

Sri Purandaradasa

(Chakravarti Madhusudana)

Sri Purandaradasa is the foremost among the Haridasas (Slaves of God Sri Hari). He is believed to be an incarnation of Devarshi (the Divine Sage) Narada. His reputation as an outstanding Vaggeyakara (lyricist/composer) is unparalleled. He is justly well known as the Karnataka Sangeeta Pitaamaha (Grand Sire of Carnatic Music). He is said to have composed some 425000 songs. Only about one thousand, some say 1300, songs are now accessible.

He is believed to have lived in the years CE 1484-1564 (some authorities say 1485-1565). However, there exists no biography of Purandaradasa written by his own contemporaries. Information about his life and times has to be deduced from stone and other inscriptions of that period, his own compositions and, equally importantly, events in his life as narrated by Sri Vijayadasa (1687-1755) in more than twenty of his own compositions. It has to be remembered, however, that Sri Vijayadasa was born 120 years (some four generations) after the passing away of Sri Purandaradasa. So it is likely that legends would have grown around the actual events of his life.

The year of Purandaradasa's birth may be surmised by the authoritative copper plate inscription of Shaka 1478 (CE 1526) found in Kaamalaapuram of Bellary district. According to this inscription, the three sons of Purandara Vithala, were given pieces of land and property as part of the gifts that Saint Vyasaraaya had received from the Vijayanagar emperor, Sri Krishnadevaraya. The eldest of the sons, Madhvapati would have been about 25-26 years old at this time meaning he was born in 1501 or thereabouts. So Purandara himself would have been about 20 years at that time, meaning that Purandara's year of birth would be in the early 1480's. It is known that he passed away in 1564/65. Hence it ties in with the tradition that he lived for eighty years, if the year of birth is taken as 1484.

Traditionally, his birth place was taken to be a place called Purandaragadh, in present Maharashtra. However, recent studies indicate that he was born in a place (Kshemapura) near Araga, Tirtha Halli Taluk, Shivamogga District, Karnataka. His original name was Srinivasa Nayaka son of Varadappa Nayaka. Although Brahmin by caste, Varadappa Nayaka was involved in banking and trading in jewellery. Srinivasa Nayaka was well educated and married to Sarasvati Bai, a lady from a highly cultured family and of great piety.

Srinivasa inherited his father's trade. He was so completely rapt in his trade that he neglected the virtues that can be expected of a person well educated and brought up. He is reputed to have gone to the capital of Vijayanagar (Hampe) a number of times dealing in diamonds and other precious stones. He thus amassed great wealth and earned the nickname "Navakoti Narayana". He was equally well known for his hard heartedness and miserliness. This must have deeply hurt his pious and charitable wife. It is believed that the couple had four sons and a daughter.

Once an old Brahmin went with his young son to Srinivasa Nayaka's shop and begged assistance from him to perform the boy's sacred thread initiating ceremony (Upanayana). The merchant refused to help him, but the old man persisted in visiting the shop every day and

repeating the request for help. This went on for six months. Finally, the jeweller showed a bag containing coins that were worn out and out of circulation to the Brahmin and told him to take one or two coins from it. The Brahmin took just one coin from the bag and went away.

The Brahmin then went to Srinivasa's home and begged the lady for help to perform his son's Upanayana, without telling her that he had already been to see her husband for the same purpose. But he did show her the worn-out coin that he had received from "a merchant". She understood that it was her own husband that the Brahmin referred to. She was moved by the plight of the old man, but had no money of her own to give him. The old man then pointed to the nose ring that Sarasvati was wearing indicating that if she donated it, it would meet his needs. She did so and the old Brahmin went away happy.

The old man then went back to Srinivasa's shop and wanted to sell the nose ring for cash. The merchant was surprised and intrigued because the piece of jewellery looked exactly like the one worn by his wife. He locked up the nose ring in his safe and told the Brahmin to call again later for the money. Nayaka then went home, saw that there was no nose ring on his wife and demanded that she produce it forthwith. Anticipating dire consequences, the chaste wife said that she would fetch it, and went in to the Puja room deciding to take her own life. Just as she was about to drink the poisoned holy water, miracle of miracles, she saw the nose ring in it. Overjoyed, she offered her respects to God and handed the jewel back to her husband.

