

Evolution of Carnatic music- a series

By Smitha K. Prasad

Dear readers, over the next few columns, we will look at the evolution of Carnatic music and how different factors have influenced Carnatic music into the form that we know today. In the last issue, we looked at the *Bhakti* movement in North India, its impact on Carnatic music and the contributions of the poet-saint Surdas. This week, we will look at more aspects of the *Bhakti* movement and discuss more about the exponents of the movement.

The *Bhakti* movement, essentially founded in South India, spread to North India during the late medieval period (14th-17th c.) when North India was under Muslim domination. The movement was spontaneous and consisted of a loose group of saints whose main ideals were devotion of God in a simple way. Saints like Surdas, Meerabai, Namdev and others spearheaded the *Bhakti* movement in the North while saints like Purandara Dasa led the movement in the South.

Meera (16th century), a Rajput princess, was one of the foremost exponents of the *Bhakti* movement. She was born into a royal family in Rajasthan and from a very young age professed deep love for Lord *Krishna*. Married at a young age of 14, Meera continued her worship and sought the company of saints and poor bhaktas, dancing and singing the praises of Krishna in gay abandonment. She is said to have been ill treated by her in-laws after the death of her husband but each time, *Krishna* intervened and protected Meera. Meera seems to have spent her last days as a devotee in Dwarka- a version of her life history describes her as merging with the idol of *Krishna* inside a temple.

Meera's poetry is in simple verse form- they are composed in Braj, a dialect of Hindi, spoken at that point of time. Her poetry is a form of *Prema Bhakti* and exudes complete surrender to Lord *Krishna*. The legendary musician M.S. Subbalakshmi popularized Meera *bhajans* in Carnatic music- her name is almost synonymous with these *bhajans*. She also essayed the role of Meera in the 1945 movie "Meera". Meera *bhajans* are now popularly included in Carnatic concerts in the *tukkadas* section because of their beauty and simplicity. Mahatma Gandhi once requested M.S. Subbalakshmi to render his favorite Meera *bhajan*- *Hari Tum Haro*. M.S., who did not know the *bhajan*, made a special recording and had it sent to Gandhiji. To this day, recordings of *Hari Tum Haro* sung by M.S. are played on the air on Gandhi Jayanthi.

Till we meet next time, do try and listen to some Meera *bhajans* online; you will find many of these rendered in Carnatic style by M.S. Subbalakshmi and other vocalists.

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