

TYĀGARĀJA'S PRAHLĀDA BHAKTI VIJAYAM

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Abstract: Prahlāda Bhakti Vijayam is one of the musical dramas composed by the saint-composer Tyāgarāja, presenting the story of Prahlāda through an integration of dramatic narration, songs and verses. Although the narrative is based on the well-known story of Prahlāda from Hindu religious tradition, Tyāgarāja invests the drama with a deeply personal devotional dimension. Prahlāda's longing for Nārāyaṇa, his rejection of worldly boons, and his complete surrender to the Lord become expressions of the ideal devotee. The dramatic structure also employs flashback narration, through which significant events from Prahlāda's life are recalled through the vacana-s and songs of the characters. Particularly significant is the relationship between Prahlāda and the Lord, in which divine compassion responds to the devotee's intense love and unwavering faith. This paper examines the narrative structure, songs, poetic forms, and devotional themes of the work, with particular attention to the intimate relationship between Tyāgarāja's own spiritual outlook and the characterization of Prahlāda.

Keywords: Tyāgarāja, *Prahlāda Bhakti Vijayam*, Prahlāda, Nārāyaṇa, bhakti, devotion, surrender, Karṇāṭak music, musical drama, Vaiṣṇavism.

INTRODUCTION

Śrī Tyāgarāja occupies a distinguished position in the history of South Indian Karṇāṭak music. His compositions are notable not only for their exceptional musical excellence but also for their profound expression of devotion to Śrī Rāma. He composed a wide variety of musical forms, including Pañcaratna Kṛti-s, Divyanāma Kīrtana-s, and Utsava-sampradāya Kīrtana-s, demonstrating the breadth of his musical creativity and devotional expression.

Tyāgarāja is traditionally known to have composed three musical dramas: *Nauka Caritram*, *Sītā-Rāma Vijayam*, and *Prahlāda Bhakti Vijayam*. Of these three, *Prahlāda Bhakti Vijayam*, which narrates the story of Prahlāda, is the most extensive and is particularly distinguished by its elaborate integration of music, dramatic narration, poetry, and devotional philosophy.

THE STORY AND CENTRAL THEME OF PRAHLĀDA BHAKTI VIJAYAM

The story of Prahlāda is traditionally associated with the conflict between the demon king Hiranyakaśipu and his son Prahlāda, who remains steadfast in his devotion to Nārāyaṇa despite severe persecution. The title of the opera is significant: it is *Prahlāda Bhakti Vijayam* and not *Prahlāda Bhakta Vijayamu*. The emphasis, therefore, is on the victory of Prahlāda's bhakti, rather than merely on the life of Prahlāda as an individual. In keeping with this central theme, Tyāgarāja introduces several incidents that are not found in the traditional narrative of *Prahlāda Caritram*.

Although the opera is based on the story of Prahlāda, it is noteworthy that the incarnation of Narasiṃha does not appear in the drama. Likewise, Hiranyakaśipu, who occupies a central position in the traditional narrative, does not appear as a character. Another significant feature is that Prahlāda frequently refers to Rāma rather than exclusively to Nārāyaṇa. This treatment can be understood in the context of Tyāgarāja's devotional outlook, in which Śrī Rāma is regarded as Parabrahman.

The central concern of *Prahlāda Bhakti Vijayam* is the relationship between the individual soul and the Supreme Being. Prahlāda is portrayed as an exemplary devotee whose unwavering faith remains unaffected by worldly difficulties and suffering. The opera is particularly noteworthy for its integration of narrative passages, *vacanas*, and songs. The dramatic action is enhanced through dialogues and prose passages, while the emotional and devotional states of the characters are articulated through musical compositions. This close interaction between dramatic narration and song enables Tyāgarāja to explore the inner devotional experience of Prahlāda in considerable depth.

STRUCTURE OF THE PLAY

The full-length drama consists of five acts and forty-five kṛti-s set in twenty-eight rāga-s, along with 132 verses. The songs are interspersed with a variety of poetic forms, including *gadyam*, *chūrṇikai*, *śīṣa padyam*, *Kanda padyam*, *dvipada*, *vacanam*, *campakamālā*, and *utpalamālā*.

