

# Tyagaraja's Musical Theology of Devotion: A Study of Navavidha Bhakti

**Aswin Kumar A**

Research Scholar, Department of Sanskrit Vedanta, Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit, Kalady, Ernakulam, Kerala, India.

## ABSTRACT

The doctrine of devotion in the compositions of Tyagaraja establishes one of the ironic intersections of music, Vedānta, and bhakti in South Indian history. Though Tyagaraja is mostly accepted as a composer of Rāma-bhakti, a closer examination of his compositions discloses a highly designed devotional psychology corresponding to the conventional doctrine of Navavidha Bhakti- the nine modes of devotion usually elaborated in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa. Tyagaraja's compositions not only echo the ninefold path of devoutness but also reinterprets it through the outlook of nāda-upāsanā, śaraṇāgati, ātma-vicāra, and Advaitic. Each mode of navavidha bhakti- śravaṇam, kīrtanam, smaraṇam, pāda-sevanam, arcanam, vandanam, dāsyam, sakhyam, and ātma-nivedanam - finds expression in Tyagaraja's lyrical doctrine, often steadied by scriptural qualities from the Upaniṣads, Bhagavad Gītā, Rāmāyaṇa, and Vaiṣṇava bhakti theology. The article reveals that Tyagaraja's compositions are not mere musical aids but sophisticated dogmatic texts enunciating a broad soteriology of piety.

**KEYWORDS:** Tyagaraja, Navavidha Bhakti, Vedānta, Carnatic Music, Rāma-bhakti, Upaniṣads, Bhāgavata Purāṇa, Śaraṇāgati, Nāda-upāsanā.

## INTRODUCTION

Among the Carnatic composers of South India, Tyagaraja occupies a remarkable place as both vāggeyakāra and spiritual genius. His songs are often realized as aesthetic oeuvre, hitherto their internal style is deeply theological. Tyagaraja's compositions disclose a devotional biosphere in which music is not adornment but sādhanā, and bhakti is not mere emotion but epistemology itself. He constantly expresses devotion as the only effective means of access to Rāma, while simultaneously grounding that devoutness in canonical and Vedāntic classes.

One of the most productive ways to realize Tyagaraja's devotional world is through the outline of Navavidha Bhakti or the ninefold modes of devotion. It is characteristically listed in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa 7.5.23–24, in the teachings of Prahlāda. This listing became one of the foundational arrangements of Hindu devotional praxis and later it deeply influenced Vaiṣṇava traditions. Tyagaraja does not simply echo the navavidha bhakti in abstract form; moderately, his compositions exemplify each of these modes in deeply personal, musical, and scripturally saturated ways. The ninefold bhakti model is still broadly illustrated in modern devotional education, reflecting its enduring canonical position.

This study suggests that Tyagaraja's oeuvre may be read as a musical doctrine of Navavidha Bhakti.

## FOUNDATION OF NAVAVIDHA BHAKTI

The traditional scriptural basis for Navavidha Bhakti is the Bhāgavata Purāṇa. In this text Prahāda demonstrates the nine forms of devotion as ample and adequate modes of spiritual realization. These modes are not just ritual groupings; they designate a whole transformation of the devotee's sensory, emotional, intellectual, and experiential orientation toward the divine.

Prahāda explains that, "Hearing of Viṣṇu, singing of Him, remembering Him, serving His feet, worship, prostration, servitude, friendship, and self-surrender."<sup>1</sup> The significance of this list lies in its all-inclusiveness: the body, speech, memory, affect, and selfhood are all increasingly sanctified. Tyagaraja's compositions show precisely this drive- from nāma-smaraṇa and saṅkīrtana to śaraṅgati and ātma-samarpaṇa.

## TYAGARAJA AND THE THEOLOGY OF BHAKTI

Tyagaraja's bhakti is never just outward. Most of Tyagaraja's compositions illustrates theological features such as:

1. Rāma as both iṣṭa-devatā and para-brahman
2. Nāda as a vehicle of divine realization
3. Bhakti as superior to dry ritualism or courtly ambition
4. Self-surrender as the culmination of spiritual life

His compositions frequently oppose wealth, pride, dry learning, ritual display, and royal patronage to the innermost riches of bhakti. Hence, Tyagaraja holds his place in the long lineage of bhakti philosophers who transform piety into a hermeneutic of being.

"Endarō Mahānubhāvulu" one of his famous compositions clearly honors those saints who understood the inner essence of Bhāgavata, Rāmāyaṇa, Gītā, Śruti, Śāstra, and Purāṇa, thus placing Tyagaraja's own devotional life inside the wider scriptural tradition. This kṛti is commonly considered as one of his well-known compositions and clearly waves toward scriptural interiority.

