



**Sangita Kalanidhi R. Vedavalli** is not only one of the most accomplished of our vocalists, she is also among the foremost thinkers of Carnatic music today with a mind as insightful and uncluttered as her music. *Sruti* is delighted to share her thoughts on a variety of topics with its readers.

## The art of viruttam singing

*Naadena vyajyate varnahpadam varnaat padaadvachab |  
Vachaso vyavahaaroyam tasmaan naadaatmakam jagat ||*  
says Sarangadeva in his *Sangeeta Ratnakara*.

Syllables are derived from nada or sound, words from syllables, speech from words and from speech all activity in this world. Thus nada being the basis for everything else, we see that words are more appealing when recited or sung in a tune. In mythology, the *Ramayana* is known to have been sung by Lava and Kusa. Subsequently, the bhakti literature of the Alwar-s and Nayanmar-s was also mostly sung except for some parts composed only for recitation (*iyarppa*). The verses themselves mention that they were sung to tune – *naalum innisaiyaal Tamizh parappum Sambandhanukku ulagattavar mun talam inda tamiyane*; and *innisaiyaal paadi koduttaal narpaamaalai*, and *Kulasekharan innisaiyil mevi cholliya* to name a few. Children's rhymes when sung in a tune attract children better. We find that in the katha cults of Andhra and Maharashtra, apart from the songs sung in between for highlighting particular instances, many times the narration is itself recited in tune to make the story-telling more lively. Even the vegetable vendor's cry follows a tune.

The term 'vrttam' is a Sanskrit word that denotes 'meter', that is a particular rhythm to which a verse is set. In literature, metrics is a separate branch of knowledge. Metrics in Sanskrit literature deals with many vritta-s like Indravajra, Sardoolavikreeditam, Sragdhara, Arya, and Mandakranta, each of which has a separate form and identity of its own. These meters regulate the arrangement of syllables and words in poetry. Prose does not follow these and is not regulated by them. Tamil literature also deals elaborately with the metrics aspect. Here, the verses are broadly classified as 'isaippa' (those which are fit to be tuned and sung) and 'iyarppa' (those that cannot be set to tune). The *Yappilakkanam* says that 'pa' or verse consists of six parts called ezhuttu, asai, seer, talai, adi and today, and is of four kinds – venpa, asiriyappa, kalippa and vanjippa. These four kinds of verses in turn have three branches each, namely turai, taazhisai and viruttam. Here we find

the use of the term 'viruttam' denoting a particular type of meter alone. A vowel addition to the 'vrttam' of Sanskrit is also seen, making it viruttam.

In music the connotation of viruttam is entirely different from its usage in literature. In the prevalent practice of Carnatic music, viruttam singing is one of the forms of manodharma sangeetam or improvised music, in which a metrical verse in any language is elaborated in a raga or as a ragamalika. A metric verse with words set in a rhythmic structure is used for rendering this kind of viruttam. The interesting thing about viruttam singing is that a structured lyric limited to a particular rhythm in its original form is chosen, which when rendered musically merges into the aesthetics of the raga. However this rendition is not bound by a tala thus making it unstructured. For instance:

*Karaaravindena padaaravindam mukhaaravinde  
vinivesayantam |*

*Vatasya patrasya pute sayaanam baalam mukundam manasaa  
smaraami ||*

This, when recited, is metrically a structured verse but when sung as a viruttam, the beauty of the words and the meaning find expression. The limited structure of the words becomes unidentifiable in the overwhelming visual and aural image of the song. Thus, the viruttam singing technique, when used appropriately and aesthetically, enhances the power, appeal and sensitivity of the words resulting in a transition from the form to the formless and from the limited to the limitless. This process of elaboration by the musician ultimately results in the wholesome experience of rasabhava for the singer and the listener.

The *Natya Sastra* of Bharata speaks of rasanubhava when words are sung rather than being recited or expressed as speech.

*Geetaireva hi vaakyarthas rasapaako balaasraya*

(It is only through songs that strength and ripeness comes to the meaning of the words.)