Some of the songs are composed in the established kṛti format, while others reflect the simple kriti format of Divyanāma Kīrtana-s. This variety demonstrates Tyāgarāja's versatility in adapting different compositional forms to the requirements of musical drama. The alternation of songs, verses, and prose passages also contributes to the dramatic movement of the work, allowing the narrative to progress while simultaneously revealing the devotional and emotional states of the characters.

FIRST ACT

This part comprises six songs. At the beginning, the composer offers salutations to the deities Śrī Rāmacandramūrti, Viśvaksena, and Sarasvatī. He then pays homage to his guru, Sage Nārada, and eulogizes several renowned devotees of the Lord, including Tulsīdāsa, Purandaradāsa, Rāmadāsa, Pāṇḍuraṅga, Nāmadeva, Jñānadeva, Jayadeva, Tukārāma, Nārāyaṇa Tīrtha, and other dāsa-s of the Lord.

The arrival of Lord Gaṇeśa is depicted by the popular kṛti *Śrī Gaṇapatini* in the rāga Saurāṣṭra, set to Ādi tāla. Following the Gaṇapati stuti, the arrival of the Dvārabālaka (gatekeeper) is presented through the well-known kṛti *Vāsudevayani* in Kalyāṇi rāga, set to Ādi tāla. The Dvārabālaka enters singing and dancing in praise of Lord Vāsudeva.

The story of the play commences at the point when Prahlāda is thrown into the sea by his father's minions. This episode is introduced through a dialogue between the Sūtradhāra and the Dvārabālaka. Their conversation at the entrance to Śrī Vaikuṇṭha serves as an effective narrative aspect through which Tyāgarāja recounts the events that had occurred earlier in Prahlāda's life.

Acting on the orders of Hiraṇyakaśipu, Prahlāda is bound with poisonous serpents and thrown into the sea. Samudrarāja, the Lord of the ocean, who himself is a devoted worshipper of Hari, welcomes him and takes him to his palace. The arrival of Samudrarāja to rescue Prahlāda, who has been cast into the ocean bound by poisonous serpents, is described by the Dvārabālaka in the kṛti *Sāgaruṇḍu*, set in Yamunā Kalyāṇi rāga and Rūpaka tāla.

In the kṛti, *Vinatāsuta Rāra*, in Husēni rāga, set to Rūpaka tāla, Samudrarāja prays to Garuḍa and requests him to remove the serpents coiled around Prahlāda's body. The subsequent arrival of Garuḍa and his response is expressed in the popular and melodious kṛti *Viṣṇu Vāhana Luṇḍitīkō*, in Śaṅkarābharaṇa rāga and Rūpaka tāla. As soon as Garuḍa arrives, Prahlāda is freed from the *nāgapāśa* (bonds of serpents). Garuḍa then returns to Śrī Vaikuṇṭha to continue serving his Lord.

Prahlāda expresses his gratitude and offers his salutations to Samudrarāja. He then seeks guidance on the means of attaining the Lord and remaining eternally united with Him. This is presented in the kṛti *Vāridhi Nīku*, in Tōḍi rāga and Cāpu tāla.

Samudrarāja instructs Prahlāda to eulogize the Lord in order to attain *darśana-soubhāgyam*, the blessed opportunity of beholding Him. He emphasizes that the vision of the Lord can be attained only through intense prayer, unwavering devotion, and steadfast remembrance of Him. This teaching is conveyed through the kṛti *Vaccunu Hari*, in Kalyāṇi rāga and Rūpaka tāla. With this episode, the first act concludes.

SECOND ACT

The second act comprises six kṛti-s in which Prahlāda pours out his anguish and longing before Hari. The act primarily explores the emotional and devotional dimensions of Prahlāda's bhakti as he yearns for a direct vision of the Lord.

The beautiful kṛti *Vandanamu*, in Sāhanā rāga, presents Prahlāda's intense prayer to Hari. He prays for the Lord to appear before him, protect him, and accept his salutations. The composition reveals the intensity of his devotion and his complete dependence upon the Lord.