## NAVAVIDHA BHAKTI IN TYAGARAJA'S COMPOSITIONS

### 1. श्रवणम् (Śravaṇam) - Devotional Hearing

Śravaṇam is the initial mode of bhakti because revelation arrives through focused listening. Śravaṇam is also the initial order towards brahma-jñāna. Tyagaraja advocates both: hearing divine stories, and hearing divine truth. The composition, "Endarō Mahānubhāvulu", praises those who understood the inner essence of Bhāgavata, Rāmāyaṇa, Gītā, Śruti, Śāstra, Purāṇa. This illustrates that true bhaktas are listeners to revelation, not just performers of faith. Tyagaraja infers that one becomes a mahānubhāva through hearing and assimilating sacred truth. Bhakti initiates with receptivity. The Self is to be heard, reflected upon, and meditated upon<sup>2</sup>. Hence, śravaṇam for Tyagaraja is both bhakti practice and Vedāntic discipline.

### 2. कीर्तनम् (Kīrtanam) - Singing the Divine Name and Glory

Kīrtanam is the expressive flowering. Tyagaraja's whole compositions are the portrayal of kīrtanam. He transmutes theology into song and song into sādhana. In his compositions, "Nāma Kusumamula", "Sogasugā Mrdaṅga Tālamu", "Nāda Tanum Anīsam", "Rāma Nī Samānamevaru" and more he presents

<sup>1</sup> श्रवणं कीर्तनं विष्णोः स्मरणं पादसेवनम् ।

अर्चनं वन्दनं दास्यं सख्यमात्मनिवेदनम् ॥ (Bhāgavata Purāṇa 7.5.23)

<sup>2</sup> आत्मा वा अरे द्रष्टव्यः श्रोतव्यो मन्तव्यो निदिध्यासितव्यः । (Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 2.4.5)

singing not as entertainment but as reverential utterance. Tyagaraja's kīrtanam is grounded on the opinion that divine nāma itself is salvific, music is a method of upāsanā, and the vocal sound becomes a vehicle of grace. Bhagavadgīta says, 'Eternally glorify Him, always striving with self-control, endure firm in their vows, bow before Him, worship Him with love and firm steadiness'.<sup>3</sup>The Chāndogya Upaniṣad's adoration of udgītha and sacred sound tenders a reflective contextual for Tyagaraja's nāda theology. Tyagaraja considers Kīrtanam is not just one among nine forms but as musical locus through which the other eight are also activated.

### 3. स्मरणम् (Smaranam) - Constant Remembrance

Smaranam is the interiorization of bhakti. The heard and sung essentially become continuous remembrance. The compositions, "Smaranē Sukhamu", "Rāma Rāma Rāma", "Nannu Vidachi Kadalakurā", "Manasā Etulōrtunē" and more shows that remembrance is not as mental replication alone but as empirical dependence on the divine presence. Tyagaraja's compositions often express complaint, longing, ecstasy, and anxiety. These all reveal one truth: the mind cannot stay away from Rāma. Bhagavad Gītā states, "One who always remembers Him without deviation, He is easy to obtain because of his continuous engagement in devotional service."<sup>4</sup>The Upaniṣadic doctrine of nididhyāsana- steady meditative absorption-forms a philosophical matching part to bhakti-smarana.

### 4. पादसेवनम् (Pāda-Sevanam)- Service at the Divine Feet

Pāda-sevanam implies humble nearness, seeking shelter, and service at the Lord's feet. Tyagaraja regarded the feet of Rāma as a recurrent salvific image. In his compositions, "Rāma Pādamā", "Nī Pāda Paṅkaja", "Sītāvara Saṅgīta Jñānamu", "Cētulāra Śṛṅgāramu" and more the feet of Rāma represents the refuge, the humility, mokṣa-giving contact and which is embodied with devotion. The goal of reaching the highest abode often adopts devotional epithet in bhakti traditions through caraṇa-sevā. Tyagaraja's doctrine of pāda-sevanam is often personal rather than temple-bound: he pursues not ritualistic access but heart-level closeness.

### 5. अर्चनम् (Arcanam) - Worship and Ritual Offering

Arcanam is sacramental worship. Tyagaraja however deepens it into inner worship. In his compositions "Tulasi Dalamulacē", "Upacāramu Jēsēvarunnāru", "Cētulāra Śṛṅgāramu", "Nāma Kusumamula" and many frequently mentions to offering flowers, having ritual attention, and performing sacred service. Hitherto, Tyagaraja also questions to mere external worship when the heart itself is absent. Pure arcanam is not an external magnificence but is a bhāva-filled offering. In Bhagavad Gītā, Kṛṣṇa says himself that, "If one offers Him a leaf, flower, a fruit or water with love and devotion, He will accept it without hesitation."<sup>5</sup>The change from outer ritual to inner sacrifice in the Upaniṣads makes the way for Tyagaraja's devotional reinterpretation of worship. Tyagaraja transmits arcanam from the altar to the inner-self or consciousness.

