Overview

The work of the Trinity may be better appreciated against the backdrop of the prevailing socio-economic conditions of their times. This chapter gives an overview of the socio-economic and cultural environment directly relating to Karnatic music in the era of the Trinity in and around the places where they lived.

While studying the history of Karnatic music, it becomes apparent that the period commencing from the 16th century onwards is significant in shaping the system of music as it prevails today – including the system of scales, the wealth of compositions created as well as the range of musical instruments that have evolved. It is also clear that much of this occurred when Tanjore was the headquarters of Karnatic music during the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. One important driver for these events was political change as we see below.

Importance of Royal Patronage

Music and dance had traditionally flourished in Tanjore for many centuries under the patronage of eminent scholar-rulers such as Mahendra Varma Pallava and Raja Raja Chola whose contribution is well recognized in the literature and inscriptions that have survived till today. Towards the middle of the 16th century, the kingdom of Vijayanagara, which was until then the main seat of Karnatic music, fell. Thereafter, Tanjore’s eminence as the bastion of Karnatic music grew spectacularly and remained undisputed as well as unparalleled until this day.

The rise of Tanjore to such eminence in the later centuries can again be attributed to the royal patronage of the Nayak rulers and subsequently the Maratha rulers. During the rule of the Nayaks,
knowledge of Telugu was cultivated widely and a number of scholarly Telugu families made Tanjore their home. Tanjore thus became a seat of fine Sanskrit, Tamil and Telugu considerably enhancing an already flourishing cultural seat.

King Raghunatha Nayak (1600-1634) was himself an erudite scholar and composer, a veena player and a great patron of art. His successor Vijayaraghava Nayak (1633-1673) and others after him continued to be great art patrons and many rulers themselves composed many Yakshaganas. It is evident that during their time, the Chaturdandi form consisting of alaapa, thaya, gereta and prabandha of which several are believed to be in the Saraswati Mahal library at Tanjore appears to have been the prevalent music form in which composers composed. Many composers like Kshetragna, the famous composer of Sringara padas (who is said to have visited Tanjore during the time of Vijayaraghava Nayak), Pedda Dasari, Giriraja kavi, Kavi Matrubhootayya, Sonti Venkatasubayya and many others lived and composed in Tanjore.

This tradition of patronage continued unhindered under the subsequent rule of the Marathas who seamlessly adopted and mastered these new languages in addition to providing patronage for Marathi. Maratha rulers were also prolific composers and great art lovers. Shahaji, Tulaja I, Ekoji II and Sarfoji II composed Darus, Yakshaganas, Kuravanjis, Musical Operas and numerous Padas.

Since these two dynasties were again Hindu, there was an unbroken tradition of Hindu devotional and cultural way of life. The great temples of the region, again the creations of royal patronage, formed seats of music, dance and literature.
Eminent treatises in musicology like Sangita Sudha, Chaturdandi Prakashika, Sangita Saramrita, and Sangraha Chudamani were produced in Tanjore and the 72 melakarta ragas (which provide the basis of the system of Karnatic music, as it exists today) were systematised by Venkatamakhi. Thus, this period was critically important in its contribution to both lakshya and lakshana of Karnatic music.

Royal patronage played a very real and functional role in encouraging the musical tradition. Actions of the rulers such as appointment of composers or musicians to paid court positions or honouring them with valuable gifts ensured that they were free to only develop the musical tradition. Initiatives such as encouraging the study and development of music by investing in the establishment of archives, sponsoring regular performances, supporting the research of the theory of music through publications and debate and providing endowments to various entities such as temples, Mutts for these purposes, went a long way towards preserving and enhancing a valuable tradition.

As royal patronage waned with the commencement of the British rule in India, composers looked to private and public sponsors. Composers and artists migrated to other courts such as Trivandrum and Mysore as well as to newly flourishing cities such as Madras (today’s Chennai) where they gained the patronage of sabhas and other bodies and Karnatic music became more commonly accessible to people to learn and appreciate. One could argue that this in a way has preserved the wonderful heritage of Karnatic music and ensured its survival and growth till this date.
Socio-economic State

A key contributing factor to the unhindered cultural development was the geographical location of Tanjore – set ideally in the fertile deltaic region of Kaveri, known as the garden and granary of South India. The fertility of the soil, plentiful rain contributed to great prosperity in the region leading people to live a contented and artistic life steeped in devotion and spirituality not plagued by any form of unrest.

Thus, religion, music, dance, and literature flourished for over three centuries in Tanjore unhindered by change from political, social or economic events, creating a unique and substantial tradition in music, often called the Tanjore tradition, which has become more or less synonymous with the classical tradition in Karnatic music.

