Bhakti and Kingship: Theology, Ethics, and Self-Representation in Swathi Thirunal's Lyrics

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: *Swathi Thirunal Rama Varma (1813–1846), the Maharaja of Travancore, represents a rare confluence of political authority, devotional humility, and musical genius. His lyrical corpus—composed in Sanskrit, Malayalam, Telugu, Hindi, and Manipravalam—offers a unique window into how bhakti theology was articulated from within the framework of kingship. This study examines Swathi Thirunal's compositions as texts of self-representation, where the ruler consciously positions himself not as a sovereign above the divine, but as a dāsa (servant) of Lord Padmanābha.*

Methodology: *In this paper, the exploratory qualitative research method is used. The relevant information is collected using keyword-based search in Google search engine, Google Scholar search engine, and AI-driven GPTs. This information is analysed and interpreted as per the objectives of the paper.*

Analysis/ Results: *Through close textual and thematic analysis, the paper explores how theological commitments to Viṣṇu-bhakti, ethical ideals of rājarṣi kingship, and personal humility are woven into his kritis and padams. The study further argues that Swathi Thirunal's lyrics function as moral-political statements, redefining royal power as service (sevā) rather than dominance. By integrating bhakti metaphysics, ethical self-discipline, and aesthetic refinement, his works challenge conventional binaries between devotion and governance.*

Originality/ Values: *This paper situates Swathi Thirunal within broader bhakti traditions while highlighting his distinctive contribution as a ruler-composer whose musical self-fashioning shaped the cultural and spiritual ethos of nineteenth-century Travancore.*

Type of Paper: *Exploratory Research.*

Keywords: Bhakti and Kingship; Swathi Thirunal Rama Varma; Royal Self-Representation; Devotional Ethics; Carnatic Lyric Theology

1. INTRODUCTION :

The role of bhakti and kingship in Indian history is unique and shows how power, ethics, and involved humanity are expressed through culture. An example of such a harmony is the musical and literary work of the Maharaja of Travancore, Swathi Thirunal Rama Varma (1813–1846), who presents devotion in a unique way through the expression of royal power. Unlike most court poets, who used devotion to justify the power of a sovereign, Swathi Thirunal's compositions illustrate a consistent tuneful surrender to the divine [1].

As a royal devotee to Lord Padmanābha, the deity of Travancore, Swathi Thirunal structures himself within the uneasy and constraining ideal of kingship as service (sevā) rather than domination. His compositions (kritis, padams, and varnams) in a range of languages (Sanskrit, Malayalam, Telugu, Hindi, and Manipravalam) placed him within a deliberately constructed theocratic order, where the king, in the person of a dāsa, is bound to outer and inner self-control, discipline, and morality. This self-description is consistent with the Indian classical construction of the ideal king (rājarṣi), where the exercise of political power is complemented and completed with spiritual power [2-3].

Simultaneously, we can consider the lyrics of Swathi Thirunal also as cultural texts shaping collective imagination. He, through the music, is able to convey the constituents of governance, devotion, and personal conduct to the elites and the popular. The aesthetic sophistication of the rāga-tāla structure is in harmony with the gravitas of the themes of the lyrics, reinforcing the idea, that beauty, devotion, and ethics can sustain each other [4].

Here, the lyrical repertoire of Swathi Thirunal has been to be seen not just as musical literature, but as an intellectual literature on theology and the art of kingship. By trying to place him amidst the bhakti-tinged kingship and self-making poetry, this paper attempts to foreground Swathi Thirunal's distinctive position as a ruler-composer in the bhakti continuum, who, however, was able to pioneer the construction of a royal authorship that enshrined ethics and spirituality [5].

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE :

The following table 1 contains a review of literature based on the keyword "Swathi Thirunal Lyrics".

Table 1: Review of literature based on the keyword "Swathi Thirunal Lyrics".