### 6. वन्दनम् (Vandanam) - Salutation, Praise, and Reverence

Vandanam is the devotional tribute clearly by worship, surrender, and acknowledgement of the divine

<sup>3</sup>सततं कीर्तयन्तो मां यतन्तश्च दृढव्रताः।

नमस्यन्तश्च मां भक्त्या नित्ययुक्ता उपासते॥ (Bhagavadgīta 9.14)

<sup>4</sup>अनन्यचेताः सततं यो मां स्मरति नित्यशः।

तस्याहं सुलभः पार्थ नित्ययुक्तस्य योगिनः॥ (Bhagavad Gītā 8.14)

<sup>5</sup>पत्रं पुष्पं फलं तोयं यो मे भक्त्या प्रयच्छति।

तदहं भक्त्युपहृतमश्रामि प्रयतात्मनः॥ (Bhagavad Gītā 9.26)

greatness. “Vandanamu Raghunandana”, “Endarō Mahānubhāvulu”, “Śrī Rāma Jayarāma”, “Namo Namo Rāghavāya” and other various compositions of Tyagaraja expresses existential bowing. The ego bends before Realization of truth. Bhagavad Gītā advices to engage one’s mind always in thinking of Lord, become his devotee, offer obeisances to him and worship him and once being completely absorbed in him, one surely would go to Lord.<sup>6</sup> The upaniṣadic self-effacement of the seeker before brahma-vidyā, particularly in guru-śiṣya frameworks, becomes devotionalized in Tyagaraja’s compositions.

### 7. दास्यम् (Dāsyaṃ) - Servitude and Sacred Obedience

Dāsyaṃ is one of most explicit worshipful characteristics where devotee approaches God with obedience, surrender, reverence and willingness to serve. Tyagaraja frequently mentions to himself as dāsa, nija-dāsa, Rāma-bhakta and servant of the Lord in his compositions like, “Tava Dāsoham”, “Dāsarathi Nī Runamu”, “Banturīti Kolu”, and “Nī Dāsa Nudarani”. Tyagaraja believed dāsyaṃ is not disgrace but freedom over belonging. He strongly beloved that servant of Rāma attains liberation from worldly servitude. Rāmayaṇa demonstrates Hanumān as the supreme model of dāsyaṃ as he is strong, wise, and absolutely surrendered. The ideal devotee is the one whose will is aligned with the divine.

### 8. सख्यम् (Sakhyam) - Friendship with the Divine

Sakhyam is intimate bhakti where the devotee approaches the Lord with affection and fearless relationship. The devotee talks to God not only as Lord but as favorite friend. Tyagaraja in his compositions, “Cēlimini Jalajākṣu”, “Nannu Pālimpa”, “Evarani Nirṇayincirirā” and “Mī Valla Guṇadoṣamēmi” speaks to Rāma with emotional honesty, grievance, soreness, and familiarity. Hence, this shows Tyagaaraja’s sacred intimacy with Rāma and not mere irreverence. In the mode of Sakhya-bhakti the devotee honestly asks the God things like, ‘why have You delayed?’, ‘why do You neglect me?’, ‘are You not mine?’ and so on which reveals the relational non- duality within devotion. Arjuna’s relation to Kṛṣṇa in Bhagavad Gītā is a unique example since it is both reverential and friendly. The “two birds on one tree” imagery of the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad and Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad tells that two birds, with beautiful wings, who are close companions, cling to one common tree. Of the two birds one eats the sweet fruit of the tree, the other eats not but watches his fellow<sup>7</sup>. This may be considered as the individual self and the indwelling Lord in intimate imminence. Tyagaraja through his compositions shows that through sakhyam mode, bhakti not only matures into surrender but also into divine acquaintance.

### 9. आत्मनिवेदनम् (Ātma-Nivedanam) - Total Self-Surrender

Ātma-Nivedanam is the culmination of all bhakti mopedes. In this mode the devotee not only offers an object, a ritual, or mere words- but he offers self itself. Through his compositions like “Nannu Vidachi Kadalakurā”, “Nidhi Cāla Sukhama”, “Mokṣamu Galadā”, “Rāma Nannu Brōvara” and “Nannu Pālimpa Nadaci Vaccitivō”, Tyagaraja offers his suffering, helplessness, longing, and ultimately his self itself at the feet of Rāma. Ātma-nivedanam in Tyagaraja’s compositions is attached to śaraṇāgati, vairagya, mokṣa and nāda-upāsanā. His denial of wealth and court patronage becomes part of this surrender. Bhagavad Gītā advocates to do not fear and abandon all varieties of creed and just surrender unto the Lord and He shall

<sup>6</sup> मन्मना भव मद्भक्तो मद्याजी मां नमस्कुरु ।

मामेवैष्यसि युक्तवैवमात्मानं मत्परायणः ॥ (Bhagavad Gītā 9.34)

<sup>7</sup> द्वा सुपर्णा सयुजा सखाया समानं वृक्षं परिषस्वजाते ।

तयोरन्यः पिप्पलं स्वाद्वत्त्यनश्नन्नन्यो अभिचाकशीति ॥ (Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad 3.1, Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad 4.6)

deliver you from all sinful reactions.<sup>8</sup> The surrender of egoic personality into brahman-consciousness is reflected devotionally in ātma-nivedana. According to Tyagaraja ultimate bhakti is not mere emotional dependency but also ontological offering.