Now Srinivasa Nayaka was completely bewildered. He went back to the shop, opened the safe and found that the nose ring was no longer there. Something extraordinary had happened. The old man was no mere mortal. He returned home and asked Sarasvati what exactly had happened. She narrated the whole incident in detail. He then realised the depth and sincerity of his wife's piety. He realised it was an act of God to remind him of what he should do. Apparently, he wandered all about the town asking everyone whether they had seen an old man with a boy. No one had seen them. He became remorseful and told his wife that their life should be truly religious and righteous henceforth. Of course, his wife was joyful at this welcome change in her husband.

Srinivasa gave up all his wealth and distributed them among pious people in the name of Lord Vitthala. He left his home, took a vow of poverty and from that day onwards, would beg alms for the daily sustenance of his family. He was grateful to his wife for his change of heart in the right direction. His feelings on this release from previous shackles, are proclaimed in the famous song;

ಆದದ್ದೆಲ್ಲ ಒಳಿತೇ ಆಯಿತು, ನಮ್ಮ ಶ್ರೀಧರನ ಸೇವೆಗೆ |

ಸಾಧನ ಸಂಪತ್ತಾಯಿತು ||

ದಂಡಿಗೆ ಬೆತ್ತ ಹಿಡಿಯುವುದಕ್ಕೆ| ಮಂಡೆ ಮಾಚಿ ನಾಚುತಲಿದ್ದೆ

ಹೆಂಡತಿ ಸಂತತಿ ಸಾವಿರವಾಗಲಿ ದಂಡಿಗೆ ಬೆತ್ತ ಹಿಡಿಸಿದಳಯ್ಯೆ ||

(आदद्वैल ओदिते आयितु, नम्म श्रीधरन सेवेगे |

साधन संपत्तायितु ॥

दंडिगे बेत हिडियुवुदक्के | मण्डेमाचि नाचूतलिद्वे

हेण्डति संतति सावीरवागलि | दंडिगे बेत हिडिसिदळ्य्य ॥

Whatever happened has happened for the best. It has become a rich means to serve Lord Sridhara. I was too shy to hold the staff and tambura. May my wife's tribe increase, she made me take the tambura and the staff).

As the family were moving away from home, they had to pass through a dense and lonesome forest. He noticed that his wife was walking slowly and anxiously looking this way and that. He asked her what the matter was. She replied that she was afraid of robbers. Upon her husband asking whether she carried any valuables with her, she replied that she had kept a gold cup to serve her husband. He told her to throw it away so that they could proceed care free. Many incidents like this have been narrated, all illustrating the gradual development of the sense of detachment in the family. It may be mentioned here that a very similar story is told about Sri Kuresha (foremost disciple of Sri Ramanuja) who also gave away all of his riches. But Kuresha's wife had kept a single gold cup for her husband and, therefore, anxious during their journey through a jungle.

It appears that Srinivasa Nayaka and his family went to Pandharpur and stayed there for twelve years. One night he dreamt that he ought to go to Hampe and seek the blessings of Sri Vyasaraaya, the pontiff of the Madhvas at that time. Vyasaraaya was also the Rajaguru of Krishnadevaraya. Accordingly, he went with his family to Hampe. He immediately went to Vyasaraaya and narrated the events in his life which led him to take this journey, indeed a pilgrimage. Vyasaraaya at once recognised the greatness of his soul and accepted him. Vyasaraaya explained the role of Bhakti in the life of a Haridasa and told Srinivasa to call himself Purandara Vitthala. This name also became his signature in all of his compositions. This initiation by Vyasatirtha is said to have occurred in the year 1525 CE, when Purandara was about 40 years old.