Tanjore as the seat of Karnatic music exploded in eminence with the number of composers and saint musicians who lived and composed there. The Trinity were all born in the district of Tanjore, which had immense religious and spiritual significance. Eminent composers and musicians in the pre and post Trinity period have left their indelible mark by contributing to the rich heritage of this system of music. The guru-shishya parampara was invaluable in preserving and passing on contributions to subsequent generations making them available until today.

State of Music

From the 17th century, art musical compositions in which musical expression reached its zenith came to be composed in the history of South Indian music and Tanjore was the place where much of this occurred. This marked a trend distinguishable from the earlier era of applied music. The period commencing with the composition of a
number of kirtanas with the evolution of their classic structure coupled with the composition of innumerable technical pieces focused on the definition and illustration of ragas including varnams of different types, followed by the age of composition of several dance dramas and dance music such as Swarajati, Tana and Pada varnams etc. finally culminating in the era of the Trinity which formed the pinnacle of the achievements in art music and art musical forms with a clear shift to the lyrical style of music. The post Trinity era saw the composition of many Kritis, Ragamalikas, Tillanas, Swarajati, Varnams and other art musical compositions on the model of those of Trinity and other earlier composers.

Tanjore district saw the emergence of various traditions in music and dance, which were really a way of life for most of the people who lived there. These traditions provided inspiration for the composers and musicians of the time. One of these was the tradition of ‘Bhagavata Mela Natya’, which prevailed in many of the towns and villages including Oothukadu where Venkata Kavi lived and composed. Another important tradition that emerged was that of Bharatanatyam as a dance form, standardized and refined in all aspects of performance as well as being endowed with a rich body of music.

The literature of the times composed by both royal composers or musicians and the great composers and musicians who adorned their courts contains extensive references to the rich nature of music and dance of the times. There was significant intertwining of dance and music and the royal composers and court poets of the time composed a vast body of music including the popular Yakshaganas. The Yakshaganas used many ragas, which are no longer in regular use. As such, they provide a wealth of material to trace the precedents of the ragas of today.
The Tanjore Quartet composed a variety of musical forms, especially dance forms. Another important feature was the nature and range of instruments that were invented and continued to be refined during these times.

Telugu literature and Telugu as a medium of composition achieved new heights with an unprecedented body of music and composition in Telugu being created during this time. Forms of composition such as Padas and Prabandhas were rejuvenated and flourished during this period. It is interesting to note that this tradition continued seamlessly from the time of the Nayak rulers to the Maratha rulers with active contribution by royal composers of both lineages.

The royal composer Shahaji brought about a landmark change in the composition of the Prabandhas and Yakshaganas of that time. These compositions bear the cultural and literary refinement of the Prabandhas seamlessly blending Telugu and Sanskrit in some cases, while preserving the simplicity, melodious nature of the traditional Yakshaganas set in a perfect complement of music, dance and literature. Subsequently a large number of compositions in musical forms such as the Swarajati, Varnams and Kirtanas came to be composed under the reign of the Maratha rulers of the 18th century.

**Role of Composers**

While the compositions of the Trinity dominate any discussion on Karnatic music, Tanjore district was the home for many illustrious composers – in the pre-Trinity period, the Trinity period and in the post-Trinity period. Many eminent composers in the pre-Trinity period of the same era, such as Kshetragna, Muthu Tandavar, Virabhadraraya, Giriraja Kavi, Somakavi, Kasinatha, and Vasudeva Kavi as well as
several in the post-Trinity period contributed significantly to the growth of Karnatic music.

Each of the composers may be distinguished in one or more ways viz. the distinction of their compositions in terms of art or technical forms of music that they contributed, languages that they composed in, the extent to which, if at all, they benefited from royal patronage etc. For instance, Kshetragna set illustrious precedents for the composition of Padas while Sri Sadasiva Brahmendra was a brilliant composer of devotional advaitic Kirtanas of his day.

Role of Women

Women played a significant role in the development of fine arts under the royal patronage in South India. A study of the literary works of the era reveals that there were many highly accomplished gayakis, vainikas, dancers, poets and players of various musical instruments among the artists who adorned the royal courts. For instance, Raghunatha Nayaka, the most illustrious of the Tanjore line of Nayaka rulers, had under his patronage many famous erudite women court poets and veena players well known among them being Ramabhadramba and Madhuravani. This tradition continued under Vijayaraghava Nayaka the next ruler as well as with Rangajamma, Krishnamamba and Lilavati considered the most famous of the court poets of his reign. Rangajamma is said to have composed poems in eight languages and is said to have composed Yakshaganas and Padas that are unfortunately not available today.

