

Critical & Analytical Essays

An Analytical Study of Vālājapēṭ Veṅkaṭaramaṇa Bhāgavata's Musical Style Using Select Compositions

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Editor's Note:

The guru-śiṣya paramparā is not merely a pedagogical arrangement but the living vessel through which a musical tradition renews itself across generations. This study of Vālājapēṭ Veṅkaṭaramaṇa Bhāgavata's compositions brings long-overdue analytical attention to a figure whose contribution to the Karnatic tradition has been felt more than it has been formally examined.

Abstract

Guru-Śiṣya paramparā is a revered tradition of learning through close mentorship. It is a system rooted in the concept of paramparā, representing an unbroken lineage of knowledge passed from guru to śiṣya through oral tradition. Each disciple becomes a custodian of their guru's teachings and is entrusted with the responsibility of preserving, practising, and sharing the art form with future generations, ensuring its sustained evolution. This tradition reached its zenith after the enduring impact of the Trinity—Śrī Śyāmā Śāstri, Śrī Tyāgarāja, and Śrī Muttusvāmi Dīkṣitar—a heritage that inspired generations of composers to carry forward their legacy and enrich the field of Karnatic music.

In order to acquire subtle knowledge and reach transcendental realms, it is a prerequisite to find a bona fide guru to ensure qualitative transmission of proficiency. At the same time, it is a coveted desire of every guru to look for the right disciple with whom they can share their knowledge and later impart advanced learning to sincere disciples. Vālājapēṭ Veṅkaṭaramaṇa Bhagavata was one such devoted chief disciple of Saint Tyāgarāja.

The current case study deals with the profound compositions of Vālājpēṭ Veṅkaṭaramaṇa Bhagavataṛ, the foremost disciple of Śrī Tyāgarāja. The article explores the melodic, thematic, and structural features of select compositions by Veṅkaṭaramaṇa Bhagavataṛ, highlighting his distinctive style and lasting contribution to the Karnatic music tradition.

Keywords: Guru–Śiṣya paramparā, Vālājpēṭ Veṅkaṭaramaṇa Bhagavataṛ, Śrī Tyāgarāja, compositional forms, structural features

1. Methodology

The study is exploratory and qualitative and is conducted using an analytical approach. This study adopts a comprehensive analytical framework to examine the select compositions of Vālājpēṭ Veṅkaṭaramaṇa Bhagavataṛ through three interconnected dimensions: lyrical, melodic, and thematic. The lyrical (sāhitya) analysis focuses on the poetic content, language, and expressive nuances embedded in the compositions. The melodic dimension encompasses both rāga and tāḷa, aiming to understand the musical architecture, stylistic choices, and rhythmic intricacies that shape each piece. The thematic analysis explores the underlying devotional, philosophical, and narrative elements, identifying recurring motifs and contextual relevance. Together, these components provide a holistic lens to interpret the artistic intent and cultural significance of the compositions within the broader tradition of Karnatic music.

The selected compositions of Vālājpēṭ Veṅkaṭaramaṇa Bhagavataṛ for this study have not previously been analysed from structural and melodic perspectives, particularly with regard to their sāhitya (lyrical content), rāga (melodic framework), and tāḷa (rhythmic structure). This study aims to address that gap by examining the melodic, thematic, and structural features of select compositions, focusing specifically on those composed in the rāgas Bhairavī and Dhanyāsi, which were chosen as each has the highest number of compositions—four—in the selected corpus. The analysis is based on the published notations found in the 1991 edition of the book *Srimad Venkataramana Bhagavataṛ Swamigalin Swara Sahityangal and Charitra*

Surukkam, which serves as the primary source material for this research.

The data collection for this research article is as follows:

1.1 Primary sources

The book titled *Srimad Venkataramana Bhagavata Swamigalin Swara Sahityangal and Charitra Surukkam*, published by the Srimad Venkataramana Bhagavata Swami Jayanthi Committee in the year 1991 and edited by V. N. Nagaraja Bhagavata and Prof. T. R. Damodaran. This book contains the notation for 71 compositions of the composer.

1.2 Secondary sources

Articles
Books
Journals
Theses
Websites

2. Introduction

The philosopher-poet Maharishi Dr. Shuddhananda Bharathi (1897–1990 AD), a devoted Sāma Yoga practitioner, proclaimed: “Tyāgarāja is the temple of Rāma nāma—Rāma kokilam—who warbles the glory of Rāma from the honey-dropping arbor of music. He is a Mira in motion, a Kabir in devotion, a Purandara Dāsa in music, and a Nammālvār in vision.”¹ Dr. Raghavan further adds to this observation, stating: “The age of Caturdaṇḍī, of Gīta, Prabandha, Thāya, and Ālāpa had to give place to the age of Pada, Kīrtana, and Kṛti. In achieving this, Tyāgarāja stands foremost with his marvellous contribution.” His devotion, religious fervour, reformatory zeal, and spiritual realisation pour out in the form of classical compositions in Karnatic music, which are deeply captivating and relatable to every heart on the path of bhakti

¹ <https://www.indian-heritage.org/music/thyagar.htm>

(devotion). It is for this reason that the śiṣya paramparā of Śrī Tyāgarāja is considerably wide.