The blessed feeling that he experienced on receiving the grace of Vyasaraaya, as well as the greatness of Vyasaraaya and his achievements, is described by Purandara himself in a SuLaadi, the opening lines of which are:

व्यासरायं चरणकमलं दूरशनवेनगं । एसु जन्मद सुकृत फल दोरकित्तु एन्न ।

सासिर कुलकोटि पावनवायित्तु । श्रीशन भजिसुवुदक्कधिकारि नानादे ॥

(व्यासरायं चरणकमलं दूरशनवेनगे | एसु जन्मद सुकृत फल दोरकित्तु एन्न ।

सासिर कुलकोटि पावनवायित्तु । श्रीशन भजिसुवुदक्कधिकारि नानादे ॥

I have received the fulfilment of many births by the sight of the lotus feet of Sri Vyasaraaya. All my ancestors are redeemed. I am now authorised to worship the Lord of Sri.)

When Vyasaraaya initiated him into the life of Haridasa, Srinivasa Nayaka found himself able to compose freely with rich powers of imagination and expression under the name Purandara Vitthala. Although this type of composition existed earlier in the songs of Sripadaraya and

Vyasaraya, the Daasapantha can be really said to have come into existence with Purandaradasa.

At that time, Vyasaraya had a group of scholars, called Vyasakoota, around him. These were knowledgeable in all of the Shaastras, Srimadbhagavatam and other Sanskrit scriptures relevant to the Madhva religion. These intellectuals of Vyaasakoota, at first, did not consider the people of Dasa as their equals. The Guru, Sri Vyasaraya, had to show the disciples of Vyasakoota that Purandara was a true devotee and that his songs and utterances were no less valid, forceful and revelatory of true wisdom than what was contained in the Shaastras, PuraaNas and the Vedas. Although at first the Vyaasakoota scholars demurred, later on they could see that Purandara's songs revealed the same truths, in a simple and direct way, easily intelligible to the masses, as the sacred Sanskrit texts that were difficult to be understood by the layman. Soon Purandaradasa's works came to be known as Purandaropanishad.

Purandaradasa was allowed by his guru, Sri Vyasaraya, to go on pilgrimages to sacred places in Karnataka as well as the rest of India. He is believed to have composed some 125000 songs in praise of the various deities in those pilgrim centres. Even when the local deities are adored, the ultimate tribute in these songs is to Hari or Vishnu. He appears to have a special liking for Tirupati, home of Lord Venkateshwara, adored in many hymns of the Alvars (Tamil Vaishnavite saints). King Krishnadevaraya and Sri Vyasaraya also used to visit this beautiful place frequently. Some miracles said to have occurred during Purandara's various journeys may be told:

Once Purandara was treating a large number of devotees to lunch. The supply of ghee ran out during the feast. Appannadasa, his trusted assistant, was nowhere to be seen. However someone had replenished the stock and served all the ghee that the guests needed. Later, when Appanna was questioned, it turned out that he had no knowledge of what had happened. Purandara realised it was Vitthala himself who had come to the rescue.

Another time Purandara asked for water and Appanna did not respond immediately. Someone who looked like him brought the water. Angry because of the delay, Purandara hit him on the head with the vessel. Since it was Vitthala himself who had brought the water, it seems a swelling appeared on the idol of Vitthala and tears were rolling down his eyes. Nobody could stop them. Purandara went into the inner shrine and appealed to Vitthala to forgive him for his bad temper and rash action. Soon the swelling subsided and the tears ceased to flow from the eyes of the deity!

However, it appears that Vitthala still wanted to test his devotee. Purandara's fame, Bhakti and righteous conduct were known to all in Pandharpur. One night a beautiful courtesan was surprised to find this devotee of God on her doorstep bearing a precious bracelet as gift. She was happy to serve him. Next morning the temple priests noted that a bracelet adorning the image of Vitthala was missing. A fruitless search was made, but the bracelet was only discovered when the courtesan went to the temple to worship. Under torture, she admitted that it was the great Purandaradasa himself who gave it to her. Purandara was apprehended, tied to a pillar and thrashed. Of course, Purandara knew nothing about the whole affair. Finally, a voice within the shrine seems to have proclaimed that the Dasa was innocent. Purandara realised that it was Vitthala's playful revenge for being hit on the head by him. Purandaradasa composed a very famous song describing these events. The first few lines are given below:

