

nAma SankIrtanam - Origin & Evolution



S anAtana Dharma followers believe in the mythical time measure of **ChaturyugAs**. The time between the creation and the deluge is known as one **Kalpam** consisting of 4, 320,000 years. Each kalpam has four yugAs and the last and shortest is the **Kali Yuga** with about 432,000 years before the PraLaya or the Deluge. According to the [Holy] Scriptures, the prescribed methods of devotion and prayer will differ depending upon the pace of the Yugas. The scriptures also claim that Kali Yuga, though believed to be one when materialism dominates over spiritualism, is also the best of the Yugas where ordinary mortals can unite with the Supreme Lord or the *Cosmic Presence* through simpler forms of devotion.

At the advent of Kali, the Lord Supreme was asked by his immortal grandson NArada, of the simplest SAdhanA which will help the ordinary mortals realize the Lord Supreme easily. To dispel doubts, the

Lord Himself pronounced that in Kali he would not reside in VaikunTha, the celestial abode, or in the hearts of great TapasvIs [sages], nor permeate in the solar system, but would stand in attention wherever His devotees do sing His name [sankIrtanam].

*NAham VasAmi VaikunThE Na
YogI hridayE Ravau
Mat BhaktA: Yatra Gayanti tatra
tishThAmi nArada !*

Sage VEda Vyasa narrates in the seventh canto of Srimad BhAgavatam, under 'PrahLada Bakti,' the nine sAdanAs or worshipping methods of Bhakti, or the supreme devotion to Lord:

*SravaNam KIrtanam VishnO:
SmaraNam pAdasEvanam
archanam vandanam dAsyam
Sakhyam AtmanivEdanam*

(*Listening* to glory like King ParIkshit, *singing* like Sukha Brahmam, *remembering* like Sage PrahLada, *servicing* at the feet of the Lord like MahAlakshmi, *offering* personal worship like SanatkumArAs, *prostrating*

in admiration like *akroora*, *rendering* (service) like Anjaneya, *courting* friendship like Arjuna, and *offering oneself* [surrender] like cakravarti MahAbali).

Lord Krishna helped nArada choose the simplest three of the above nine forms of worship, *SravaNam*, *KIrtanam* and *SmaraNam*. The finest of those three is, of course, *KIrtanam*, as 'mOkshasAdanam'; it has two facets, *GuNakIrtanam* and *nAmakIrtanam*.

The easiest path to (tranquility and) self-realization and/or facilitating reunion with the Lord supreme is *nAmasankIrtanam*. When nArada and all other nityasoorIs (the permanent attendees at the celestial abode), raised the question as to how to induct the ordinary mortals into this most sacred form of worship, the Lord ordained that: (i) He himself along with his manifestations would reincarnate amidst ordinary mortals to extol the benefit of **nAma Bhakti**; and

that (ii) all the DevAs, nityasoorIs, and SanatkumArAs (eternally youthful sages) would also be born in Kaliyuga as saint-composers, singers, and devotees who would lead uninitiated mortals on to this simplest of paths to (*Mukti* or) spiritual liberation.

Believers of sanAtana dharma maintain that VedavyAsA took three births (re-incarnations), the first in the 12th century, as Bhakta JayadEva and offered to mankind the immortal *GitA Govindam*, a SrIngrA MahAkAvyam highlighting Premabhakti, the quintessence of Bhagavatam in 24 songs or *AshtapadIs* (an ashtapadi means "of eight stanzas"). He was born again in the 15th century, as MahA VidwAn Kshetrayya or Kshetragnya and reportedly composed about 24,000 padams/songs in praise of Lord Krishna; and finally, as *Yatiraja* nArAyaNa tIrtha in the 16th century and offered the immortal work, *KrishnaleelA Tarangini*. The rest of the *ordained* descended as saint composers and spread the **SankIrtana Bhakti** through the length and breadth of the sacred BhArata dEsam (also known as *Bharata:kanDam*); nArada reincarnated in the 15th century