Prahlāda's deep sorrow and anguish are further expressed in the kṛti-s *Eṭṭa Kanugondunē*, in Ghaṇṭa rāga, set to Ādi tāla, and *Indukāyī Tanuvunu*, in Punnāgavaraḷi rāga, set to Cāpu tāla. In these compositions, Prahlāda expresses his inability to attain a vision of Hari. Despite offering his prayers with a heart filled with devotion, he finds that the Lord has not appeared before him.

In the next kṛti, *Nijamaitē Mundara*, in Bhairavi rāga and Cāpu tāla, Prahlāda's anguish takes the form of a direct challenge to the Lord. He declares that if the *upadeśa* on the divine name of Hari, which he received while still in his mother's womb, is indeed true, then Hari should manifest Himself before him. The composition thus marks a significant development in his devotional state which portrays the depth of his longing for divine vision.

Nārada, the divine musician, appears before him and, after offering a magnificent description of Vaikuṇṭha, conveys the joyful news that Hari has resolved to appear before Prahlaḍa. Nārada, having arrived from Vaikuṇṭha, then describes the splendour and majesty of Nārāyaṇa in Vaikuṇṭha. This is elaborated in the well-known *cūrṇikai* beginning with the words *Jayatu Jayatu Sakala*. Through Nārada's narration, the transcendent glory of the Lord is brought before Prahlaḍa's mind and his devotional longing is further intensified.

In the final kṛti of the act, *Ipuḍaina Nanu*, in Ārabhi rāga and Cāpu tāla, Prahlaḍa turns to Nārada with renewed hope. He asks whether Hari is thinking of him and whether he has become the recipient of the Lord's *dayā* (divine compassion). The question reflects his continuing longing for the Lord's grace and brings the second act to a close on a note of expectation and devotional surrender.

The second act thus traces the gradual intensification of Prahlaḍa's devotional experience—from humble prayer and longing to anguish, questioning, and direct appeal to the Lord, followed by the consoling intervention of the sage Nārada.

THIRD ACT

The Third Act begins with Prahlaḍa singing in ecstasy and then falling unconscious. Hari revives him with His touch, and Prahlaḍa is overjoyed to see the divine form of his Lord. His devotion and joy are expressed through four kritis:

- Ennaga manasuku -Nīlāmbārī- Ādi: Prahlaḍa longs to see Hari. He feels that eyes that have not seen the Lord and hands that have not worshipped Him are of no use.
- Ēti janmamidi – Varāli-Cāpu: Prahlaḍa laments the futility of his birth without seeing, speaking to, and embracing Hari. Overcome by sorrow, he faints.
- Entanucu varṇintunē – Saurāṣṭram- Cāpu: Hari comes to Prahlaḍa, embraces him, and brings him back to consciousness. Prahlaḍa is filled with joy and feels unable to describe the divine beauty of the Lord.
- Ē nāṭi nōmu - Bhairavi - Ādi: Prahlaḍa expresses his supreme happiness at seeing Hari and praises the Lord, wondering at his great good fortune.

FOURTH ACT

The long Fourth Act presents an intimate conversation between Hari and Prahlaḍa. Hari tests Prahlaḍa's unwavering devotion by offering him various boons, including worldly wealth and sovereignty. Prahlaḍa firmly rejects these temporary pleasures and seeks only unwavering bhakti, service to the Lord, and liberation. The act contains 14 kritis, which beautifully portray his steadfast devotion and spiritual longing.

