

January 2010

A VISIT WITH SRI P.V.R.K. PRASAD

Today I had the extreme privilege of meeting Sri P.V.R.K Prasad. He is one of the key people who were involved in popularizing Annamacharya kritis during 1978 and 1982 when he was executive officer of Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams(TTD).

There is a little history behind this whole event. During the summer of 2009, I had music camp for 1 week for my students at VeenaGana and each day after singing we did little bit of theory and talked about the composers. I talked about Annamacharya on one of the days and displayed the pictures of the little room where the copper plates were discovered in Tirupathi Tirumala Devasthanams. Little did I know at that time, that we would learn so much more information later.

Sometime in September, One of the organizers of SAPNA foundation (Annamacharya project), Smt Sarada Sonti, requested me to have my students perform for Annamacharya day. I taught about 9 students Srimannarayana with some swara patterns in the beginning of the song as that was the requirement for that program. During that time, one of my new Veena students Dr.Madhavi Rao asked me how I knew about Sarada Sonti. She immediately said, my father was one of the people who were involved in popularizing Annamacharya kritis in 1978. That itself was a big excitement for me.

Dr Madhavi's parents are visiting here now and when we were at the temple last week for Bahula Panchami celebrating Tyagaraja Aradhana, she introduced me to her father Sri. P.V.R.K. Prasad. I requested him to talk for my school and he immediately agreed. I normally hold theory class every 6 months for my students at VeenaGana. On January 25th, just after the theory class I had arranged for his speech. He spoke to us about Saint Annamacharya and rediscovering his compositions. When you read the following you will

realize how much of effort and dedication was put in so people could easily avail of this great saint's extraordinary compositions.

Annamacharya was born 600 years ago in a little village called Tallapaka, which is about 100 kms from Tirupathi Tirumala Devasthanams. Originally the saint was an ordinary man who did not do much. One day suddenly he saw a group of people walking to Tirumala and joined them. From then on he started composing songs in praise of Lord Venkateswara. The songs had several flavors as in devotional, sringara, folk, conversation with the lord, general life etc.. all leading to God. He did not use his ankitanama or Mudra or signature but used the Lord's name instead. His songs were resonating with bhakti. Annamacharya wrote about 32,000 sankirtanas.



The king wanted the saint to write songs in his praise and the saint refused. St. Annamacharya was jailed because of this. The story goes that the king was made to realize that this is no ordinary man and Annamacharya was released from prison. Annamacharya kritis were all inscribed on copper plates by the king and some were distributed to various villages to be sung. During the muslim rule these copper plates were hidden and saved in the Tirupathi Tirumala devasthanams.



Sometime In 1938 the Mahant's who were in charge of temple management opened the doors of the little room and discovered several copper plates. In all there were 32000 sankirtanas on those plates.

Scholars tried to figure out these songs. Some of the copper plates were sent to various scholars to decipher, which never came back to the temple. Some were used for some temple palanquins etc.. The Devasthanam made some efforts involving scholars like sri Veturi Prabhakar Sastry, sri Rallapalli Ananta Krishna Sarma, Sri Rama Subba Sarma, for preparing true transcripts of all that was available on the copper plates.

Many years later sri Anna rao and Sri Rajagopalraju started the printing work. By that time it was realized that only 13000 sankirtanas were available with the devastanams in the available copper plates. At that time, i.e. in 1978, Sri P.V.R.K. Prasad who is an IAS officer became the administrator of the temple. When he reviewed the action taken so far, he felt the need for creating an institution to initiate the process of popularizing the kritis. A separate project Sri Annamacharya Project was started with sri Kamisetty Srinivasulu Chetty as the special officer sri Balakrishna Prasad, Smt Sobha Raju. Sri Parupalli Ranganath as artists along with a competent team of supporting orchestra. These sankirtanas were in old telugu and were difficult to understand. Sri Rama Subba Sarma and Dr Medasani Mohan were appointed to create a language dictionary. Several artistes had made attempts and sang some of the songs. Still the songs were not that popular, as Tamil musicians who were more familiar with Tyagaraja and Dikshitar did not think much of these.

Sri PVRK approached Smt.M.S.Subbulaksmi who was around 60 years at that time to sing these songs. Sadashivam, M.S.'s husband had reservations and refused saying MS was very popular and famous and suddenly with these very difficult telugu kritis, her reputation might

be at stake. At that time I believe M.S. walked in and heard the request and immediately agreed saying that it is a call for her from Lord Balaji. Every evening they would assemble i.e. MS. the project musicians, the telugu scholars and work relentlessly - she would learn the song and sing in front of them to make sure it came out correctly. Also, Kanchi Mahaswamigal called Sri PVRK and said that MS had lost all her money in charity and was really in deep trouble. They had to move out of their own home Kalki Estate into a small rented house. MS would not accept any charity. Many industrialists were willing to give money, but she would not accept. Even for this project, she did not want to accept money. However, persuading her, an arrangement was made so that



Ms would have some monthly income till her death. 7 lakhs of rupees were deposited in her name and that of Sadasivam And Radha, her daughter who would sing along with Ms. They are entitled for the monthly interest on that, till their death. The deposit will revert back to the devastanam. During the first year itself the Devastanams had realized 10lakhs as royalty.

Thus the series of Five Cassettes and records by name "Sri Balaji Pancharatnamala has come into existence. Thus Ms has paved the way



for the acceptance of Annamacharya by musicians of all hues and for the ultimate popularity of the Sankirtanas of the great Saint Composer.

The above is the gist of what he spoke. I felt truly blessed that this great person Sri P.V.R.K. Prasad had come to our house per my request and talked to my students and me. The speech inspired me so much that I wanted to share with all of you right away. His commitment and dedication for this great cause is amazing. After writing this note, I sent it for his approval before sending it to our group. He was extremely gracious and changed or added some of the information that I had missed. He also gave me a book titled " When I Saw Tirupati Balaji..Naaham Karta" written by him on his and other involved people's experiences, which contains all these experiences in detail. I have read two chapters that he had marked for me and couldn't keep it down. I wanted to share this experience with all of you.

Thank you
Vasanthi Iyer