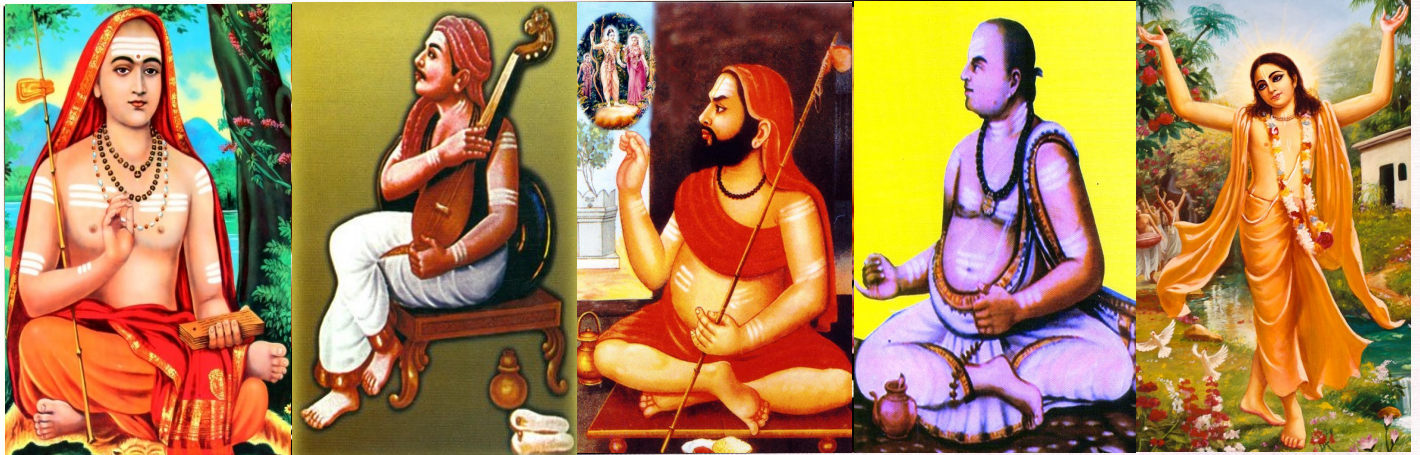
as (*SangItha PithAmaha*) Purandara DAsa and set the tone for the modern nAmasankIrtanam with about 475,000 'padagalu (padams)'. It is now believed there are only about 2000 of them available in documented form. Around the same time, one of the panchAyudAs of Lord Supreme was born as *tAlapAkka annamAchArya* who gave more than 14,000 *kIrtanams*, most of which have reportedly been preserved in copper plates in Tirupati, Andhra Pradesh. Lord Krishna is believed to have taken birth as *Krishna Chaitanya* (MahA Prabhu) in (old) Bengal, about 500 years ago, to help propagate nAmaprabhAvam and the method of worship now known as *nAmasankIrtanam*. LIAsukha from MalayALa desam (today's Kerala) offered *KrishnakarnAmrutam*.



Vijayavittala dAsa, Kanaka dAsa, and many more from Karnataka, *Sant TukAram*, EknAth, nAmdev and a host of others from MaharAshTra, BadrAchala RamadAs from Andhra Pradesh, *Goswami tulsidAs*, *SurdAs*, *MIRa Bai*, *KabhIrdAs*, and many others from northern and Bhojpuri provinces, *Narsi Mehta* from Gujarat, *BhodEndra Satguru*,

Sridhara VenkaTEsa satguru, *marudAnallUr VenkaTarama satguru* (**sankIrtana trimurthi**) and the CarnAtic music Trinity (*SangItha trimurthi*) and their disciples, and Sri Sadasiva Brahmendrar from Tamilnadu, are a few of the great Sants (saints) who contributed to this great tradition over the last 800 years.