His foremost disciples disseminated the guru's compositions through three principal lineages: Tillaisthānam (Rāma Iyengār), Umayālapuram (Kṛṣṇa and Sundara Bhāgavatar), and Vālājapēṭ (Veṅkaṭaramaṇa Bhāgavatar and his son Kṛṣṇaswāmy Bhāgavatar).

Vālājapēṭ Veṅkaṭaramaṇa Bhāgavatar was born to Nannusamy of Ayyampettai on February 18, 1781, in Ariyalur, Tiruchirappalli district, into a Saurāṣṭra Brahmin family. He was fluent in Telugu, Saṁskṛtam, and Saurāṣṭra. He composed nearly 150 works in these languages, closely reflecting Tyāgarāja's musical style. His contributions span various compositional forms such as varṇa, svarajati, kṛti, and tillāna. Many of his compositions remain unpublished, with existing records found in the Vālājapēṭ notations—manuscripts preserved at the Madurai Saurāṣṭra Sabha and the Government Oriental Manuscripts Library in Chennai. He attained mukti on December 15, 1874, and a temple dedicated to him stands near the Tyāgarāja samādhi in Tiruvaivāru.

Vālājapēṭ Veṅkaṭaramaṇa Bhāgavatar, though a late bloomer, became a promising disciple of Śrī Tyāgarāja. His contribution has been immense in unearthing factual details about the life and musical compositions of his guru. Along with documenting his guru's works, he also composed a number of original compositions. Though he is believed to have composed between 2,000 and 2,500 pieces, only about 150 have been identified so far. Among these, 70 compositions are published with lyrics and notations (svaralipi) in the 1991 book *Srimad Veṅkaṭaramaṇa Bhāgavatar Swāmigalin Swara Sāhityaṅgal and Charitra Surukkam* from Ayyampettai (Sankaranarayanan).

For the purpose of this study, two compositions are chosen. Many compositions in the rāgas Kēdāragaula and Bhairavī were composed by Veṅkaṭaramaṇa Bhāgavatar, which serves as a criterion for selecting the kṛtis analysed in this article. While the composition in Bhairavī is a svarajati, the selected compositions are examined to understand their melodic, thematic, and structural characteristics within the broader framework of the Karnatic music tradition.

3. Composition Analysis

Svarajati: *Sāmi Nenaruna Brōvara* in the Rāga Bhairavī

Pallavi

Sāmi nenaruna brōvara nādupai jālamēla nannēlukōra

Caraṇa-1

Mōmiṭu tirugarā mamata nēda nīde nātanu vaṭamcu benciti
gadarā
mudamotava sadayudavagucu sarasane daneda
gatiyakatami niluvadika nanu

Caraṇa-2

Kāmita phalada yōkari varada nīvanāda raṇa sēyamēra
takadūraka
nikaramuna karamiḍi bharavasa mosagudu vanucu śaraṇani
padamula baḍiti

Caraṇa-3

Sāṭi dorakani sāmi cāla valacati rāmana seriginan kṛpā
jūḍarā sarasāgraṇi
ninu vinā gatiga vara sārekulu nī pada sārasmulviḍa
jālanunannika
sādaramuna manupumu nanu sākulu jūpaka
sānandamukanu

Caraṇa-4

Nī padamula nera nammiti gadā sadā sarasīruhāyata nētra
nikhila lōka
rakṣaṇātyakṣasam rakṣamām patitāgragaṇyam anagha
santatamu
nā morālincibirā nanu parāku salupaka

Caraṇa-5

Nīvē gati anucuna palu vidhamulan moraliḍina nī
 kṛparādika
 nēmisētu nevaritō teluputu sumā vinumā ghanā kṛpakala
 dora
 nīvē nādu gurutavivekuladana mīvē rāmacandrapura
 dāsanuḍavu
 nīvē vidhi bhavādi sēvyuṭavaraku nātha tāḷajālamēla
 takadika

This svarajati, set to vilamba (dvikāla) Ādi tāḷa with sama eḍuppu, is dedicated to Lord Rāma, revered as an eloquent and sinless protector by devotees. In this composition, the devotee humbly expresses an earnest plea to the divine, yearning for guidance, protection, and compassion. Despite being a loyal servant, he questions the perceived absence of affection and grace shown by the deity. Seeking refuge and the fulfilment of his desires, he surrenders at the deity's feet, placing unwavering faith in the divine protector even amidst life's challenges.

