

2 *Singing with Saivite Saints*

INTRODUCTION

One of the greatest movements of the world, the *Saiva Bhakti* movement, took place in Tamil Nadu between the 7th and the 10th century. It was at that time that saints composed hymns, set to music, which form the canonical literature of Saivism and were collectively named *Tirumurai*. The corpus of the devotional literature is called, *Panniru Tirumurai* which is a twelve-book compendium of writings of Saivite saints. It consists as the name reveals twelve major works, which are as the *Stotra, Hymns* in praise of Lord Siva.

The word *Tirumurai* is composed of two words namely, *Tiru* and *Murai*. The word *Tiru* means sacred and auspicious and *Murai* means scripture. The etymological meaning of the term *Tirumurai* refers to the scripture which disciplines the soul and paves the way through proper conduct for the ultimate union of the individual soul with Siva.

The spiritual outpouring of Tiru Gnana Sambandar is divided into three *Tirumurais*. Appar's hymns form the next three *Tirumurais*. Sundarar's songs are the seventh *Tirumurai*. These seven books are also called *Atankan Murai*. The eighth *Tirumurai* of Manikkavasagar consists of two different works namely, the *Tiruvasagam* and the *Tirukkovaiyar*. The ninth book is a collection of poems called the *Tiruvisaippa* and *Tiruppallandu* written by nine saints. *Tirumantiram* a unique book written by Saint Tirumular, some two thousand years ago, is acknowledged as the tenth *Tirumurai*. The eleventh *Tirumurai* is an anthology of devotional poems by twelve saints. The *Periya Puranam* of Sekkizhar, 11 century narrating the life story of the 63 Saiva Nayanmar saints, is the twelfth *Tirumurai*.

Of the twenty-seven poets who are the authors of the twelve *Tirumurais*, four are held in high esteem by Saivites. They are Tiru Gnana Sambandar, Tirunavukkarasar, Sundaramurti and

Singing with Saivite Saints 3 Manikkavasagar. These four Saints are called *Samaya Kuravars* or religious preceptors. The *Tevarams* and the *Tiruvagasam* are held as the Tamil Vedas.

This twelve-book anthology was compiled by Saint Nambiandar Nambi. He also arranged the musical notations for them with the help of another musician. There is a view that Nambi compiled only the first eleven Tirumurais and the twelfth one, was added in the 12th century by Sekkizhar.

The Tirumurais have a perennial appeal, as they are records of great spiritual experiences, rendered with wonderful rhythm and expression. Even today, after nearly a thousand years, they move us to tears of joy, give us comfort and solace, and also raise us to heights of ethereal peace.

In the history of music, the contribution of the *Panniru Tirumurai* is immense. These songs can, even now, be heard in temples and in concerts throughout the world.

About the Tevaram The Tevaram is the set of songs sung by saints Gnana Sambandar, Appar, and Sundarar in their seven Tirumurais. Together they have sung hymns to Lord Siva in 274 sacred places that they worshipped during their pilgrimage. 219 of these are found in South India. The Tevaram is more than a text. If one understands the meaning of these holy hymns, one will have a better understanding of the Saiva Samayam.

The Tevaram also guides us into the world of classical Tamil civilizations. The melodic setting of the hymns gives us clues to the ancient musical system of South India. The Tevaram is said to be the earliest musical compositions that we possess in the history of Indian Music. The importance of the Tevaram hymn lies in the fact that they belong to a period when there was a single system of music in the whole of India.

4 *Singing with Saivite Saints* **The Oduvar**

The *Oduvars* are musicians who sing the *Tevaram* in a special traditional way. They have the responsibility to sing hymns from the *Tirumurai* during rituals and ceremonial occasions in temples. The *Oduvars* sing *Tevaram* hymns in a sophisticated free form, individualized singing style, called the *Viruttam*. The *Viruttam* is entirely improvisation and free in terms of melodic form. Sometimes the *Oduvar* will keep time with hand-cymbals (*talam*). It is often at the age of seven or eight, that the typical *Oduvar* gets his training under a teacher at one of the Saiva School Centers. During his studies, the young apprentice memorizes the hymns of the *Tevaram* and learns the techniques of musical performance.

For more than 800 years the district of Tanjavur was the brightest seat of South Indian Music. The *Tevarams* were so popular that kings, starting from the great Raja Raja Cholan, decided to nominate for the first time, musicians at the temples to sing these holy hymns. The Chola King, Raja Raja I appointed *Oduvars* to sing the *Tevaram* hymns together, with accompanying percussion musicians on the *Udukkaï* and the *Matthalam*.

South Indian Music is deeply immersed in devotion. The *Tevaram* form is known as *Vaidika Ganam* or Sacred Musical form.

The *Tevaram* was set to 24 specific *Panns* by the authors of the famous hymns. The *Panns* are the precursors of modern *Ragam*, and its classifications. In the ancient Tamil scaled types, the *Panns* were associated with particular times of the day. The classification of *Panns* were; to be sung during the day *Pagal Panns*; to be sung during the night *Iravu Panns* and to be sung at all times *Prdhu Panns*. The 24 *Panns* and their nearest equivalent to modern *ragam* are as follows:

Singing with Saivite Saints 5 **Pann Ragam**

1. Natta Paadai Gambira Nattai
2. Kolli Navaroj
3. Indalam Nandanamakriya
4. Kurinji Harikambhoji
5. Senturutti Madyamavathi
6. Gandharam Navaroj
7. Megaragakkurinji Neelambari
8. Viyazhkkurinji Sowrasthram
9. Takkaragam Kambhoji
10. Takkesi Kambhoji
11. Pazhandakkaragam Suddha Saveri
12. Sevvazhi Yadukula Kambhoji
13. Kausikam Bhairavi
14. Panchamam Ahiri
15. Saadhari Pantuvarali
16. Puranirmai Bhupalam
17. Pazhampanchuram Sankarabharanam
18. Seekhamaram Mayamalavagulai
19. Piyandaik Gandharam Navaroj
20. Nattaragam Pantuvarali
21. Gandhara Panchaman Kedaragowla
22. Andhali Kurinji Sama
23. Kollikkelavanam Navaroj
24. Yazhmuri Atana

6 Singing with Saivite Saints In recent years, the musical tradition of the hymns of the *Tevaram* has undergone many changes. The tremendous developments of the South Indian Classical Music, the Carnatic Music from the 16 to 19th Centuries, have obviously had a great influence on the music of the *Tevaram*. Nowadays we find that the Pann system of the *Tevaram* has been irretrievably lost, having been replaced by Carnatic raga scales.