### **TYAGARAJA'S INTEGRATION OF THE NINEFOLD PATH**

Though the nine forms can be systematically separated, Tyagaraja in his compositions rarely treats them as secluded practices. Moderately, they pervade that Śravaṇam primes to smaraṇam, Smaraṇam surfeits into kīrtanam, Kīrtanam develops into vandanam, Vandanam ripens into dāsyam, Dāsyam develops sakhyam, Sakhyam culminates in ātma-nivedanam. Hence, Tyagaraja's devotional cosmos is living, not taxonomic. His melody also adds a distinguishing tenth dimension the nāda-bhakti. His melodies itself become the vehicle through which the nine modes are unified. Through his compositions his voice hears, remembers, praises, serves, bows, befriends, and surrenders.

### **TYAGARAJA'S NAVAVIDHA BHAKTI AND VEDĀNTA**

A common misinterpretation opposes bhakti and Vedānta as distinct ways. Tyagaraja dissolves this opposition through his compositions. He illustrates that bhakti can culminate in jñāna, nāma can lead to mokṣa, surrender can open into non-dual realization. So, Tyagaraja constantly privileges inner transformation of the self over the empty rituals, social respect, pedagogic arrogance and royal reward. Tyagaraja's devotional theology is thus deeply compatible with Vedāntic theology. The Lord revered externally is also the indwelling reality within. His compositions mention the Upaniṣadic doctrines of Antaryāmin, Ānanda as the ultimate reality, the true Self to be heard, reflected upon, meditated upon and the ultimate divine reality loomed through disciplined inwardness. Hence, his Navavidha Bhakti is not anti-intellectual devoutness; it is harmonious Vedānta.

### **CONCLUSION**

Tyagaraja's compositions deliver one of the most fascinating devotional enunciations of Navavidha Bhakti in Indian musical and theological literature. They do not just merely exemplify the nine forms of devotion but they inhabit them. Through the modes of hearing, singing, remembering, serving, worshipping, praising, serving as a dāsa, taking care of the divine, and finally surrendering the self in the Lord's feet, Tyagaraja proposes an inclusive spiritual anthropology.

Tyagaraja's worshipful corpus stances the union of Bhāgavata bhakti, Rāma theology, Upaniṣadic inwardness, and Carnatic musical praxis. Tyagaraja should not be studied only as a composer, one should also understand him as a theologian of bhakti, a musical Vedāntin, and a bard of total surrender.

### **REFERENCES**

#### **Primary Sources**

1. Bhagavad Gītā. Edited and translated by S. Radhakrishnan, HarperCollins, 1993.
2. Bhāgavata Purāṇa. Translated by G. V. Tagare, Motilal Banarsidass, 1978.
3. Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad. Translated by Swami Madhavananda, Advaita Ashrama, 1950.
4. Chāndogya Upaniṣad. Translated by Swami Gambhirananda, Advaita Ashrama, 2006.

---

<sup>8</sup> सर्वधर्मान्परित्यज्य मामेकं शरणं व्रज ।  
अहं त्वां सर्वपापेभ्यो मोक्षयिष्यामि मा शुचः ॥ (Bhagavad Gītā 18.66)

5. Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad. Translated by Swami Gambhirananda, Advaita Ashrama, 2006.
6. Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki. Translated by Robert P. Goldman et al., Princeton UP, 1984–2017.
7. Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad. Translated by Swami Tyagisananda, Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1949.
8. Taittirīya Upaniṣad. Translated by Swami Gambhirananda, Advaita Ashrama, 2006.

## **Secondary Sources**

1. Govinda Rao, T. K. Compositions of Tyagaraja. Ganamandir Publications, 1999.
2. Jackson, William J. Tyagaraja: Life and Lyrics. Oxford UP, 1991.
3. Kuppaswamy, Gowri. Carnatic Music and the Tamils. Kalinga Publications, 2004.
4. Subramanian, Lakshmi. From the Tanjore Court to the Madras Music Academy. Oxford UP, 2006.
5. Viswanathan, T., and Matthew Harp Allen. Music in South India: The Karnatak Concert Tradition and Beyond. Oxford UP, 2004.