

Musical Legacy of Dharmapuram A. Govindarajan

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Abstract

Nadaswaram is a double-reed wind instrument used in auspicious functions and festivals in South India, as well as in some parts of Sri Lanka. This instrument, which is also called the Raja Vadhiyam, has been mastered by many stalwarts, one of whom is Dharmapuram A. Govindarajan. This paper showcases his life, music affinity and notable compositions.

Keywords: Dharmapuram A Govindarajan, Nadaswaram, Rare compositions

Introduction:

Nadaswaram, also known as Nagaswaram, is a classical double-reed wind instrument played during auspicious functions, festivals, and marriage rituals. This instrument dates back several centuries, and its reference can be seen in classic texts like Silapathigaram. It is recognised as a Mangala Vadhyam, meaning it will bring auspiciousness in the place where it is played. Hence, it is a major part of the South Indian traditional functions, festivals and temple rituals. Thus, this sacred instrument has become a symbol of devotion as well as celebration.

The nadaswaram's importance goes beyond its musical prowess. It holds a special place in Indian history. The auspicious sound of the nadaswaram, played by Nadaswara Chakravarthy, Thiruvaduthurai T. N. Rajarathinam Pillai, signalled the dawn of freedom when India gained independence. And it was after this that Jawaharlal Nehru gave his historic speech¹.

Playing this instrument requires a breathing technique that allows the artist to play it continuously without interruption. This breath control will help them articulate various pitches and microtones effectively. Along with the fingering technique, applying the correct lip pressure to modify the pitch is also an important aspect.

Many noteworthy artists have played a major role in popularising this musical instrument. Among them, Dharmapuram A. Govindarajan's contribution to music plays an essential role, not only in popularising the instrument but also in enriching music through his compositions, which are both unique and rare.

Life History and Music Affinity:

A. Govindarajan was born on 30.06.1933 in a place called Dhamapuram, near Myalaiduthurai, Tanjore district. His parents were Dharmapuram Abiramasundaram, who was also an exponent in Nadaswaram and Saradhambal.

He had his Nadaswaram training under his father and under Gurukulam tutelage till 1953. Until 1956, he performed on several places along with his father. He served as a faculty member in the Government

Music College, Madurai, for several years. Apart from playing on several stages in South India, he has also given performances in several countries overseas.

His contributions to Music are outstanding. The varnam compilation is a noteworthy one. He has also composed several Keerthanis and Pallavis that have intricate features like Grahabedam and Gathibedham. Apart from being an artist, he is more renowned as a composer.

He titled the stanzas as Mudhal Nilai, Idai Nilai and Irudhi Nilai instead of Pallavi, Anupallavi and Charanam.

He was an exponent of playing the Rakthi Melam, which is a special musical style that is both rhythmic and difficult to play. This item was a speciality of the Sembanarkoil lineage, but Dharmapuram A. Govindarajan excelled in it. It involves playing Kalpana swaram in 6 different eduppu or the starting point in talam and 6 different Kaalam to get to the jathi to the aruthi².

Playing the Rakthi requires enormous stamina and lung power, along with good breath control. It also requires a good knowledge of ragas, and generally, rare thalas are used. It is set in ragas that can be elaborated like Kamboji, where the alapanai can stretch for hours during the temple procession. It is precision-bound, and even a slight slip or deviation will overturn the entire musical composition³.

His compositions are still being performed by many musicians and his students, who organise seminars and workshops, along with music programs, every year in his memory and to honour his musical legacy. They are also played and highlighted in music festivals.

He was also a very innovative and creative person, and an example of this can be seen at his residence, where he made some changes and improvisations to the grandfather clock, which chimes to the tune of Sa-Pa pitch tones at each hour.

Another example is the name of his residence being 'Agothira' Illam, which has been named by taking the first letter of each of his family members. [A-Father -Abiramasundaram Go- himself, Govindarajan, thi – his wife Tripurasundari, Ra- son-Raja Jayakumar]. We may see this style of naming today, but he had the creativity to choose such a name even back then. These details were shared by his son, Sri Raja Jayakumar, and the stone inscription still stands in their home.

Notable works and rare compositions:

Among many of his compositions, a few stand out. They are listed below.

Graha Beda Nandini – This is a rare composition and one of its kind set to Rupaka Talam. It starts with the raga Sudha Saveri, and applying the Graha Beda or tonic shift, it moves on to other ragas as follows.

Sa – Sudha Saveri

Ri-Sudha Dhanyasi

Ma- Mohanam

Pa- Madhyamavathi

Dha – Hindolam.

The highlight of this composition is that the Raga Mudra or raga names and the swara from which the Graha Bedam is done appear in each of the stanzas. The notation for composition was shared by his son, Sri Raja Jayakumar and has been performed by Chinnamanur Dr A. Vijayakarthekeyan⁴, disciple of Dharmapuram A. Govindarajan.

Keerthanai – Among the various keerthanis composed by Dharmapuram A. Govindarajan, the one in Keeravani Ragam, Arulpuri Vela, stands out. The composition is set in such a way that it has all the Tamil alphabets called Uyr Elzhuthukkal, throughout the song.

Another notable Keerthanai is one in Harikamboji – Velavane Charanam set in Kandajathi Triputai talam, rettai kalai, which is a rare talam to be used in Keerthanai.

Varnam – Varnam comes under the Sabha Ganam Category, and it primarily helps in voice culture and helps maintain proper rhythm control.

Dharmapuram A.Govindarajan has published a compilation of varnams composed by him titled Abirami Isai Vanna Maalai, which was the first book to be published by a Nadaswaram artist. It is also the only compilation of compositions by a single Vaggeyekara or composer. In this book, there are 25 Varnams in different Ragas and Talas.

Some of the salient features of the varnams in this compilation are as follows⁵.

- Many rare ragas have been used.
- Laghus of all Jaati- Tisram, Chaturram, Kantam, Misram and Sankeernam have been used in the compositions.
- In most of the varnams, the fourth Mukthayiswaram has been composed in the Swarakurraipu style.
- In the Sumaneesaranjani varnam, the last charana swaras are composed in all five nadais.
- Rishabashta Ragamalika has 8 ragas which focus on the Rishaba swara in each of the ragas - Kaanada, Sahana, Saranga, Gowlai, Sri, Suruti, Saraswati and Madhyamavathi. The rishabham is the jeeva swara in these ragas, and this composition shines in the way it is handled in this varnam.
- The third Mukthayiswaram in many of the varnams has three Avarthams.
- The second varnam Kaanamaala Jothi is set in the raga Indhirai, which is a swathantra raga.
- Pancharatna Ragamalika Varnam is also a part of this compilation.

The Varnam book also mentions the forthcoming publications from the same author – Abyasaganathil Pudhumai, Kumaraguruparar isai vanna maalai, Mallari 108 with Sahityam, Pallavi 108 with Sahityam, Grahabeda Padalgal, Pallavigalum surakuraippum.

Conclusion:

Dharmapuram A. Govindarajan was a distinguished artist and composer known for the innovation and creativity he brought to his works. His repertoire of keerthanis and varnams stands as a testament to his musical brilliance. In his collection of moral teachings, Narpanbugal, he had foretold that he would depart this world on a Friday, and indeed, he attained the heavenly abode on June 30, 1995, which fell on a Friday. Remarkably, both his birth anniversary and his Memorial Day fall on the same date and month. He may have left the world, but his legacy continues to thrive through his students and fellow Nadaswaram artists, who uphold his memory with devotion and respect.

References

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