ಮುಯ್ಯಕ್ಕೆ ಮುಯ್ಯ ತೀರಿತು | ಜಗದಯ್ಯ ವಿಜಯ ಸಹಾಯ ಪಂಥರಿಯಾಯ

ಸಣ್ಣವನೆಂದು ನಾ ನೀರು ತಾರೆಂದರೆ | ಬೆಣ್ಣೆಗಳ್ಳ ಕೃಷ್ಣ ಮರುಳು ಮಾಡಿ

ಬೆನ್ನದ ಗಿಂಡಿಲಿ ನೀರು ತಂದಿತ್ತರೆ | ಕಣ್ಣು ಕಾಣದೆ ನಾ ರೊಣೆದೆ ಪಂಥರಿಯಾಯ

ಎನ್ನ ಹೆಸರು ಹೇಳಿ ಸೂಳೆಗೆ ಕಂಕಣ | ವನ್ನು ನೀನೇ ಕೊಟ್ಟು ನಿಜವ ಮಾಡಿ

ಎನ್ನ ಪೀಡಿಸಿ ಪರಮ ಭಂಡನ್ನ ಮಾಡಿ | ನಿನ್ನ ಮುಯ್ಯಕ್ಕೆ ಮುಯ್ಯ ತೋರಿದೆ ಪಂಥರಿಯಾಯ

(ಮುಯ್ಯಕ್ಕೆ ಮುಯ್ಯ ತೀರಿತು | ಜಗದಯ್ಯ ವಿಜಯ ಸಹಾಯ ಪಂಥರಿಯಾಯ ||

ಸಣ್ಣವನೆಂದು ನಾ ನೀರು ತಾರೆಂದರೆ | ಬೆಣ್ಣು ಕೃಷ್ಣ ಮರುಳು ಮಾಡಿ |

ಚಿನ್ನದ ಗಿಂಡಿಲಿ ನೀರು ತಂದಿತ್ತರೆ | ಕಣ್ಣು ಕಾಣದೆ ನಾಣೆದೆ ಪಂಥರಿಯಾಯ ||

ಎನ್ನ ಹೆಸರು ಹೇಳಿ ಸೂಳೆಗೆ ಕಂಕಣ | ವನ್ನು ನೀನೇ ಕೊಟ್ಟು ನಿಜವ ಮಾಡಿ |

ಎನ್ನ ಪೀಡಿಸಿ ಪರಮ ಭಂಡನ್ನ ಮಾಡಿ | ನಿನ್ನ ಮುಯ್ಯಕ್ಕೆ ಮುಯ್ಯ ತೋರಿದೆ ಪಂಥರಿಯಾಯ ||

You have avenged yourself, You the Master of the Universe, helper of Arjuna, Lord of Pandharpur.

I asked the little one to bring water, You Butter-thief, deceived me and brought water in a golden vessel, blindly I hit you, Lord of Pandharpur.

You gave the bracelet to the courtesan and made it true (that I gave it to her)

I was made to appear as a low life and got tortured. You got your revenge, O Lord of Pandharpur.)

To this day, there is a pillar in the temple at Pandharpur known as Purandara Pillar indicating the pillar to which he was tied and thrashed. It is more likely that this was the pillar at which he used to stand and worship.

Again, it has to be noted that an exactly similar legend exists in the life of Sri Vipranarayana (also known as Thondaradippodi Alvar or Bhaktangrinen), who is believed to have flourished sometime between 7th and 9th Centuries CE.

After visiting the sacred places throughout the length and breadth of India, Purandaradasa appears to have returned to Hampe to spend his final days. The date of demise is given by two sources. The first account is in a song (ತೆರಳಿದರು ಪುರಂದರದಾಸ ರಾಯರು, ತೆರಳಿದರು ಪುರಂದರದಾಸ ರಾಯರು - the revered Purandaradasa has departed) composed by his son Madhvapati:

