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THE TRIUMVIRATE OF CHRISTIAN CARNATIC MUSIC

Our omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient and awesome God exists in an aura of praise and worship. He is the only God, worthy of all praise and worship of the entire creation over the millennia. There have been several compositions exalting Him in all parts of the world. India, being a country of diverse religions, languages and culture, has scores of unique spiritual songs in almost all regional languages of the country. Of them the Hindusthani of the north and the Carnatic music of the south have their rightful place in this legacy.

Tamil Christian Keerthanai (Songs of Praise) are devotional Christian songs in Tamil. They are also referred to as "lyrics" (a genre term) by Tamils in English. These are mostly a collection of indigenous hymns written by Protestant Tamil Christian poets. A few of them are translations of Christian hymns from other languages. They use the keerthanai form that includes the classical carnatic raga (mode) and thala (rhythmic cycle) designations for each song. Some of these ragas and thalas are followed in Church practice, while from the 1940s, other keerthanai were adapted to simpler Western style tunes in major scale that more easily facilitated the accompaniment of organ. These lyrics were written in the early stages of Protestant Christianity in India by composers such as VedanayakamSastriar who worked under the German Lutheran missionaries in the Tanjore area (likely the 1780s on). They were first published for broad use among the Protestant denominations and mission societies in 1853 by the American Congregational (ABCFM) missionary Edward Webb, in the hymn book titled *Christian Lyrics for Public and Social Worship*. Webb and eight of his catechists spent a couple months learning the songs from VedanayakamSastriar and then transmitted them orally throughout the towns and villages of the Protestant missions.

If Saint Thiagaraja, ShyamaSastri and MuthuswamyDikshithar are the trimurthis of Karnatic music, VedanayagamSastriar of Tanjore, Krishnapillai of Palyamkottai, and N. Samuel of Tranquebar are the triumvirate of Tamil Christian poets. Thanks to the gospel interventions of missionaries and missionary organisations, through which these great composers were reconciled with the true Maker.

Vedanayagam Sastriar (1774-1864)

VedanayagamSastriar was born, the first son of Mr. Devaahayam, a native of Tirunelveli on 7th of September, 1774. He lost his mother at a young age. At the age of ten, he had a clear vision of the Cross and Christ, an event which was to influence his entire life. In 1785, a German Missionary, Rev. Swartz visited Tirunelveli. He took Vednayagam with him to Tanjore. At that time, Prince Serfoji was also studying under Rev. Swartz. Vedanayagam went on to study Theology at the Lutheran Seminary in Tharangambadi, now known as Tranquebar.

After completing his studies, Vedanayagam worked in the villages around Tanjore. He worked as a teacher in a missionary school for a short time. He began to write Christian lyrics and literature. He wrote 133 books and his most famous work is 'Bethlehem Kuravanji'. His well known songs include 'ThandanaiThadhipome', 'Amen Aliciuyah, MahathavaThambarahara' and 'EsuvaiveThadhiyai nee Maname.'

A turning point in his life came when his former classmate, Prince Serfoji became king of Tanjore and appointed Vedanayagam as the official court poet. Vedanayagam was conferred various titles such as 'GnanadeepaKavirayar', Veda Sastriyal and 'SuvisheshaKavirayar' which established him the King of Evangelical Poets.

The songs of Poet-Lyricist VedanayagamSastriar form an inalienable part of Christian worship in South India. The richness of the Tamil language and the religious fervour of the songs instantly evoke zeal in the worship. The reverence in the songs is further augmented by their pleasing melodies. VedanayagamSastriar was a prolific and poetic crusader for the Triune God.His songs were based on Thevaram (hymns of Saivaite Saints) and Tiruppugazh. Some songs in Thayumanavar's style are found in his song collection called the 'Jebamalai' which means 'Garland of Prayers'. His compositions glorify the Triune God and are characterized by high literary quality. He continued to glorify God and he spread the Gospel as far as Srilanka in spite of personal tragedies and setbacks. His songs are still being sung in Tamil churches and are peerless in their richness and melody.