- Nannu brōvakanū – Śaṅkarābharāṇam- Cāpu: Prahlaḍa declares that he will not leave Hari until the Lord promises to protect him.
- Aḍugu varamula -Ārabhi- Cāpu: Hari tests Prahlaḍa by offering to grant any boon he desires.
- Vārija nayana nī vāḍanu nēnu - Kēdāragauḷa - Ādi: Prahlaḍa rejects worldly wealth and seeks only unfailing devotion at the Lord's feet.
- Tanalōṇē dhyāniṅci - Dēvagāndhāri- Ādi: He longs to meditate deeply on Hari and experience spiritual bliss, rejecting worldly pleasures in favour of liberation.
- Ō Rāma Rāma -Nāgagāndhāri- Cāpu: Prahlaḍa expresses his complete faith in Hari and wonders why the Lord would abandon him.
- Śrī Rāma jayarāma śṛṅgāra Rāma - Madhyamāvatī- Ādi and Ghaṇṭa and Cāputala: Prahlaḍa describes his suffering and assures Hari that his mind has no desire for worldly pleasures.
- Sarasīruha nayana nī kaṭākṣamē -Bilahari- Cāpu: Prahlaḍa declares that the Lord's gracious glance alone is sufficient for him and demonstrates his steadfast devotion.
- Vaddayunḍēdē bahumēlu- Varāli- Cāpu: He expresses his desire to remain near Hari and engage in joyful service to Him.
- Tīruna nālōni -Sāvēri - Khanda Cāpu: Prahlaḍa longs for his devotion to be fulfilled through constant service and by placing the Lord's sacred feet in his heart.
- Rāmābhirāma Raghurāma -Sāvēri- Khanda Cāpu: Prahlaḍa pleads with Hari not to remain indifferent and asks Him to rescue him from *saṃsāra*. Hari, moved by Prahlaḍa's true devotion, blesses him.
- Daya rāni - Mōhanam- khaṇḍa Cāpu: Prahlaḍa rejoices in the Lord's compassion and declares that worldly pleasures have become insignificant in comparison with His presence.
- Daya sēyavayya - Yadukulakāmbhōji- Ādi: Prahlaḍa humbly seeks a share of the compassion and bliss bestowed by the Lord upon Sītā.
- Ānandamānanda- Bhairavi - Ādi: Prahlaḍa performs *ārādhana* with the sixteen *upacāras* and expresses his supreme joy, comparing it to *brahmānanda* and eternal bliss.
- Jaya maṅgaḷam – Ghaṇṭa - khaṇḍa Cāpu: Tyāgarāja offers *maṅgaḷam* to Hari, praising Him through various divine names and attributes and offering a concluding benediction to the Lord.

The act ends with Prahlāda expressing supreme bliss and Tyāgarāja offering *maṅgaḷam* to the Lord.

FIFTH ACT

The Fifth and final Act brings the drama to its joyful conclusion. Hari briefly leaves Prahlāda to return to Vaikuṇṭha, causing him great sorrow. Pleased with Prahlāda's unwavering devotion, Hari soon returns with Lakṣmī. Prahlāda receives the divine couple with immense joy and invites them to his home. The gods, sages, Nārada, and other devotees gather to witness this auspicious event. The act concludes with worship, devotional celebration, and *maṅgaḷāśāsanam* to Lord Rāma.

The act contains 14 kritis, portraying Prahlāda's intense longing, separation from Hari, reunion, worship, and supreme bliss.

- Nannu viḍaci - Rīti Gauḷai - Cāpu: Hari says that He must return to Vaikuṇṭha to be with Lakṣmī. Prahlāda is overcome with sorrow and begs Him not to leave. Hari, pleased with his devotion, promises to return soon.
- Anduṇḍakanē - Pantuvarāli - Cāpu: Prahlāda asks Hari to promise that He will return without delay. Hari assures him that he will return within three days.
- Ēmani vēḡintunē - Husēni - Ādi: Prahlāda is unable to bear separation from Hari and expresses his deep sorrow.
- Enta pāpinaiti - Gauḷipantu - Cāpu: Prahlāda laments his misfortune and wonders what sins have caused his separation from the Lord.
- Ō Jagannātha - Kēdāragauḷai - Ādi: In deep distress, Prahlāda pleads with Hari to return, declaring that he has no refuge other than Him.
- Celimini - Yadukulakāmbhōji - Ādi: Prahlāda asks the devotees around him whether they have seen the lotus-eyed Lord.
- Pāhi Kalyāṇa Rāma - Kāpi - Ādi: Hearing Prahlāda's cries, Hari returns from Vaikuṇṭha to comfort His beloved devotee.
- Rā rā māyīṇṭidāka - Āsāvēri - Ādi: Prahlāda is filled with joy on seeing Hari again and lovingly invites Him to his home.
- Kamala bhavuḍu - Kalyāṇi - Cāpu: Brahmā, Indra, Nārada, and other divine beings arrive to witness the wonderful meeting between Hari and Prahlāda.
- Dorakunāyani - Tōḍi - Rūpaka: Prahlāda performs the sixteen *upacāras* of worship to Hari in the presence of the gods and devotees.
- Callarē - Āhiri - Cāpu: Prahlāda invites the devotees to offer flowers to Hari and celebrate Him with devotion.
- Varamaina - Paras - Cāpu: The devotion and joyful service of Brahmā, Indra, Nārada, the sages, and other devotees are described.
- Jaya maṅgaḷam - Mōhanam - khaṇḍa Cāpu: Auspicious blessings are offered to Lord Rāma, praising Him as the eternal, pure, and glorious scion of the Solar dynasty.
- Nī nāma rūpamulaku - Saurāṣṭram - Ādi: The famous concluding *maṅgaḷa kriti* praises Lord Rāmacandra and invokes auspiciousness upon His sacred name, divine form, lotus feet, and charming features.

