



Sacred Aesthetics in Performance: Navaratri Compositions of Maharaja Swathi Thirunal and Their Dance Traditions

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Abstract

This study focuses on the Navaratri Keerthanams of Maharaja Swathi Thirunal Rama Varma (1813–1846), examining their devotional depth, lyrical structure, and aesthetic resonance in both musical and dance traditions. Composed for the annual Navaratri Mahotsavam at the Padmanabhaswamy Temple in Thiruvananthapuram, these nine Sanskrit compositions encapsulate the spiritual essence of Devi Upāsana and the artistic excellence of the Travancore court. Each keerthanam—rendered in a distinct rāga and tāla—exemplifies the union of bhakti and rasa, integrating melodic sophistication with spiritual surrender. Although not originally intended as padams or varnams, their lyrical beauty and rhythmic clarity have inspired expressive interpretations in Bharatanatyam and Mohiniyattam. This paper explores the theological symbolism, musical architecture, choreographic experiences, and performative adaptations of these compositions, highlighting how Swathi Thirunal’s Navaratri Keerthanams continue to illuminate the sacred dialogue between devotion and aesthetics.

1.Introduction

The Navaratri Mahotsavam in the royal court of Travancore was not merely a festival of worship but a grand synthesis of spirituality, art, and tradition. During the reign of Maharaja Swathi Thirunal, the festival attained exceptional artistic refinement. The nine days dedicated to Goddess Saraswati, Lakshmi, and Durga transformed into a spiritual odyssey through sound and movement, where nāda (music) and nr̥tya (dance) became vehicles of divine expression. Swathi Thirunal, revered as Sree Padmanabhadasa, was both a devout ruler and a scholar of Sanskrit and Carnatic music. His Navaratri Keerthanams were conceived as nightly offerings to the Divine Mother, performed at the Navaratri Mandapam near the Padmanabhaswamy Temple. Through these works, he harmonized bhakti, poetic elegance, and musical grammar, making devotion itself an aesthetic experience.

2. The Navaratri Keerthanams and Their Cultural Significance

The Navaratri Keerthanams occupy a sacred and cultural position in the devotional landscape of Kerala. They form a musical cycle that mirrors the spiritual ascent of the devotee during the nine nights of Navaratri, symbolizing the victory of divine wisdom over ignorance. Each composition glorifies the Goddess in one of her many manifestations—Saraswati, Lakshmi, or Durga—and unites bhakti with aesthetics. These compositions, rendered in the serene atmosphere of the Navaratri Mandapam, represent the perfect confluence of ritual precision and musical artistry. The royal family's stewardship, the devotion of the Mullamoodu Bhagavathars, and the continued performance tradition have preserved their sanctity for nearly two centuries.

Index of Navaratri Compositions

1. Dēvi Pāvane – Sāveri – Ādi
2. Bhārati Māmava – Tōḍi – Ādi
3. Janani Māmava – Bhairavi – Ādi
4. Sarasīruhāsana Jāyē – Pantuvarāli – Ādi
5. Janani Pāhi – Śuddha Sāveri – Mīśra Chāpu
6. Pāhi Janani Santatam – Nāṭakurunji – Mīśra Chāpu

7. Pāhi Parvata Nandini – Ārabhi – Ādi
8. Bhavati Vivasō Me Bhavatu – Mukhāri – Miśra Chāpu
9. Pāhi Janani – Śuddha Sāveri – Miśra Chāpu

3. Musical Characteristics and Rāga–Tāla Analysis

The Navaratri Keerthanams exemplify Swathi Thirunal’s mastery of melodic form and rhythmic architecture. Each piece is carefully structured to align the rāga’s emotional landscape with the tāla’s rhythmic vitality, producing compositions that are simultaneously devotional and scholarly. The sequence of rāgas progresses from Sāveri—invoking serenity—to Mukhāri and Śuddha Sāveri, evoking compassion and transcendence. The predominant use of Ādi and Miśra Chāpu tālas balances symmetry and meditative rhythm, inviting introspection and surrender. The sahitya resonates with mantra-shakti—each word functioning as a prayer. Repetitions such as “Pāhi Janani” are both melodic refrains and invocations, bridging sound and spirituality.

