

22. The Screen Within

It has become a convention to address such a gathering as “Brothers and Sisters”, though no speaker is prepared to live up to the ideal that such a form of address implies. Many such empty formalities have entered into daily conduct. For example, it was mentioned now, that today is a ‘red letter day’ in the history of Tirupati. Red-letter days or days that have to be recorded in letters of gold are becoming quite cheap nowadays. Only four days, remember, deserve that honour: the day on which devotees gather to sing the glory of God; the day the hungry are fed; the day one meets a great sage; and the day on which discrimination dawns on the individual. This day certainly falls in the category, so the secretary’s description is, for once, right.

I like the work in which this committee is engaged, so I hurried to this place from Bangalore, where yesterday there was continuous singing (*akhandā bhajans*) by many devotees.

I like Saint Thyagaraja. My affection for him is not a matter of today. It is centuries old. And Thyagaraja and Tirupati are also attached to each other. He prayed here that the screen hiding the Light that was inside him might be moved aside by the Lord’s Grace. This committee has been trying heroically to erect a place of worship for the saint and a hall to celebrate the Thyagaraja Festival and to encourage the study and practice of his songs. I was sorry when I heard their report and listened to the journeys these people have made to distant places and the dribbles of donations they have received so far.

The means for collecting donations must be pure

Though the report is evidence of their devotion and sacrifice, it reveals the false sense of values that people are developing nowadays. Money (*dabbu*) must also circulate like blood (*blooddu*)! Otherwise, that too will cause ill health. There is no better method of using money than for promoting devotion, for then the entire system, individual and social, will benefit. If money is stored and not circulated, it will cause social swellings, and the swellings may become boils and burst.

I learn that the secretaries in their despair have thought of running a lottery for completing this structure. I am very much against this plan. A lottery attracts money from persons who are moved by greed; it holds out the attraction of quick riches and tempts men from a wrong angle. It will be tainted money to sell lottery tickets and distribute prizes and use the balance. Though it is for a good purpose, the means must be pure.

Everyone who gives even a paisa must give it out of real devotion, knowing that the paisa will be used for the building that one wants to get built. Do not receive money given halfheartedly or with some motive other than devotion. Then only will the building be worthy of Thyagaraja, who spurned the wealth (*nidhi*) offered by the Rajas of Tanjore and preferred the proximity (*sanidhi*) of the Lord to the favours bestowed by human donors.

It is when diseases are rampant that doctors are needed more; and now, when the standard of moral conduct has fallen very much, people must turn to doctors like Thyagaraja, who dispense the drug of repeating the Name Rama in their own sweet palatable versions. All have equal right to share in the health-giving properties of that drug. In every linguistic group we have great doctors who treat this disease of worldly existence successfully — Surdas in Hindi, Ramalingaswami in Tamil, and Purandharadasa in Kanada, to give just one example in each language.

Thyagaraja's songs impart bliss

Thyagaraja is in a class by himself, not because he sang in Telugu but because his songs are marked by the rare excellences of sincerity of devotion, poetical beauty, and musical melody. The tune suited to the emotional tempo of the idea elucidated in the song; the marking of time quite appropriate to the movement of the meaning; the words, which automatically dictate the marking of time and guide the musician along the notes and the entire structure of the song, helping the arousal of the yogic urge in the singer — such spontaneous mastery of the science and art of both music and spiritual exercise is seldom found in the history of any language or country. He sang unaware, out of the fullness of his realisation, so the songs have that strange communicative force imparting bliss (*ananda*) to the singer as well as the listener.

Devaki gave birth to Krishna, but the child was brought up by Yasoda in Brindavana. Yasoda had all the delight that the child could give. So too, the Tamil devotees of music have adopted Thyagaraja and have practised his songs more than the Telugu speaking people. They are the Yasoda of Thyagaraja. The Tamils specialise in tune and beat, and they sing with scrupulous adherence to these. However, since they do not grasp the full meaning of the text, distortions painful to the Telugu ear often occur. More and more Telugu devotees have to learn to sing Thyagaraja musical compositions so that the nuances of the Telugu language in the songs may not be missed. After all, the tune, beat, and notations are to help in the more easy assimilation of the message contained in the song and in the transmission to the singer and the listener of the live emotion out of which the song arose in the first instance. This can happen only if the meaning is clear.

Devotion is the reservoir for all the temples

Music as a vehicle of peace is universally popular; men, women, and children of all lands are amenable to its subtle influence. Even animals and plants are susceptible to music. The Lord has said: “Where My devotees sing, there I seat Myself (*madbhaktha yathra gaayanthe, thathra thishthaami, Narada*)” So the songs of Thyagaraja sung well and with full realisation of the context and meaning are excellent media for the spread of devotion. That is why I came today, to encourage and bless this committee, which is celebrating Thyagaraja Festival. Three things combined to bring Me here: their yearning, faith, and conjunction of convenience!

The Thirumalai Tirupati Devasthanam must foster the nurseries of devotion wherever they are found. For it is through devotion that pilgrims flock to the Hill and pray before Venkateswara. If the springs of devotion dry up, with what are the minds of men to be watered? That is the reservoir for all the temples of this land. So, the Devasthanam can well come to the rescue of this committee. It is doing the work of the Devasthanam, by promoting the musical compositions of Thyagaraja, that develops the spirit of devotion. Thyagaraja was Valmiki himself come to the south of India to sing the glory of Rama and spread the *Rama tharaka* mantra. He had always the welfare of the individual as well as the world in view. He had the experience of the constant presence of the Lord, so that Rama had to give him audience and come to his help a number of times. His devotion made him ever at peace and joyful.

India is on the threshold of a new era

Prayer and contrition are the two disciplines by which the mind can be cleansed of egoism and hatred; Thyagaraja is a fine example of how this can be done. He was ever engaged in the process of examining his words and deeds and evaluating them on the touchstone of devotion. As the bee in search of honey wanders in search of the

flowers, as the creeper clings fast and fondly to the tree lest it fall, as the rill runs to the river and the river rushes to the sea, so Thyagaraja pined for Rama. His songs are pure fragrant blossoms of devotion and, therefore, are immortal.

Everyone seeks rest, but the dust of sense craving accumulates on the mind, producing rust and threatening to “burst” it; so one has to test it, off and on, keep it in perfect trim. To remove that rust, the music of Thyagaraja’s musical compositions will be useful. Lay aside your cynicism for a while and listen to the captivating tunes and imbibe the sense. The science of spiritual culture and of the control of the mind has been developed and practised in this country for thousands of years, and that is why Indian civilisation has stood the shock of ages and the fury of typhoons that swept whole peoples off their feet. India is still green and fresh, on the threshold of a new era, under the leadership of her own ancient ideals.

The taste for good music has also gone nowadays, with the coming of catchy lilts and croonings from the cinemas, and the craze has spread for imitating them even in *bhajans*! Sing the compositions of Thyagaraja in the classical tunes, and I am sure they will have great appeal. They are not mere songs (*paatalu*), they are bundles (*mutalu*) of precious stones; they take you along the road (*batalu*) to God.

If Thyagaraja gets neglected, this Holy Hill will lose height, for the Hill stands so high because it rests on the pedestal of devotion. Neglect of Thyagaraja can happen only when the people of this land become desperately worldly, deaf to the whisper of the God within.

Tirupati, Thyagabrahma Festival, 1957-07-11