ರಕ್ತಾಕ್ಷಿ ಸಂವತ್ಸರ ಪುಷ್ಯ ಬಹುಳ | ದತಿಶಯದಮಾವಾಸ್ಯ ಮಂದವಾರ

ಗುರು ಮಧ್ವಪತಿ ವಿಠಲನ ಧರಗೆ ತೋರಿ | ಪುರಂದರದಾಸರು ನಿಜ ವೈಕುಂಠಕ್ಕೆ||

(ರಕ್ತಾಕ್ಷಿ ಸಂವತ್ಸರ ಪುಷ್ಯ ಬಹುಳ | ದತಿಶಯದಮಾವಾಸ್ಯ ಮಂದವಾರ ||

ಗುರು ಮಧ್ವಪತಿ ವಿಠಲನ ಧರಗೆ ತೋರಿ | ಪುರಂದರ ದಾಸರು ನಿಜ ವೈಕುಂಠಕ್ಕೆ ||

On the new moon day of the dark half of the Pushya month and Raktaakshi year, Saturday, Purandaradasa departed for Vaikuntha)

Vijayadasa's account is slightly different:

ಮುಕ್ತಾರ್ಥ ಹರಿಪಾದಾಸಕ್ತರಾಗಿ ಧ್ಯಾನಿಸುತ | ರಕ್ತಾಕ್ಷಿ ವತ್ಸರದರ್ಕವಾರ ಇಂದು ಕ್ಷಯ

ಯುಕ್ತ ಪುಷ್ಯಮಾಸದಿ ಉದ್ಯುಕ್ತರಾಗಿ ಪುಷ್ಪಕದಿ | ಮುಕ್ತಿಗೆ ಸಾರಿದರು ವಿರಕ್ತಿ ಮಾರ್ಗವನ್ನೆ ಪಡೆದು ||

(ಮುಕ್ತಾರ್ಥ ಹರಿಪಾದಾಸಕ್ತರಾಗಿ ಧ್ಯಾನಿಸುತ | ರಕ್ತಾಕ್ಷಿ ವತ್ಸರದರ್ಕವಾರ ಇಂದು ಕ್ಷಯ

ಯುಕ್ತ ಪುಷ್ಯಮಾಸದಿ ಉದ್ಯುಕ್ತರಾಗಿ ಪುಷ್ಪಕದಿ | ಮುಕ್ತಿಗೆ ಸಾರಿದರು ವಿರಕ್ತಿ ಮಾರ್ಗವನ್ನೆ ಪಡೆದು ||

He departed, on the Pushpaka, for his deliverance, meditating upon Hari's feet on the Sunday of the dark half of the Pushya month and Raktaakshi year).

Only the day of the week appears to be different, by one day, between the two versions. The latter day is calculated to be 2nd of January 1565 CE).

A Brief Glance at the Works of Purandaradasa

As indicated earlier, Purandaradasa is believed to have composed some 425 000 (some say 475 000) songs. Only about 1300 are now available. Even among those that are accessible, some of them might not have been composed by him at all, but by others such as disciples, sons and other followers who just used his signature, Purandara Vitthala.

The compositions are generally classified into three categories:

1. Pada or Keertana: These normally contain Pallavi (refrain), Anupallavi (that follows Pallavi) and three or more Nudis or Charanas. The important message is contained in Pallavi and Anupallavi. The Charanas mainly explain and elaborate the message.
2. SuLaadi : Here the taalam (rhythmic beat) changes from verse to verse. In other words, it is a Taalamaalika as contrasted with Raagamaalika (garland of melodies). Purandara has composed a very large number of SuLaadis. They usually contain a philosophical or spiritual message.
3. Ugabhoga. Normally these are short compositions set to a particular raaga. They do not have a Pallavi or Anupallavi.

