

CAN THE PATHS OF BHAKTI, YOGA AND JÑĀNA SYNTHESIZED? A CASE STUDY OF DEVOTIONAL SINGING

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Abstract

Devotional singing, popularly known as bhajan, is a popular way of worshipping one's deity. Bhajan singing is also a useful method followed by the seekers of specific streams of Indian Philosophy. Prior research suggests that bhajan singing existed prior to the origin of mainstream bimodal genres of music viz. Hindustani and Carnatic. The traditional bimodal genre of music integrates different strands of Indian Philosophy. Current article explores the query whether bhajans can integrate devotion and philosophical ideologies of various schools of Indian Philosophy. Here, we analyze one of the bhajans composed and sung by a mahatma of Kerala, a southern state of Bhārat, Śrī Mātā Amṛtānandamayī Devi. The research suggests that bhajans can be a potential tool for a seeker of Advaita to realize one's spiritual goal. It can convey a systematic pathway for the seekers of spirituality.

Keywords: Bhajans, Hindustani, Carnatic, Bhakti, Vedānta, Yoga

INTRODUCTION

Composing songs and singing them in praise of gods and goddesses has been a traditional practice to display devotion in India. These songs are sung at various venues and occasions such as in front of temple shrines, for the enjoyment of kings and various members of king's court, to generate divine ecstasy among devotees and also as a symbol of auspiciousness during gatherings. Over the period of time two mainstream musical traditions known as Hindustani and Carnatic style of singing developed in the Northern and Southern part of India respectively. Both the styles are highly systematic and technical. In both the systems, songs are rendered in specific raga-s or melodic frameworks and tala-s or rhythmic patterns. The improvisations and compositions are quite intelligently rendered that the listener needs a thorough understanding of its methodology to enjoy a performance. Another musical tradition known as bhajans existed prior to the genesis of the mainstream bimodal genres of music. According to Guy Beck, "Karnatak music emerged from the devotional songs and hymns of the great Vaishnavite and Shaivite saints performed in the temples and shrines of Vijayanagar, Tanjavur, Srirangam, Tirupati, and Cidambaram. What became known in succeeding centuries as Hindustani classical music developed primarily from the temple vocal form known as dhrupad and from the elaborate bhajan music performed by Vaishnavite singers in the northern region of Braj".¹ Bhajans are songs composed to glorify and worship specific popular Hindu gods like Kṛṣṇa, Rama, Shiva, Muruga and goddesses like Durga, Lakshmi, Saraswati, Parvati. Bhajan-s are devotional songs composed using very simple lyrics, focusing mainly on the suitability of the words used in the composition. Special care is given to the usage of ornamentations, like in poetry. Bhajan-s are melodious since they have refrains and are set to specific rhythms at varying paces and almost repetitive tunes.

The above-mentioned nature of bhajan-s have made this particular genre popular among all the generations across boundaries. William Jackson states, "Housewives keep little altars in their kitchens and teach their children the songs of saints [.....] On every street and lane, Hindus sing in worship of the goddess in her many forms and in praise of the deities Śiva and Muruga and offer flowers to incarnations of Viṣṇu such as Rāma and Kṛṣṇa".² It can be noticed that the traditional Carnatic and Hindustani classical music and bhajans from the northern and southern parts of India extensively used invocative compositions to express devotion. Songs like *Endaro Mahānubhavulu*, *Alaipāyute Kaṇṇa*, *Bhāgyada Lakṣmi Bāramma* from the South and bhajans like *śrī Rām Candra Kṛpalu* of sage Tulsidas, *Jhīnī Jhīnī bīnī chadariya* of sage Kabirdas, *He Govind*

He Gopal of sage Surdas, Ram Ratan Dhan of Meera Bai from the North are few popular and favorite renditions that hauls the heart of any devotee towards the respective deity.

BLEND OF TRADITIONAL SONGS WITH ADVAITADARŚANA

In Bhārat people were innately inclined towards fulfilment of *puruṣārtha*-s. Among the four *puruṣārtha*-s, viz. dharma, artha, kāma and mokṣa; one shall engage towards achievement of at least one of the *puruṣārtha*. The thought on achievement of *puruṣārtha* is instilled in an individual from the early childhood days. Hence, Hitopadeśa, a book on ethics for young minds knitted with stories, states that one's existence is meaningless without fulfilment of any of the *puruṣārtha*-s.³ Also, while striving for artha and kāma, one shall ensure a dharmic underpinning. Hence, we have various declarations on the significance of dharma and the urgency in adherence to dharma in practice. Hitopadeśa states, "one shall adhere to dharma as if the lord of death has grasped one's lock of hair".⁴

