays hard to get Vendaam ideallam:

Don't touch me Lord, don't do all this.

My mother and my people
won't be scared if you are the Lord,

Oh, Dancer-King of Tillai!

You think that if I am alone you can seduce me

I am not like the ladies of Darukhavana,

I know a thing or two

Take me in public with a gift of a saree

And we can embrace and enjoy all night and day

In another padam Naane Valiya vandaney, however, the lady shamelessly offers herself.

I have come to you by myself

Why be angry my Lord of Ambalam

I tortured myself with dreadful thoughts and fears

I have come to you to offer my heavy breasts

I dare not send another with my request and so

I came all alone.

Muthutandavar also deals with the "other woman" more roughly and directly.

The nayika challenges the other woman thus:

You can never embrace him publicly, you woman.

Come on, defeat me if you can get the Lord's favour.

How can you forget your trickery and how can you change into a noble lady

Who can get any pleasure from you.

You boast idly that you will capture the love of the Lord, all of a sudden.

Ha, Ha!

It is evident that Muthutandavar was familiar with the intricacies of nayika bhava in Tamil literature and it is equally clear that this literature was alive in several circles though bowdlerized by puritanical commentaries and Sanskritization. It is interesting to note that the later Tamil padam composers of the 19th century took up Lord Muruga as the hero and the target of their pada-s, instead of Siva as Nataraja. This 'return' to Muruga as lover supreme seems to have occurred after a gap of a few centuries, after Muruga was glorified again by Arunagiri, Kumaragurupara and Kachiappa Muni from the 17th century onwards. I have referred to this in an earlier article on Kavadi Chindu (Sruti67) but the matter deserves further research, We may note however that some of the 19th century Tamil pada-s on Muruga take greater liberties than Muthutandavar did with Nataraja and some of the pachchai pada-s by Muthusubba Bharati and his ilk are even lewd, witness his Sahana padam :

Kaiyil panam illamal kalavi seyya vandeero ? Kadanaha varamaatten Swami!

(oh! you have come to make love without cash; Not on credit here, my Lord!)

The Tamil Isai movement and other influences led to a revival of interest in Muthutandavar in 1941-42 and the late Tiruppamburam Swaminatha Pillai set to music 60 of his kriti-s in wellknown and apoorva raga-s after some discussion and these were published later by the Annamalai University (1967, 3rd edition). These did not include his pada-s, but did include several nindastuti songs. Muthutandavar's successor and

admirer, Marimutha Pillai seems to have latched on to this idea, and two of his songs carry nindastuti much further, namely Edukkittanai modi in Surati and Enna Pizhappu pizhappaiya in Sourashtram. Swaminatha Pillai's tunes however, do not seem to have been fully adopted. Madurai Mani sang Sevikka vendumaiya in Andolika, instead of Abhogi, Professor S. Ramanathan sang Aarukkuththan teriyum in Devamanohari instead of Natabhairavi and M. S. Subbulakshmi sings Aaraar aasaipadar in Nadanamakriya instead of Sankrabharanam. The changes were made probably because Pillais tunes were suited primarily to performance on instruments.

We may however be thankful that a good few of Muthutandavar's compositions are in circulation in some form. We must also remember that he was the first composer of kriti-s and pada-s in Tamil, thus inaugurating the transition from Pann Murai into the style of Carnatic music and the transfer of nayika bhava sringara from its birthplace in Tamil devotional poetry into the popular padam idiom. For this, he deserves to be recognized as one of the Founders of Carnatic music.