For an effective viruttam presentation, it is mandatory for the musician to know and understand the meaning of the verse taken up. He or she should also know where the sense gets completed, for in some verses a sense may be complete in each line and in some it may be complete only when two lines are taken together. Similarly she should also know where to pause, where the words may be broken up without losing the intended sense and the tonal emphasis to be used to convey the real sense that is implied in the verse. In a verse like:

*Jaanaati Rama tava nama ruchim Mahesab  
jaanaati Gautama sati charana prabhavam |  
Jaanaati dorbalaparaakramam Easa chaapah  
jaanaatyamogha patu baana gatim payodhib ||*

(Rama, the power of your name is known by Siva, that of your feet by Ahalya, that of your arms by Siva's bow and that of your arrow by the ocean). Here there is no explicit stuti (praise) or namaskara (salutation). Each line is an anecdote that shows the Lord's prowess which in turn implies praise. Only with understanding of these subtleties can the viruttam singing of this verse be truly effective.

The choice of raga is an important thing in singing a viruttam. For verses like *Na janami daanam na cha dhyana yogam... gativvam gativvam tvameka bhavani*, where the devotee says he does not know any path other than total surrender to the goddess, raga-s like Sahana, Varali or Ahiri would be appropriate in conveying the dainya bhava and the bhakti rasa expressed here.

In another verse,

*Kinkini katti kiri katti kaiyini  
Kankanamittu kazhuttal todar katti  
Tan kanattaale sadiraanadandu vandu  
En kannan ennai purm pulguvaan  
Embiraan annai puram pulguvaan*

Raga-s like Mohanam, Kambhoji, Kedaragaula or Kapi would effectively portray the joy expressed by mother Yasoda on seeing her child walking up to her beautifully. All raga-s are not suited for viruttam singing. If you choose vakra raga-s like Kathanakutoohalam, attention would be focused on the raga rather than blending the verse in the elaboration. Moreover such raga-s do not lend themselves to the aesthetic in viruttam singing.

Selecting the appropriate lyric is as important as selection of the raga. The verse must convey a pleasant and auspicious meaning. The syllables used must be soft and sweet, for, even if the meaning may be good, if the syllables are harsh it would not be suitable for viruttam singing. For example, *sataa patalabbeeshane sarabhasaattabaasodbhare sphuratkrudhi parisphuratbhrukutikepi vaktre krite*.

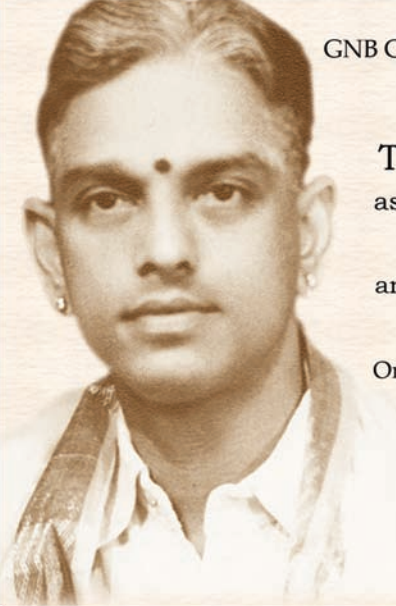
If the verse is in a meter that is very restricted, like –

*Brahma Murari suraarchita lingam  
nirmalabhaasita sobhita lingam*

Such a verse offers limited scope for elaboration. Gadyam-s, dandaka-s and choornika-s also do not offer ample scope for viruttam style of singing.

Another aspect that enhances viruttam rendition is the appropriate interspersing of raga phrases in between words, without singing a string of words in the same swara position and following it with a long raga phrase as an appendage. The raga can be used effectively wherever there are vowel extensions in between the words.

The art of viruttam singing is a perfect blend of music and lyric and lends itself to an enriching aesthetic experience because of its endless and unrestricted scope for creativity and svanubhava. ■



GNB Centenary Year Special Release  
A set of DVDs on

**The Music of GNB**  
as Vocalist and Composer

An analysis based on  
an exhaustive presentation  
by a Study Group

Organised by The Sruti Foundation  
in December 1992

Price : Foreign - US \$ 65.  
Inland - Rs. 2000 per set,  
Rs. 200 extra for  
Packaging & Postage

To order contact  
The Sruti Foundation, 9 Cathedral Road,  
Chennai 600 086. Ph: 2812 8070  
Email: [sruti.magazine@gmail.com](mailto:sruti.magazine@gmail.com)