The counting of women among the illustrious ranks of great composers of Karnatic music is marginal in the pre-Trinity and Trinity period and a little more prominent in the 20th century. For instance,
Kuttikunju Thankachi (1820-1904) who lived and composed in Kerala in Sanskrit and Malayalam is considered the first woman composer of Travancore. She composed several Kritis, three Attakadhas, Kilipapaattus, Thiruvaathirapaattus and Thullalpaattus. A few other women composers of the 20th century include Kalyani Varadarajan, Smt. D.Pattammal, Smt. Rukmini Ramani, Smt. Mangalam Ganapathy, and Smt. Suguna Purushottam. Among women musicians who rose to great fame were M.S.Subbulakshmi, M.L.Vasanthakumari, D.K.Pattammal, Brinda-Mukta, N.C.Vasantha Kokilam, Radha Jayalakshmi and the list is still growing today. However, the number of women who rose to prominence as singers, vainikas, dancers, musicians par excellence was always significant and continues to be so until this day.

Symbiosis of Religion and Music

Quite apart from its aesthetic appeal, music has always been viewed as a tool of devotion and spiritual realization since time immemorial in India. Many of the great composers with notable examples such as the Trinity, led saintly lives steeped in devotion, inspired by their God and composing, singing in praise of God, viewing music as one with their religion. Nowhere was this more true than in Tanjore, home to many holy temples, spiritual and devotional traditions and the most illustrious of divinely inspired composers, musicians and other artists who took this intertwining of the arts and spirituality to a new level.

Temples with the able assistance of royal patronage became centres of culture with a regular establishment of Oduvars, Araiyars, Dancers, Instrumentalists, Musicians, Sculptors and Painters. The singing of Tevaram hymns, Tiruppallandu, Tiruvaymozhi,
Divyaprabandam, performances of Kuravanji Natakam, musical plays and dance formed an integral part of daily worship (Nityotsava). In the wave of devotional and spiritual revival in Tanjore during this era, the development of Bhajana and Harikatha as art forms was a major contribution in the realm of devotional music.

The temples and revered deities inspired innumerable Sthala Kirtanas from the illustrious composers in praise of the presiding deities as well as their Ishtadevata. This also led to the creation of forms of music and arts unique to some locations.

**How the Trinity Differed**

The Trinity, who were distinguished by their being divinely inspired composers felt no need for royal patronage. They lived and composed for their God/Goddess and at His/Her command. Similar instances can be found with Purandaradasa, Potana, and perhaps Oothukadu Venkata Kavi. The Trinity are exceptions who in this aspect as well as others as we shall see, rank above other illustrious musicians and composers. Rulers such as Tulaja and Sarfoji had the greatest respect for the Trinity.

Though the Trinity themselves never resorted to any royal patronage for support, it may be argued that their vast accomplishments may have been partly facilitated by the fact that their parents and ancestors benefited from the tradition of royal patronage of music. For instance, Ramaswami Dikshitar, Muthuswamy Dikshitar's father, was appointed the Asthana vidwan by King Amarasimhan (the then ruler of Thanjavur) and entrusted with the responsibilities for the temple rituals and organization of the nadaswaram music at the great temple of
Thanjavur¹. Further, unlike his son Muthuswamy who did not compose in praise of patrons, Ramaswami Dikshitar also composed many songs in praise of his patron, Venkatakrishna Mudaliyar of Manali and his vaggeyakara mudra (signature of the composer) “venkatakrishna” is used in all his compositions.

The Trinity lived and composed in an era when music was a way of life and inseparable from religion, one of the most accepted means of devotion to the Lord. The era of the Trinity marks a climax of the various factors leading to the development of Karnatic music in that period causing it to reach its pinnacle as a form of music and devotion. It is sometimes observed that the post-Trinity period was characterized by many illustrious musicians and performers but fewer composers in comparison to the era of the Trinity and the pre-Trinity period. The 20th century has witnessed a flood of composers though not all of them can be put on the same pedestal.

While the contributions of the Trinity itself, which shall be elaborated upon more in subsequent chapters, are enough to set them apart as a group from other composers, it would however be only fair to accord due importance to the fact that they all belonged to Tanjore at a time when it was culturally most vibrant. Artistic creativity and innovation was at its peak and it is little wonder that musicologists often liken this period to the renaissance, which took place in Europe. It appears to be the period, which has had the most significant impact on Karnatic music and performance, as we know it today. It is hence little wonder that the Trinity of Karnatic music should belong to this era.

¹ ‘Monumental Compositions of Ramaswami Dikshitar’ by P.P. Narayanaswami, available at http://www.carnatica.net/special/rdiksitar.htm