Addressing Lord Rāma—whom he reveres as eloquent and unparalleled—the devotee implores mercy and forgiveness, longing for compassion rather than judgment. He praises the deity's sinless and pure nature and humbly requests that his prayers be accepted, seeking constant shelter and grace.

Through sincere devotion and repeated appeals, the devotee recognises the deity as his ultimate guide, protector, and teacher. He expresses profound gratitude for the incomparable compassion received, acknowledging his own unworthiness to repay such divine kindness. Emphasising the deity's role in shaping the harmony of his life, he identifies the divine as the Lord of Rāmacandrapura, one who is revered even by fate and destiny.

The composition comprises a Pallavi with two āvarta-s and seven saṅgati-s, followed by five Caraṇa-s, each with four āvarta-s. The

first and second Caraṇa share the same melody. The Pallavi's initial āvarta in the first and second saṅgati-s is melodically identical, with subtle druta variations in the second saṅgati. The laghu section from the third to the seventh saṅgati remains consistent, while the first druta of each exhibits distinct phrases such as Ś ; ; ś n (third), m p d n Ś ś n (fourth), and ś n ś p d p ś n (fifth). The final druta phrase d p m g r s r g remains uniform across these saṅgati-s. The sixth and seventh saṅgati-s share similar laghu melodies, while their second āvarta-s and druta segments vary with phrases such as g g r s m m g r n n and ṇ s r g M p m G R, and druta phrases d p ḡ ḡ ṛ ś n n and Ṛ ś ṛ ḡ ṛ Ś ś n, respectively.

The composition begins on Śaḍja (Sa) and Madhyama (Ma) in the Pallavi and includes Pañcama (Pa) in the Caraṇa-s. The highest note is Madhyama (Ma) in the tāra sthāyi, and the lowest is Niṣāda (Ni) in the mandra-madhyā sthāyi. Janṭa prayōga-s such as gg, mm, nn, pp, rr, and dhāṭu prayōga-s such as s g r g, g n s r, and m d p d enrich the melodic texture.

The composition exhibits several melodic features that deviate from conventional Bhairavī patterns. In the sixth saṅgati of the Pallavi, the phrase “g g r s – m m g r – n n d p – ḡ ḡ ṛ ś – n n d p” is notable for the insertion of “m m g r,” which is uncommon in the standard Bhairavī sequence. Another distinctive feature is the dhāṭu phrase “D Ṛ Ś ṛ ś N D P,” which begins with a leap from D to Ṛ, an unusual transition when compared to more typical P–Ṛ or N–Ṛ movements. The seventh saṅgati of the Pallavi includes the phrase “m g p d p m G R,” presenting both technical complexity and an octave leap from R to Ṛ.

In the first and second Caraṇa-s, the phrase “Ḡ Ś Ṛ N Ś D N P D M P R G Ṇ S R” is particularly rich in texture. The fourth Caraṇa displays a repeating 3–3–2 rhythmic pattern across the first two āvarta-s, which are mirrored, creating a symmetrical musical design. The fifth Caraṇa introduces the phrase “ś n d m” and the sequence “N ś – P d – M p – R g,” further enhancing the composition's expressive quality.

Prosodically, the composition demonstrates dvitīyākṣara prāsa and extensive use of svarākṣara-s, including both śuddha

(e.g., *Sāmi*, *Nīde*, *kṛpā*) and *sucita* (e.g., *nādupai*, *mōmiṭu*, *ninuvina*). Instances of *hrasva* syllables aligning with *dīrgha* *svara*-s, as seen in *nīpada* and *Kāmita*, further enhance the lyrical sophistication of the *svarajati*.

4. Kṛti: Karuṇānidhi in the Rāga Kēdāragaula

Pallavi

Karuṇānidhivaṇi nera nammina nannu
Karuṇiṅcavademi rā Rāma

Anupallavi

Śaraṇāgata pōṣaṇa birudāṅka
Paramānanda paripūrṇa ninnu

Caraṇa-1

Parama puruṣa nī smaraṇamu sēyucu
Dāridrya dūralai merayucu niṇḍē
Parama bhāgavatula pādasēvakuḍanai
Nirupamā maunī caritamulanu vini

Caraṇa-2

Suravaruḍani ninne śaraṇu śaraṇanina
Karivarumoravini parama dayāluvai
Śīrirmodalagu nī parijanula maraci
Veravaku manasunu dūramuna pōsina

Caraṇa-3

Rāmacandrapuravara budhapālana
Rāmadāsa hṛtāpa śamanā
Kāmapūrituḍaina nannu niṣkāmuniga jēsi
Pāliṅceṭi

This kṛti, composed in praise of Śrī Rāma, is a sincere plea that extols his divine qualities while seeking his compassion and guidance. It acknowledges Rāma as the ocean of compassion and expresses unwavering faith in his mercy, imploring his presence and grace. The composition highlights Rāma's swift response to devotees, his nourishing presence, and the supreme bliss he embodies, recognising him as a complete and perfect divine being.

