

Evolution of Carnatic music- a series

By Smitha K. Prasad

Dear readers, over the next few columns, I will be discussing the evolution of Carnatic music through the ages. While Carnatic music is a traditional art form that has survived through the centuries, it has been influenced by various social and political factors. Each of these factors has brought about some change either in the form of contribution to Carnatic music or modifying what previously existed.

As I had mentioned in the very first column, the origin of Carnatic music can be traced to the *Vedas* (a large body of text originating in ancient India). Around the 11th-12th century, a new religious faith called *Veerashaivism* came into existence to protest the existing social order in Hindu society. The practice of caste system allowed people born in a higher caste to ill-treat and persecute people of a lower caste. Women had no religious rights and were unfairly treated. It was in this state of society that the *Veerashaiva* movement gained momentum and found a number of willing followers.

The *Veerashaiva* saints created awareness about caste system, fought against rituals and caste and envisioned an egalitarian social order. This was done through simple poetic compositions in Kannada language called *vachanas*. Basavanna, Allamma Prabhu and Akka Mahadevi are few of the most respected and well-known *Veerashaiva* saints. Their poetry, though simple, was filled with meaning and encouraged people to lead a good life- abstain from lying and stealing and instead spend time working and associating with learned people. Here are a few lines from one of my favorite *vachanas* composed by Sri. Basavanna. The *vachana* serves a wonderful lesson in the philosophy of life-

KaLa beda koLa beda husiya nudiyalu beda,
Do not steal, do not kill, do not lie

Muniya beda anyarige asahya padabeda
Do not lose your temper, do not hate other people.

Today, especially in Karnataka, *vachanas* are a popular inclusion in many Carnatic music concerts. Apart from this, concerts consisting entirely of *vachanas* are often heard as special presentations.

Till we meet next time, do try and listen to some *vachanas* online; many of these have been beautifully tuned to either Carnatic or Hindusthani *ragas*. I find that they make excellent songs to teach younger children because of the simplicity of language.

*Smitha Prasad is a Carnatic vocalist based in Cary, NC and can be reached at
smitha_prasad@hotmail.com*