No attempt is made here to list out all the names of the saints and the the prolific saint composers who have contributed to the rich tradition of SankIrtanam. Adi Sankara, a reincarnation of Lord Dakshinamoorthy, was an example of his own saying, 'Pragnyanam Brahma' (Knowledge is Brahman). His immortal



work 'Bhaja Govindam' summarizes all that has been mentioned above and more on the need to repeat the *Bhagavan-nAmam* before time runs out on us, the mortals. Almost 1,300 years ago, the twelve vaishnavite saints known as *Alwars* offered to mankind the immortal *Dhivya Prabandam*, a compendium of 4000 sacred versus, which are otherwise known as '*Tamil tirumarai* (Tamizh Vedam)'. Sixty-three *saiivate* saints known as *nAyanmAro* offered the finest of Tamil poetry in praise of Lord Siva. The most eminent Nithyasoori, sage *Sukhabrahma* (who is believed to have re-narrated *Srimad BhAgavatham* to *Parikshit MaharAja*), was the one who was believed to have come again as *Sant Kabhir* and to have pulled the agitated mankind from the divisive influence of religious fanaticism. In the recent 250 years, we have been blessed with the reincarnation of the Lord Almighty's 'amsams' (aspects) as *Sri SyAmA SAstri*, *SatgurutyaAgarAja*, and *Sri Mudduswamy Dikshita* (aka *Sanglta Trimurti*, (mentioned earlier).

Contemporaneously, three other eminent saint composers firmly established the current tradition known as *DakshiNa BhArata PrAchIna SankIrtana Paddati*. They are *BhodEndra Satguru*, 59th pontiff from *KAnchi KAmakOTi PITam*, *Sridhara VenkaTEsa Satguru*, and the illustrious *marudAnallUr VenkaTarama satguru*. *Marudanallur Sadguru* was one of Saint *TyAgaraja's* teachers who initiated him into both the *TAraka nAma* and also into *nAamasankIrtanam*. This, eventually, resulted into *AgarAja's* immortal creations '*divyanAma sankIrtanams* and *utsava sampradAya kritIs*.'

MarudAnallur Sadguru, popularly known as *Sadguru SwAmigal*, traveled the length and breadth of *BhArata dEsam* within the short life span of 40 years (1777-1817), and set the foundation for the current *sampradAya* (tradition) which has been kept intact for more than 200 years. He brought about true national integration through the *SankIrtana* tradition by including compositions of eminent saint composers from all over India and structured the *paddati* (tradition) as a five-part classical tradition of eminence. Numerous *bhAgavatAs* fine-tuned this

tradition over the last 200 years and included more and more colorful compositions of a thousand saints and composers to make it more attractive for the *bhaktAs/bhAgavatAs* to enjoy and propagate the tradition. *Swami Haridoss Giri* ("Guruji") deserves a lion share of credit for such monumental contribution.

The *SankIrtana paddati* (*akabhajana sampradAya*) has seven parts or observances (as the minimum *samskArAs*, in traditional belief, are '7' in number). '*Paddati nityabhajanam*', '*divyanAma sankIrtanam*' are further subdivided in to *deepa-AhvAnam*, *DolOtsavam*, *Unchavritti*, *poorNa ashTapadi*, *kalyANa utsavam*, and *vasantOtsavam*.

1. The part known as '*paddati nityabhajanam*' includes *Taka mangaLam*, *guruvandanam* and *sAdhuvandanam*. This part invokes the vision of the Lord Supreme with the help of our *gurUs/AchAryAs*. There will also be a few *keertan(am)s* from saints from the middle and northern provinces of India (spanning 2,000 years).
2. The next parts, *deepa-AhvAnam* and *pradakshiNam* are widely described as '*divyanAma bhajana sampradAya*.' During this section, we attempt to get closer to the Lord by abandoning our inhibitions, physically/dancing in ecstasy, enacting the leela of the Lord, and enjoying His company by invoking him as the *JyOti/ Blissful Light*. The Lord from the sanctum is brought to the lamp in the form of *JyOti* (by *AvAhana Mantram*). This is followed by *dIpa-pUja* which involves placing the lamp in the center of the arena and singing in praise of Him. In this anga, the *bhaktAs* dance (*nritha & abhinaya*) the leela of the Lord by circling the lit *pancha-mukha* (five-faced) lamp. This is to emphasize the importance of total surrender unto Him; devotees do *S*araNAgati* by abandoning the self-importance and *Ego*. This part gives devotees more opportunities to participate via group singing or by dancing around the deepam. We should forget ourselves, feel the presence of the Lord



