



Daasa Vaibhava – The glory of Daasa literature

Daasa Sahitya refers to Kannada Vaishnavite poetry and literature of the Bhakti movement by “Hari Daasas”, literally servants of Lord Vishnu. The most popular compositions from this literary genre are called *dEvara nAmas*.

Sripadaraya (1404 – 1502) was the pioneer of Daasa Sahitya and was closely associated with the Vijayanagar empire. He is considered the “Daasa Pitamaha”. He wrote under the pen name “Ranga Vithala”. His most well-known composition is *kangaLidyAtakO kAvEri rangana*. He was the guru of Vyaasa Raayaru (Vyaasa Theertha).

With **Vyaasa Theertha** (1447–1548), Daasa sahitya really took flight. He spent the prime of his life in the Vijayanagar empire as the *rAja guru* of the emperor Krishndevaraaya. A noted composer of *dEvara nAmas*, he wrote under the pen name “Sri Krishna”. Best known among his works include *krishnNa nee bEgane bAro* and *dAsarendare purandara dAsarayya*. His bigger contribution to Daasa Sahitya was by being the guru and inspiration to two of the brightest composers of the Hari Daasa genre, Purandara Daasa and Kanaka Daasa. It is noteworthy that his influence reached beyond Karnataka: his exposition of Madhva philosophy inspired the Bhakti movement of Chaitanya in Bengal.

Purandara Daasa (1484–1564) was the most illustrious proponent of the Daasa Sahitya genre. He began his life as Srinivasa Nayaka, the son of a diamond merchant, well educated in Kannada, Sanskrit and music. He went on to acquire great wealth, earning the title *navakOTi nArAyaNa*. Legend has it that miraculous events prompted him to give away all his earnings to charity at the age of 30 years. Together with his family, he abandoned his house to lead the life of a wandering Hari Daasa, singing the praise of the Lord and living on alms. His meeting with Vyaasa Theertha and formal initiation by him at age 40 was transformative. He traveled the length and breadth of the Vijayanagar empire, composing and popularizing numerous *dEvara nAmas* under the pen name “Purandara Vithala”, which by tradition and legend numbered about 475,000. His songs were propagated in the oral tradition, and only about 700 compositions are accessible today. Most of his compositions are in Kannada, while some are in Sanskrit.

Beyond his myriad *dEvara nAma* compositions, Purandara Daasa has had tremendous impact as a musicologist and *vAggEyakAra* (composer of classical musical compositions) in the Carnatic tradition. He systematized the method of teaching Carnatic music, which is followed to this day. He introduced the raaga *mAyAmALavagowLa* as the basis basic scale for music instruction, since the notes are spread out in a symmetrical manner, enabling easy learning. He created a series of graded lessons such as *swaravalis*, *janti swaras*, *alankaras*, *lakshana geetas*, *daatu varase*, *geeta*, and *kritis*. He is therefore considered the “Sangeetha Pitamaha” of Carnatic music. Saint Tyagaraja paid homage to him in his operatic work, Prahlada Bhakti Vijayam. He also had influence on Hindustani music: Swami Haridas, the teacher of Tansen (the illustrious singer in the court of the Mughal emperor Akbar), was Purandara Daasa’s disciple.

Purandara Daasa's compositions are firmly rooted in Bhakti toward Lord Vishnu, although he composed many songs on other deities as well. He also strived to shed light on contemporary social evils through his songs, exhorting people to rise against casteism, untouchability and showmanship in the pursuit of religion. In his songs, he used colloquial Kannada words, folk tunes, easy raagas and extensive comments on everyday life. Among all the composers of *dEvara nAmas*, his songs have had the most impact and reach. Bidaram Krishnappa and Dr. ML Vasantha Kumari played particularly important roles in popularizing his compositions in the vernacular of Carnatic music. Today, his compositions are an integral part of every Carnatic “kutcheri” (formal musical performance). Pandit Bhimsen Joshi popularized his compositions in Hindustani classical music, and his disciples have carried on the tradition since. While it is impossible to list even his most popular compositions, notable ones are *Adaddella oLitE Ayitu*, *AchAravillada nAlige*, *bhAgyada lakshmi bAramma*, *dayamADO ranga*, *Enu dhanyaLO*, *gajavadana bEDuve*, *jagadoddhArana*, *karuNisO ranga*, *nArAyaNa ninna nAmada smaraNe*, *pOGadireloO ranga*, *rAgi tandlra*, *rAma mantrava japiso*, *rAma nAma pAYasake*, *tambUri mltidava*, *venkaTaramaNane bArO*, *vrindAvanadoLu ADuvanyAre*, *yAdava nI bA*, *yArE rangana*, and on.

Kanaka Daasa (1509 – 1609) was a contemporary of Purandara Daasa, and a disciple of Vyaasa Theertha. Throughout his life, he faced caste-based discrimination. Legend has it that the Brahmin priests at the Sri Krishna temple in Udupi denied him entry. Forced to camp outside, he sang to his Lord for many days and weeks. The east-facing idol turned westward, and Kanaka Daasa was able to get *darshan* of his Lord through a crack in the wall. Today that window (kanakana kiNDi) is a permanent fixture at the temple, enabling countless devotees to view the Lord without entering the temple. His compositions stressed the need for moral values in life, shed light on the futility of meaningless religious rituals, and consistently criticized the caste system. He wrote under the pen name “Kaaginele Adi Keshava”. Notable compositions of Kanaka Daasa include *bAgilanu teredu*, *bArO krishNayya*, *ellaru mADuvudu hoTTegAgi*, *japava mADidarEnu*, *muTTabEDi meTTabEDi*, *nammamma shArade*, *nEmavillada hOma*, *nI mAyeyoLagO*, *kula kulavendu*, *Ithanlga vAsudEvanu*.

Other notable “Hari Daasas” include **Raaghavendra Swami** (1595–1671, *indu enage gOvinda*), **Vijaya Daasa** (1682–1755), **Gopala Daasa** (1721–1769), **Jagannaatha Dasa** (1728–1809, *yAke mUkanAdyO*), Narasimha Daasa, Ananda Vittala Daasa, Abhinava Janaardana Vittala Daasa (*tungA tlradi ninta*), Kamalesha Vittala Daasa (*karedare barabArade*), Mahipati Daasaru, Helevanakatte Giryamma, Pranesha Daasaru, Harapanalli Bheemavva, Prasanna Venkatadaasaru, Narahari Theertharu, and many more.

In addition to classical music, *dEvara nAmas* have also found their way into many Kannada movies. In particular, Dr. Raj Kumar, with his phenomenal acting and musical skills, popularized many of the songs all over Karnataka, in both classical and semi-classical formats. Other genres have also adopted these evergreen works, due to the work by many luminaries, including P Kalinga Rao (the pioneer of the Kannada “bhaavageethe” genre), BV Karanth (theatre and film director), and more recently, Raghu Dixit.

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August 27, 2017