Thus, the Fifth Act concludes the drama on a note of complete devotion and divine grace, with Prahlāda attaining the ultimate fulfilment of his *bhakti* through the permanent presence and blessings of Hari.

MUSIC IN PRAHLADA BAKTHA VIJAYAM

Prahlāda Bhakti Vijayam is the longest among the three operas composed by Tyāgarāja. It consists of a rich variety of musical and literary forms, including *kīrtanas*, *kritis*, *khaṇḍa padyas*, *śīsa padyas*, *utpala mālās*, *dvīpadas*, and *cūrnikas*. These include descriptive songs, dialogue songs, introductory verses, and prose passages, all composed to suit the various situations and dramatic contexts of the story.

The opera opens with the popular kriti Śrī Gaṇapatini in the rāga Saurāṣṭram, which invokes Lord Gaṇapati. Interestingly, the opening song and the concluding *maṅgaḷam*, Nī nāma rūpamulaku, are both set in Saurāṣṭram, giving the opera a musical unity. *Nī nāma rūpamulaku* has also become a popular concluding piece in Karnatak music concerts.

Several other well-known kritis from *Prahlāda Bhakti Vijayam* have gained an established place in the Karnatak repertoire but their connection with *Prahlāda Bhakti Vijayam* was not always widely recognised. These include Nannu viḍaci in Rīti Gauḷai, Ē nāṭi nōmu and Ānandamānanda in Bhairavi, Ēti janmamidi in Varāli, Aḍugu varamula in Ārabhi, Vandanamu in the Rāga Sāhanā, Vāsudēvayani in the Rāga Kalyāṇi, and Vinatā suta rā in the rāga Husēni.

Compositions in rāgas such as Paras and Nāgagāndhārī are found in the *Prahlāda Bhakti Vijayam*. The kritis Pāhi Kalyāṇa Rāma in Rāga (Karnāṭaka) Kāpi and Sāgaruṇḍu in Yamunā Kalyāṇi are particularly valuable for their clear presentation of the distinctive melodic characteristics of these rāgas.

With regard to the tāḷas, *Prahlāda Bhakti Vijayam* employs a variety of rhythmic structures that contribute significantly to the musical and dramatic character of the opera. The commonly used Ādi and Rūpaka tāḷas are found alongside Khaṇḍa Cāpu and Mīśra Cāpu, providing rhythmic variety and flexibility. Ādi tāḷa in tisra nadai is also employed in the kriti

Nāradamuni in Pantuvāraḷi, adding a distinctive rhythmic movement to the composition. Thus, Tyāgarāja's handling of rhythm, together with his melodic treatment, contributes to the overall dramatic vitality and musical richness of *Prahlāda Bhakti Vijayam*.

The compilation, and publication of the complete opera have made its rich musical heritage more accessible. This has encouraged leading musicians to include more from *Prahlāda Bhakti Vijayam* in concert programmes. Many other equally valuable and musically significant compositions from the opera remain to be explored and brought to the concert platform.

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