It again states, "wellbeing is achieved when wealth is used with adherence to dharma".⁵ While the first three *puruṣārtha*-s urge towards achieving materialistic benefits and wellbeing, the final and the greatest *puruṣārtha*, mokṣa ensures eternal happiness through transcending ignorance. Here, one seeks the highest reality and escapes the cycle of rebirth. Śaṅkarācārya affirms this in his Brahmasūtrabhāṣya, "There is no further transmigration after emancipation".⁶ Upaniṣadic statements terms the reality as brahman or ātman and affirms the nature of reality as happiness.⁷ The Upaniṣad again confirms that realization of brahman takes one beyond any fears.⁸

It is not surprising that the Advaita Vedānta tradition has greatly inspired the traditional composers of Hindustani and Carnatic music. Hence, ideas of Advaita Vedānta finds expression in many compositions. To quote few examples from Carnatic tradition, the song 'Mokṣamu Galada' composed by Tyāgarāja Swamikal, discusses about attainment of emancipation by realization of self. Upāsana of Omkāra has been prescribed as a method to achieve realization. Sage Tyāgarāja speaks about the oneness of jīvātman and paramātman in the song *Karuna elagaṇṭe*. The self is considered here as an unbounded witness. The song *Sarvam Brahmayam* composed by sage Sadāśiva Brahmendra describes the all-pervasiveness of Brahman. The song states that realization of Brahman cannot be achieved through disquisitions, devotional singing, studying, enjoyment or by modeling something in the world. The sage proposes hamsa-dhyāna as the foundation of self-realization.

In Hindustani tradition we have the songs of Pandit Kumar Gandharva who encapsulates Advaita philosophy in his songs. Through his music Pandit Kumar Gāndharva propagates the teachings of sage Kabir Das, a popular mystic poet and saint of the 15th Century CE. Among the compositions of sage Kabir Das, rendered beautifully by Pandit Kumar Gāndharva, *Ud Jayega hans akela jag darśan ka mela* conveys that the world is a play of illusion. Sage Kabir Das opines about death, stating that the individual soul, compared to a swan here, will fly away alone. One has to surrender to the lord and perform actions well because everyone reaps the results of one's own action. The song *suntā hai guru gyāni* imparts the greatness of knowledge of brahman. Sage Kabir instructs everyone to transcend the diversity of the world and try to perceive the underlying unifying substratum. Similarly, the bhajans like *moko kaha dhūṇḍhere*, *Jhīnī Jnīnī bīnī cadariyā* take the listener to an Advaitic realm. It can be observed that Advaita philosophy and the methodologies like bhakti, karma, upāsana, advocated by Advaita philosophers for realization has been an integral part of the popular musical traditions of India.

ESSENCE OF ADVAITA-VEDĀNTA

In the traditional Advaita system, the central theme is that the absolute brahman alone is real, the world is a superimposition or even an illusion. The goal of life is to attain realization that we are the self, pure consciousness and not this body, mind or intellect. Sankara states, "the one who through discrimination



realizes that the knower of the body (kṣetrajña) is essentially brahman, the reality and the body (kṣetra) along with the entire creation is merely an apparition. One who realises that the unreal entity appears like a real one, transcends ignorance and escapes rebirth”.⁹ In other words, one with real knowledge realizes that the differences in the world are unreal and all the beings including oneself are to be seen as self alone. This is the culmination of human endeavor to understand the supreme truth. Even the concept of God or īśwara is secondary to the concept of brahman. Thus, the main emphasis is on contemplation of the philosophic truths or knowledge and devotional practice or yoga is considered secondary to knowledge. Bṛhḍāranyaka Upaniṣad states, ātman must be seen, heard (from a preceptor or scriptures), pondered (through logic) and meditated (with determination).¹⁰ Advaitavedānta’s greatest exponent, Śaṅkarācārya, was known to have emphasized jñāna-yoga, the path whereby contemplating the mahāvākya-s one realizes brahman. Appayya Dīkṣita affirms, “mahāvākya-s from the upaniṣad-s alone is helpful in the realization of Brahman”.¹¹

However, in medieval times, after the yoga-vāsiṣṭha work appeared and after Mādhavācārya’s Sarvadarśanaśaṅgraha, Advaita expanded, as it were, to incorporate elements of yoga and bhakthi. And it culminated most famously in Swami Vivekananda presenting Advaita as a ‘universal religion’ and incorporating yoga and bhakti in it.¹² In modern times, ‘Greater advaita’ as it is called, incorporates several components in Advaita, like bhakthi and yoga that traditionally belonged to different schools.¹³ Remarkably, this Neo Advaita trend was espoused by various saints like Swami Nīścaldas, Swami Eknath, and other spiritual luminaries including Swami Vivekananda.