Henry Alfred Krishnapillai (1827-1900)

Henry Alfred Krishnapillai was a well-known poet in Tamil language. Krishna Pillai was born in 1827 at Kazaiyuruppu, Tirunelveli District, Tamil Nadu. He was born into an orthodox Hindu family belonging to Vaishnava tradition of Hinduism. He received his early education in Tamil grammar and literature in the village. In May 1853, he moved to Sawyerpuram, a Christian hamlet. The settlement was founded by the Society for Propagation of the Gospel. There Krishnapillai was appointed as a Tamil teacher by

Bishop Robert Caldwell. It was in Saswypuram that he first encountered Christianity through his friends and eventually was baptised an Anglican in the St Thomas Church in Mylapore, Chennai. He was christened Henry Arthur through his baptism but he still retained his Hindu name *Krishna Pillai*. Later in 1875, he was appointed as a Tamil pundit at Church Missionary Society (CMS) college at Tirunelveli.

Even after his conversion, he retained his Hindu surname. He was an accomplished Tamil teacher and hence after his conversion sought to work on Tamil literary works. After his retirement he worked on his magnum opus, *Ratchanyalathrigam*. This work was based on John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, although not a translation. He had read the *Pilgrim's Progress* even before his conversion and had planned to retell the story in Tamil verses. The work itself took 16 years to complete and is one of finest works of Tamil literature of the nineteenth century. Krishnapillai is well known to use analogies from Hindu text in his Christian writings.

He fell ill with malaria in 1879, and then, with encouragement from his friends, he compiled the work in an epic form similar to the Tamil *Ramayana*. After 16 years, it was sent to print in 1894 and is considered one of the most significant Tamil poetry works of the nineteenth century.

In addition to this masterpiece, Krishnapillai wrote several other books in Tamil on Christianity. Although he was a converted Christian, he used many analogies from Hindu text in his work. He is sometimes referred to as *Christus Kambae*. Some of the hymns he composed are still prevalent amongst Tamil Protestants. His hymns were based on Hindu texts such as *Tevaram*.

Rev. N. Samuel (1850-1927)

Rev. N. Samuel of Tranquebar (modern Tharangambadi) was born at Kumbakonam on 18 September 1850. He was trained by R. Handmann, Tranquebar Seminary and ordained on 31st October 1878 at Tranquebar, by senior J. M. N. Schwartz. He served the Lord as Pastor at Tranquebar, Karaikal, Manikramam, Perayar, Bangalore, Missouri Mission and returned to T.E.L.C. in early 1927. There he was ordained Professor in Divinity, Pastor, Tamil Evangelical Lutheran Church (T.E.L.C.). He was also the first member of the Leipzig Evangelical Lutheran Mission (L.E.L.M.) Council.

Best known among his lyrics are "En MeetparVayirodirukayilay", "SenaigalinKartharey", "SeerthiriYegiravathey", and "GnanapadaPaavi". He composed the college song "Arulur Patkarathil Thangi" and designed the monogram for the Gurukul Lutheran Theological College.

One of his earliest compositions was about a journey to Tanjore called "Tharjai Payara Padham." Another was "Kallu Kurumi" (The Toddy Kurumi), where the strong drink talks about her glories, which made the drunkard blush in shame. His book *Gospel Lyrics* contains 200 songs composed over a period of 60 years. He is remembered as a translator who put several German hymns into Tamil meter. He wrote several books on Lutheran history, theology, and practical Christian living. He wrote books for children, too. He was one

of those responsible for the translation of a revised version of the New Testament.

Most of his life was spent in Tranquebar, the little port town that welcomed missionaries like Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg and Heinrich Plütschau sent by the king of Denmark in 1706 and Christian Friedrich Schwarz, sponsored at the time by the Danish Missionary Society in Copenhagen. 1927 in the Lutheran Adikalarathar Church, Parasawalkam, Madras on John 10:11-16.

His theology was rooted in Lutheran Pietism, a renewed form of the post-reformation. Needless to say, he was well versed with the life, works, and teachings of Martin Luther. He was a great lover of Spurgeon's works and was known as Tamil Spurgeon. He was also familiar with Waltharian views of Lutheranism. His allegiance was to God first and only then to his church. When it was time for the German missionaries to leave India, leaving the leadership on Indian shoulders, it was decided that the church would follow an Episcopal form of church government. Rev. N. Samuel felt that this and other innovations that were introduced were not according to the Biblical model and protested. When he realized that change was inevitable, in the middle of 1921, he left T.E.L.C that he had served all his life, and joined the Missouri Mission. He returned to the T.E.L.C. in 1927 shortly before his death. He preached his last sermon on 1 May and entered Glory in Chennai on 20 May 1927.