amongst us and prepare to reach Samabhavana by mixing with other BhaktAs and BhagavatAs. However, our ego does not get totally annihilated at this state. It only gets converted from rajasic state (based on materialistic attachment) to sAtvic state (still possessive of the Lord as Gopis felt for Krishna, the cowherd). Now, the Lord helps us cast away even this Positive Ego by disappearing for a while to make us realize the importance of His Presence (within us). At this stage, GOpikA Gitam is recited gently in a pining mode (just as the intoxicated and later lamenting gopIs pine for Lord Krishna – BhAgavatam 10th canto, 31st chapter). The supreme Lord re-appears and mingles with the ordinary mortals when the bhaktAs dance in ecstasy, singing, *anganAm anganAm antarE mAdhavam*. This is the point, when we shed our ego completely and realize that the Lord is present in 'every being in His Creation,' 'unattached,' and 'unbound,' and that 'He shines separately as the center of all our activity' – as *Summum Bonum (the supreme good from which others are derived)*.

3. The *dIpam* is returned to the sanctum and permission is sought to proceed with *Unchavritti* which reminds us of the simplistic life that our forefathers lead by focusing only on the good of the society and chanting his nAma for the universal well being.
4. The last part *kalyANa utsavam*, which encompasses both *PoorNa-ashTapadi* and *dOlOtsavam*, is very unique; it is enacted in bhAgavata mELa tradition. Celestial weddings are re-enacted in musical form; greater emphasis is given to sankIrtanam than to ritualistic observances. The current 'divya-dampati vivAham' traces back to the times of Bhakta JayadEva and hence 'rAdha (mAdhava) kalyAnam' is enacted more often than all other celestial weddings under this tradition. This format is presented in *harikathastyle*. Constant innovation has made this section the most colorful part of SankIrtana sampradAyam. Several *ashTapadIs* of JayadEva, *tarangiNi* (otherwise referred to as *tarangams*) from Sri nArAyaNa teertha, *padams* from Kshetryaya and OottukkADu VenkaTa

kavi (1700-1765), and a few kirtanams from annamayya (1408-1503) and Sadasiva brahmendra (17/18th C) are also sung to highlight how *rAdhA-mAdhava* concept was the mainstay for their inspirations and divine compositions.

With the mechanical and fast life filled with material pursuits, distractions, comforts and pleasures, available time for such relaxing and tranquil form of worship has become very limited. It is rare today to witness even a four-hour sankIrtanam in session except in small towns and villages in south India where the tradition is still kept alive. *But, it would suffice to reiterate here that the format of today's classical music concerts, particularly that from the CarnAtic Music tradition, has been derived from this immortal sankIrtanam tradition.* Due to paucity of time and due to the advent of commercialism, the format of modern concert music was redesigned by famous musicians in early 20th century possibly for popular appeal.

Fortunately, the tradition of SankIrtanam has been kept alive and the Renaissance came about in the form of *Swami Haridoss Giri (aka Guruji)*, the leading disciple of Tapovanam GnAnAnanda SwamigaL. *Guruji* rejuvenated this divine art form and the tradition in the mid-twentieth century and popularized it over the next three decades, globally, i.e., wherever Indians have taken residence. The flame he kindled in the hearts of millions grows with great glow.

Awareness has already set in to resuscitate this ancient tradition.

SankIrtanam and Bhajan are not the same. In what is commonly known as 'bhajans,' the singers usually repeat a few lines of devotional hymns in a limited number of tunes with less importance to grammar of music, tAlams, sense of timing or rhythmic patterns. But, SankIrtanams encompass renditions (including bhajans), nevertheless with high classicism and aesthetic appeal. SankIrtanam experts are usually well trained in both *CarnAtic* and *Hindusthani* systems of music, are expected to possess an average repertoire of about 1,500 to 2,000 kIrtanams and should be conversant, if not fluent, in about a dozen languages. As the founders of this tradition were saints with divine influence, humility is expected to be the hallmark of the practitioners of this exalted tradition. Hence, exponents of this tradition are required to make every such event a divine group effort and not a solo performance for exhibitionism.

The above description is a very brief attempt at describing the evolution of the NAmasankIrtana tradition, and is by no means an exhaustive summary. An attempt has been made to elaborate on this tradition and to highlight on the lives of some of its contributors to this website - <http://sankeertanam.com>

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