Remarkably, in the works of several mystics, who walked on the spiritual path, in various parts of India- like Aruṇagirināthar in Tiruppugazh, or Thirumūlar in Śaiva-siddhāntam, even though they walked through the paths of bhakthi and yoga, the advaitic realization is seen as the culmination of all spiritual endeavor.

Here in this modern age, we have the famous spiritual mystic Sri Mata Amṛtānandamayī Devī [henceforth Amma] who is known throughout the world as the ‘hugging saint’. Amma was born into a fisherman family in Kerala, located in the southern part of India on the shore of Arabian sea. Even though she had just a lower primary education, she has been an inspiration to millions of people of diverse strata of the society, across the globe. Amma dwells in an Advaitic realm where she experiences the unity of the entire cosmos. She states, “children, Amma beholds God in everything.

To Amma there is nothing but God, the paramātmān. The Atman alone is. Amma sees everything as part of the whole, as an extension of her own self. Once we experience everything as part of ourselves, how is it possible to ignore anything? How can we consider any living being, or even a non-living being object, to be insignificant? In that state there is no sense of otherness: everything is permeated with consciousness”.¹⁴ Amma mainly propounds and preaches traditional advaita to her pupil, inspiring them to seek jñāna. In addition, she insists a spiritual seeker to follow any path viz. karma, bhakti, dhyāna or yoga as seem suitable for an individual. Amma often talks of the path of bhakthi culminating in Advaita. She states, “all paths lead to same goal, and all paths incorporate devotion or love as essential to the practice”.¹⁵

In Indian philosophical thought, there are three main paths or practices that take the individual soul to the Divine- the path of selfless love (bhakti), the path of knowledge (jñāna), and the path of mystic contemplation (yoga). In the path of saṅga-bhakti, the aspirant conceives of a ‘form’ of the divine to be meditated upon, and adored. In one of the schools of Yoga, the practitioner practices the Kuṇḍalīni-yoga, wherein one seeks to pass through the 6 chakra-s, to attain the mystic union beyond. In jñāna, the seeker contemplates on the divine as the self in man and seeks the divine through inner meditation.



REVIEW OF THE BHAJAN ĀNANDAMAYĪ BRAHMAMAYĪ

The current paper explores a bhajan song written and composed by Amma when she was very young. Among numerous songs composed by Amma, the song, *Ānandamayī brahmamayī*, remarkably unifies the three paths viz. jñāna, bhakti and yoga. Very often we see that in common parlance, people look on jñāna and bhakti as different paths, with one path having the predominance of the intellect and the other with the predominance of the heart or emotion. Very often we see the followers of one looking down on the other- the followers of the jñāna path, tend to think the followers of the bhakti path as fundamentally mistaken. Some sneer on bhakti as ‘emotionalism’ and some of even the serious seekers state bhakta-s have chosen the wrong path as it assumes the existence of a personal god, an assumption that their jñāna path precludes. Similarly, the followers of the bhakti path may criticize the followers of jñāna path as people who are overly intellectual and even as one with a ‘false ego’.

However, when we study the words of true enlightened masters like Ramaṇa Maharshi, or Amma, we see that they accept both jñāna and bhakti as valid- in fact they say they are two sides of the same coin and in fact quite inseparable. About bhakti, Amma says, “live with complete surrender to God. You can tell your sorrows to God. If you want to quarrel, you can quarrel with God”.¹⁶ Ramana Maharshi, famous for his jñāna- path of self-enquiry, has written devotional works on Aruṇācala overflowing with bhakti. Interestingly, Amma, famous for her bhakti for Śrī Kṛṣṇa and divine mother, makes statements replete with jñāna even in her devotional works. She says, “learn to remember that you are the self, that you are god’s own. Try to forget that you are the body, that you are away from God or that there is nobody to look after you”.¹⁷

In the bhajan *Ānandamayī brahmamayī*, it is observed that Amma addresses the divine mother, as the blissful one (*Ānandamayī*) and as the absolute brahman (*Brahmamayā*). The bhajan starts very beautifully and quite devotionally expressing, *ānandamayī brahmamayī atulita-saundarya-rūpiṇi* ‘oh blissful one oh one who is brahman the absolute, oh one of a form of unequalled beauty’ where Amma describes the divine mother as the blissful one, the embodiment of brahman, the absolute and Amma says the divine mother has a form of incomparable beauty.

After the verse, that ascribes a form to the worshipped, ‘one of incomparable beauty’, the song suddenly takes a turn into the path of yoga where, the divine is described as the one who is reached by Kuṇḍalini-yogi-s who cross the six mystic centers, the cakra-s ‘*ārādhārāṅgal kaṭannu yogigal amūlyanidhi ninne ariyunnu*’- ‘crossing the six cakra-s the yogi-s know you, Oh incomparable treasure’.

