

19. Purandaradasa

In a village near Poona there lived a well-known banker by the name of Vardappa Naik. To him a son was born in the year 1484 who was named Srinivasa Naik. It was he who later became the famous Purandaradasa. Purandaradasa, though he lived in Carnataka country and composed songs in Canarese was a Maratha by birth.

There is no figure in the history of Indian music more unique, more worthy of respect than this saint. He is generally called the grand-father of Carnatic music, and rightly so. Present day practice of Carnatic music is due entirely to him. It was he who fixed the Maya-malava gauda scale

for preliminary training, and to those who bestow a little thought over it, it will be obvious why this particular scale was chosen. It was he who prescribed the elementary lessons in music, such as Sarali varisai, Jantai varisai, gitam, alankaram, etc. He was a prolific composer and is believed to have composed more than 4,75,000 songs. About 8,000 of these are even now extant. It may be said that he set the form and standard for musical compositions. Later composers like Kshetrajna and Thyagaraja adopted the moulds set by Purandaradasa. Of course the former improved on them, especially Thyagaraja who introduced many innovations. Purandaradasa's compositions cover a wide range from the simplest Bhajan songs to highly technical pieces. He used his songs as a medium for his work as God's messenger. He taught the scriptures, Puranas and Ithihasas through his songs. Many a moral precept was given through his music. His compositions abound in allegories, proverbs, and epigrams. He was the Divine bard singing the praise of God, of His Mercy and Love and Compassion and bringing Him nearer to the man in the street. He was so great that the very teacher under whom he received his initiation looked upon him as a greater saint than himself.

It is not proposed to give here a detailed sketch of his life. Born a rich man he improved upon his family wealth so much that he came to be called *Navakoti Narayana*. It is said that he was very greedy in his earlier years, amassing wealth by hook or crook, till almost the limit was reached. And then it was that it pleased God to turn him off from the *pravarti marga* to the path of return to the Divine. His ideal wife Saraswati Bai was the instrument through whom this change was brought about. The sinner became the saint. He gave up all his wealth and with his wife and children went about begging and earning just enough to feed their bodies daily. He reached Vijayanagar where the great Rajaguru Vyasaraya lived, and Purandaradasa who, as the rich

banker Srinivasa Naik, used to go to Vijayanagar in all pomp and glory, went there now as a mendicant seeking alms from those who would give them ungrudgingly. As the saying goes, the greater the sinner the greater the saint. Purandaradasa became the very embodiment of Bhakti. Obviously he had evolved spiritually to a high degree in previous incarnations and, in this life, had some Karma to work out which he did in the early part of his life as a greedy banker, till the shackles fell off and the clouds cleared and he had a vision of his true mission in life.

He travelled far and wide. He visited famous places and people flocked to see him and hear his enthralling songs. Wherever he went he was a centre of peace and goodwill. To him God was not a great entity sitting in a far off Heaven. He was here and now, a friend, a father, a mother, a brother, sympathising with his human failings, rebuking him where rebuke was necessary, but all the time lifting him to His Sacred Feet.

Many miracles are attributed to him. Allowing for possible exaggerations, certain incidents may be said to be authentic. Internal and external and contemporary testimonies point to this authenticity. His Ishtadevata was Sri Vittalaraya of Pandharpur and all his compositions are characterised by this mudra. In the temple at Pandharpur there is a dwajasthamba called *Dasarasthamba*. Pilgrims entering the temple worship this pillar first before entering the holy of holies. There is an anecdote connected with this. In Pandharpur there was a devadasi (singer and dancer of the temple) who was also a true devotee of Lord Vittala. One day the Lord Himself in the guise of Purandaradasa went to the dancer and desired to see her dance and hear her song. The dancer who was a great admirer of Purandaradasa as a devotee sang and danced, with self-forgetful devotion. Highly pleased with her performance the visitor presented her with a bracelet. Next morning it was found

that the bracelet of the image of Sri Vittala in the temple was missing and it came out that Purandaradasa had given it to the dancer. In spite of his entreaties Purandaradasa was dragged to the temple, tied to the post and flogged. At that moment a Voice was heard from the Inner Shrine saying that it was the Lord who disguised as Purandaradasa went to the dancer, because the dasa had some little karma to work out and by that apparent disgrace and flogging Purandaradasa had been completely cleared of all old karma and became a free soul, a *mukta*. The Lord also indicated his desire that that pillar should thereafter be considered a sanctified post and named *Dasarasthamba*.

He lived a full and rich life. He lived but to serve God as His children, the masses. He lived but to bring the Joy of God to the sorrowing world. He was a Divine Mediator interpreting God and His Joy to humanity and lifting the suffering humanity to the Bliss of God, and this he did through the medium of music. After his mission was over he returned to the feet of the Lord on Saturday, Pushyabaula Amavasa of the year Rakthakshi, corresponding to 1564.