The text reflects the belief that constant remembrance of Rāma removes distress and illuminates the hearts of those who seek refuge in him. The devotee aspires to serve at his feet alongside exalted bhāgavatas, listening to his incomparable deeds in deep contemplation. The composition further conveys complete surrender, portraying Rāma as one who listens attentively to the prayers of his devotees and offers protection. His compassion and greatness shield his followers from fear and inner turmoil, ensuring that their hearts remain undisturbed and pure.

Structurally, the composition comprises a Pallavi, Anupallavi, and three Caraṇa-s. The Pallavi and Anupallavi span two āvarta-s each, while the Caraṇa-s consist of four āvarta-s and share a common melodic structure. The Pallavi and Anupallavi resemble the melodic framework of Tyāgarāja's *Vārija Nayana*. The Pallavi has no saṅgati-s, whereas the Anupallavi displays two melodic variations in its first line, with the phrase "pōṣaṇa birudāṅka" differing only by the addition of ṛ ṇ. The lines "Niṣkāmunigā jēsi pālīṅceṭi" and "Paramānanda paripūrṇa ninnu" share similar melodic contours with slight variation.

The Pallavi begins on the tāra sthāyi Śaḍja (Ś), the Anupallavi on the madhya sthāyi Madhyama (M₁), and the Caraṇa on the madhya sthāyi Riṣabha (R₂). The highest note employed is Madhyama (Ma) in the tāra sthāyi, while the lowest is Pañcama (Pa) in the mandra sthāyi. Janṭa prayōga-s occur throughout the composition, with the exception of Ma, and dhātu prayōga-s such as r m g s and r p m p ṣ n are also present. Typical rāga phrases include m P d P, r M g S, p S N S, ṛ ś n d P, m P ṛ Ś, and r P m G, with no unconventional melodic deviations observed.

Set to Ādi tāla in madhyama kāla, the Pallavi and Anupallavi feature an anāgata eḍuppu of two akṣara-s, while the Caraṇa-s employ an anāgata eḍuppu of three akṣara-s. Prosodically, the Pallavi and Anupallavi each contain a single pāda, while the Caraṇa-s comprise two pāda-s each. Dvitiyākṣara prāsa is evident in phrases such as *Karuṇānidhi-karuṇiṇca* and *Rāmacandra-kāmapūrituḍaina*, while anuprāsa is also observed across sections. The composition further exhibits both śuddha and sucita svarākṣara-s, such as *ri* in *Kāmapūrituḍai* and *ru* in *Karuṇānidhi* aligning with *Ri*. Instances of hrasva and dīrgha alignment between sāhitya and svara, as seen in *Rāmacandrapura* and *Śaraṇāgata*, enhance the lyrical and melodic richness of the kṛti.

5. Conclusion

Vālājapēṭ Veṅkaṭaramaṇa Bhāgavataṛ's work clearly reflects the Tyāgarāja tradition while simultaneously showcasing his own distinct musical style. His compositions are marked by deep devotion, structural clarity, and a refined balance between lyrical elegance and melodic coherence. Although the saṅgati-s and rhythmic patterns employed are relatively simple, the music conveys depth, restraint, and thoughtful expression. These compositions hold significant value not only as performance repertoire but also as pedagogical material, offering an effective synthesis of bhakti and musical discipline.

Several strategies may be adopted to promote and disseminate these compositions more widely. Various platforms and organisers can encourage musicians to perform such lesser-known works through thematic presentations. With the aid of modern technology, additional orchestral arrangements may be created for these compositions and presented to connoisseurs on special occasions. As an experimental initiative to familiarise listeners with the composer's oeuvre, albums featuring a selection of his compositions may be recorded and circulated on social media platforms. Music educators may also conduct workshops to introduce students and practitioners to these compositions.

Vālājapēṭ Veṅkaṭaramaṇa Bhāgavatar's contributions exemplify the essence of the guru-śiṣya paramparā, wherein knowledge is transmitted with reverence and precision, thereby safeguarding the legacy of Karnatic music for posterity.

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