In this line the devotional song definitely takes on a tāntric flavor- with the reference to the 6 cakra-s and the ascension of the kuṇḍalini (the seeker) through the 6 cakra-s and beholding the deity.

The first verse starts with Amma talking about the deity as a form of incomparable beauty- the second verse describes the deity as that which is reached through the path of yoga by crossing the six cakra-s. And even here the deity is not fully understood. But then in the third verse, the song takes a dramatic turn. Almost reminiscent of the ‘nedam yadidam upāsate’ of the Kena Upaniṣad, Amma says, *matavum jātīyum ivide ī martyante madamuyartān mātram upakarippu, manuja mṛgādiyil okkeyum jīvanāy manassinte adittaṭṭil nī śayippu*. ‘Here religions and caste have merely served to increase the human ego, but you lie as the substratum of all minds in all creatures, men and animals alike. In a single verse, Amma points to the insufficiency of all religions, by pointing out the blemishes or misconception that occur in the practicing group. Their concept of a separate god, apart from man, worshipped in an exclusive way, to which only their religion is privy, has only served to increase the human ego.

Hence, all clashes between religions and castes. In the present day, this verse rings out poignantly, as violence and fighting in the name of religion has spread all over the world. What went wrong? What was wrong was



our concept of God as an entity separate from man, who needs to be worshipped in an exclusive manner. So much so that people start fighting over their concepts of God and fighting with each other over which is a better religion. However, Amma corrects this by stating, 'You are existing as the life principle, the substratum of all minds in all men, animals and all creatures. Here, suddenly, the verse takes a Vedāntic turn. The deity that had a beautiful form, that was the essence of bliss, that was blissful to behold for the bhakta, the deity that was seen by rigorous yogic sādhanā, through the tantra path, is now discovered as 'the substratum of one's own mind'. What started as a devotional song, has now turned out to be a jñāni's definition of God as the self in all beings.

The divine is the substratum of one's own mind and is the substratum of one's intelligence. The divine is the substratum of 'all minds', meaning the divine is consciousness, the ātman. Here we see clearly the bhajan pointing to Advaita Vedānta, indicating the divine as one with one's being, adhering to the *mahāvākya* 'tat twam asi'. Amma calls the divine as 'arivin urave'- meaning the fountain of intelligence, once again pointing to the nature of the divine as the 'substratum of intelligence' or consciousness.

In the last verse that follows, Amma points out that all desires are pointless and prays to the divine to make her desireless. On a similar note, the Advaita Vedāntic tradition conveys that even a jñānā may have to rely on bhakti or seek one's beloved deity's blessings on one's endeavors. Ācārya Śaṅkara in the *maṅgalaśloka* of his commentary to the Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad seeks blessings of brahman and prays for turīya's protection eventhough he was advaitin competent enough to compose bhāṣya (exposition) to the Upaniṣad-s.¹⁸

So, both in the third and the fourth verse there is a direct definition of what god is. But the beauty is that Amma, in this bhajan, synthesizes bhakti, yoga and jñāna flawlessly. The one with a beautiful form, which is adored by bhakti, who is to be revealed through yoga, is now seen as the self of all beings which is the goal of jñāna yoga. Not only is the divine, reached through the contemplation of the self, the self can be 'interacted with' through prayer and can be thought of as having a 'beautiful form' and can be asked to reveal itself through bestowing upon the aspirant an ability to overcome desires and achieve steadfastness and settle in oneself.

CONCLUSION

This bhajan in three verses, refers to the three, time tested paths that forms the basis of Indian Philosophical thought- bhakti, yoga and jñāna. Here it will be apt to note that there is a similar work of Bhagavān Ramaṇa Maharṣi, titled 'Aruṇācala Pañcaratnam' where the great sage talks of these three paths all as leading to Aruṇācala. In Amma's case the divine here is described as the divine mother, in Bhagavān Ramaṇa's case, the divine is seen as Śiva, Aruṇācala and both these songs, talk of the three paths as valid methods by means of which the aspirant attains the supreme.

Another remarkable fact is that Amma wrote this song when she was just ten years old. This is what Amma herself told the author of this article. It goes to show the immense spiritual genius that is Amma, to write such a profound bhajan with such depth of meaning, combining in one sweep the paths of jñāna, bhakti and yoga, that too when She was only ten years old, goes to show the immense spiritual greatness of Amma.

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3. Hitopadeśa, 1.26
4. ibid 1.3
5. ibid 1.6





6. Brahmasūtrabhāṣya, 1.3.40
7. Taittirīya Upaniṣad, 3.6.1 and 2.5.1
8. Ibid 2.9.1
9. Bhagavad Gītā bhāṣya, 13.23
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