Devotional Songs The majority of Purandara's songs express his devotion to Krishna in His many forms. His favourite deity Venkateshwara is adored in several compositions such as ದಾಸನ ಮಾಡಿಕೊ ಎನ್ನ | ಸಾಸಿರ ನಾಮದ ವೆಂಕಟರಮಣ (ದಾಸನ ಮಾಡಿಕೊ ಎನ್ನ | ಸಾಸಿರ ನಾಮದ ವೆಂಕಟರಮಣ || *Venkataramana of thousand names! Make me Thy slave*), ಶ್ರೀನಿವಾಸ ನೀನೇ ಪಾಲಿಸೋ (ಶ್ರೀನಿವಾಸ ನೀನೇ ಪಾಲಿಸೋ | *Sreenivasa, please protect me!*) and the Sanskrit ವೆಂಕಟಾಚಲ ನಿಲಯಂ ವೈಕುಂಠ ಪುರ ವಾಸಂ (ವೆಂಕಟಾಚಲ ನಿಲಯಂ ವೈಕುಂಠ ಪುರ ವಾಸಂ | *Having a home in Venkata Hill, resident of Vaikuntha*). He entreats Krishna to show Himself as in ಯಾದವ ನೀ ಬಾ (ಯಾದವ ನೀ ಬಾ | *Please come, You Scion of the Yadu clan*). Vishnu's seventh Avatar, Ramachandra, and particularly the name Rama itself, is extolled in several songs. For example, ರಾಮ ಎಂಬುವ ಎರಡು ಅಕ್ಷರದ ಮಹಿಮೆಯನು ಪಾಮರರು ತಾವೇನು ಬಲ್ಲರಯ್ಯ (ರಾಮಾ ಎಂಬುವ ಎರಡು ಅಕ್ಷರದ ಮಹಿಮೆಯನು ಪಾಮರರು ತಾವೇನು ಬಲ್ಲರಯ್ಯ

एरडु अक्षरद महिमेयनु पामररु तावेनु बल्लरय्य | *What do the ignorant know about the greatness of the two syllables of the name Rama?*) and रामु मन्त्रव जपिसो | *Chant the Rama mantra*). Of course, no Kannada household is unfamiliar with the song ಭಾಗ್ಯದ ಲಕ್ಷ್ಮೀ ಬಾರಮ್ಮ (भाग्याद लक्ष्मी बारम्मा *Lakshmi of good fortune, please come to our abode*).

Conduct of Life (ನೀತಿಬೋಧೆ). A large number of Purandara's songs tell us how to live a righteous life. They also indicate the importance of a good teacher as in ಗುರುವಿನ ಗುಲಾಮನಾಗದ ತನಕ ದೊರೆಯದಣ್ಣ ಮುಕುತಿ (गुरुविन गुलामनागद तनक दोरेयदण्ण मुकुति | *You won't achieve salvation until you become slave to a guru*). He also stresses that God's grace and the companionship of righteous people (सत्संग सत्संग) are vital for salvation, mere reading of scriptures or punishing body with severe penances are useless. This is elaborated in the song ಏನು ಮಾಡಿದರೇನು ಭವ ಹಿಂಗದು | ದಾನವಾಂತಕ ನಿನ್ನ ದಯವಾಗದನಕ (एनु माडिदरेनु भव हिन्गदु | दानवान्तक निन्न दयवागदनक ||

Do what we will. We will not be released from the cycle of birth and death until we receive Your grace, O Slayer of Demons), He also advises people against having a loose tongue and uttering calumny, in the song ಆಚಾರವಿಲ್ಲದ ನಾಲಿಗೆ ನಿನ್ನ ನೀಚ ಬುದ್ಧಿಯ ಬಿಡು ನಾಲಿಗೆ (आचारविल्लद नालिगे | निन्न नीच बुद्धिय बिडु नालिगे ||

You undisciplined tongue! Get rid of your low-mindedness!). He tells us to swim, not sink; we should persevere and win (ईसबेकु इद्दु जैसबेकु | ಈಸಬೇಕು ಇದ್ದು ಜೈಸಬೇಕು). He also exhorts us not to waste our precious human life (मानव जन्म दोड्डु | इद हानि माडलु बेडि हुच्यप्पगळिरा ಮಾನವ ಜನ್ಮ ದೊಡ್ಡದು | ಇದ ಹಾನಿ ಮಾಡಲು ಬೇಡಿ ಹುಚ್ಚಪ್ಪಗಳಿರಾ).

Conclusion

It is impossible to do any sort of justice in a short essay to the vast contribution that Purandaradasa has made to the south Indian people not just in music, but in the general uplift of our spiritual life. Many outstanding song writers and composers of devotional music followed in later years. It may be safely said, however, that no one has surpassed or even come close to the phenomenal impact that Purandaradasa has made on the lives of generations of Kannadigas and other South Indians. He was God's gift to humanity.