4. Choreographic Interpretations and Dance Traditions

Although primarily intended as liturgical offerings, the Navaratri Keerthanams have inspired choreographic interpretations in Bharatanatyam and Mohiniyattam due to their lyrical clarity and emotional range. The Sanskrit language, rich in imagery and philosophical depth, enhances their potential for abhinaya. In Bharatanatyam, compositions like “Janani Māmava” (Bhairavi) and “Pāhi Parvata Nandini” (Ārabhi) lend themselves to expressive storytelling, intricate adavus, and stylized nṛtta patterns. In Mohiniyattam, “Pāhi Janani Santatam” (Nāṭakurunji) and “Janani Pāhi” (Śuddha Sāveri) embody lasya bhāva, with gentle sways, circular movements, and subtle eye expressions reflecting meditative devotion.

5. Bhakti and Rasa: The Aesthetic of Devotional Experience

Swathi Thirunal’s compositions manifest bhakti rasa—devotion as aesthetic experience. While the primary rasa is bhakti, sub-rasa elements such as śṛṅgāra (beauty) and vīra (courage) emerge naturally in the goddess’s portrayals. The emotional transformation of śṛṅgāra into madhura bhakti (sweet devotion) elevates beauty to spiritual love. According to Nāṭyaśāstra, true rasa arises when emotion transcends personal limits and becomes universal. These keerthanams achieve that state: the listener and performer

alike experience ānanda—the bliss of union with the divine. In the synthesis of sound, rhythm, and emotion, Swathi Thirunal transforms performance into prayer, fulfilling the vision of saundarya upāsana—the worship of the divine through beauty.

6. The Navaratri Festival and Mandapam Tradition in Thiruvananthapuram

The Navaratri festival in Thiruvananthapuram is an enduring symbol of Travancore's devotional heritage. Each year, the idols of Saraswati Devi, Kumaraswamy, and Munnoottinanga travel in a grand procession from Padmanabhapuram Palace to Thiruvananthapuram, accompanied by Vedic chanting and temple music. At the festival's heart is the Navaratri Mandapam, a centuries-old wooden pavilion near the eastern gate of the Padmanabhaswamy Temple. The hall's ceiling holds suspended earthen pots that act as natural sound reflectors—an ingenious acoustic design ensuring resonance without modern amplification. The Navarathri Sangeetholsavam held here features nine days of concerts where only Swathi Thirunal's compositions are performed. The sacred atmosphere—oil lamps, floral decorations, incense, strict discipline, and silence—transforms each concert into an act of worship.

7. Dance Choreography: Experiencing Bhakti Rasa through Performance

In dance, the Navaratri Keerthanams transcend musicality to become an experiential path to bhakti rasa. The dancer does not merely portray the goddess but enters her essence through the harmony of śruti, rāga, bhāva, tāla, laya, and movement vocabulary. Each composition reflects a facet of the Devi—her compassion, grace, or valor—and through chaturvidha abhinaya (aṅgika, vācika, āhārya, sāttvika), the performer internalizes these states. Through the interplay of tāla and laya, the dancer experiences waves of divine energy—lahari—where movement merges with melody. The choreographic process thus becomes meditation: the dancer journeys from invocation (āhvāna), through immersion (āveśa), to surrender (samarpana). When the final cadence resolves and the dancer bows, art dissolves into prayer. The audience, too, experiences transformation—not as spectators but as fellow devotees. The Navaratri Keerthanams, in their dance form, become a celebration of divine vibration—a bridge between form and formlessness, motion and stillness, the performer and the goddess.

8. Conclusion

The Navaratri Keerthanams of Maharaja Swathi Thirunal are not just compositions; they are spiritual blueprints for merging art and devotion. Rooted in ritual and refined through centuries of practice, they

continue to inspire musicians and dancers alike. Their melodic purity, lyrical elegance, and choreographic potential exemplify India's eternal philosophy that aesthetics and spirituality are one. Through their performance, the devotee becomes the vessel of divine sound—where every gesture, note, and silence is part of the sacred continuum called bhakti. As long as these songs are sung and danced in reverence, the Navaratri Keerthanams will remain luminous symbols of Swathi Thirunal's vision—where beauty becomes worship, and worship becomes art.

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