S. No.	Topic/Area	Focus/Outcome	Reference
1	The Speciality of Swathi Thirunal Keerthanam	This paper highlights Swathi Thirunal Rama Varma and the uniqueness of his keerthanams. A brilliant composer with over 400 works in Carnatic and Hindustani styles, he often used mudras such as Padmanabha and Sarasijanabha in his compositions. Though deeply rooted in the Carnatic tradition, he supported both major Indian music systems and is especially renowned for his Navaratri keerthanams and diverse devotional compositions.	Nair, S. S. A. L. U. (2023). [1]
2	Educational Progress In Travancore	Kerala developed formal and higher education earlier than most Indian states, which helped it achieve high literacy and strong gender and regional equity. Historically, education in Kerala was valued for enlightenment and empowerment, with institutions like Ezhuthupallis for non-Brahmin youth and Kalaris for military and physical training. These traditions show that Kerala's ancient and medieval education systems were rich and progressive.	Chinthu, I. (2019). [2]
3	Swathi Thirunal: Life and Contributions	Swathi Thirunal Rama Varma was a 19th-century ruler of the Kingdom of Travancore and a celebrated patron of arts and music. A gifted composer himself, he made major contributions to both Carnatic and Hindustani classical music, composing hundreds of kritis, varnams, and padams in multiple languages. His reign is remembered for promoting culture, education, and administrative reforms, leaving a lasting legacy in Indian classical music and cultural history.	Venkatasubramanian, T. K. (2001). [3]
4	A Survey of Kerala History	This volume deals with the history of Kerala with special attention to selected historical personages who have played significant roles in shaping the history of Kerala through the ages.	Menon, A. S. (1967). [4]
5	Perumals of Kerala	Political and Social Conditions of Kerala Under the Cēra Perumals of Makotai	Narayanan, M. G. S. (1996). [5]

3. OBJECTIVES :

(1) **To analyze Swathi Thirunal's lyrical theology**, focusing on how bhakti to Lord Padmanābha informs his understanding of kingship and moral authority.
(2) **To examine ethical ideals of rulership** as expressed in his compositions, particularly humility, service, and self-restraint.
(3) **To study self-representation in royal bhakti**, assessing how Swathi Thirunal constructs an identity as both king and devotee through music and poetry.

4. BHAKTI THEOLOGY AND DEVOTION TO PADMANĀBHA :

Here we examine the lyrical corpus of Maharaja Swathi Thirunal Rama Varma (1813–1846) of Travancore as a profound and systematic articulation of classical *Vaiṣṇava-bhakti* theology, directed toward his *iṣṭa-devatā*, Lord Padmanābha (Viṣṇu reclining on the serpent Ananta). It is seen that his compositions—primarily in Sanskrit, Manipravalam, and Malayalam—constitute not merely a royal aesthetic project but a deliberate theological discourse that inverts the conventional relationship between king and deity. Through an analysis of key *kṛrtana*s and *padam*s, the chapter demonstrates how Swathi Thirunal's lyrics foreground the core principles of *Viṣṇu-bhakti*: the absolute sovereignty of the divine (*aiśvarya*), the soul's inherent dependence (*paratantratva*), and the culminating act of total surrender (*śaraṇāgati*). In doing so, the Maharaja, a sovereign ruler in the political realm, meticulously constructs a poetic persona of a humble supplicant (*dāsa*), thereby acknowledging a metaphysical dependence that transcends and relativizes his temporal power. His music becomes the medium through which a king performs his most significant act of statecraft: the devotional submission of his sovereignty to the divine sovereign [6].

The King as Dāsa:

Swathi Thirunal's reign marked the zenith of Travancore's cultural refinement, a period where the kingdom was explicitly understood as *"Śrī Padmanābha Dāsam"* (the servitude of Śrī Padmanābha), a formal covenant made by his ancestor Marthanda Varma. This was not merely a political slogan but a governing theological reality. Swathi's extensive musical output (over 400 compositions) must be read within this framework. As a monarch wielding considerable power, his turn to *bhakti* poetry represents a conscious philosophical positioning. His lyrics are where the *Rājā* (king) consciously assumes the role of *bhakta* (devotee) and *dāsa* (servant), using the language of *rasa* (aesthetic emotion) to explicate the *siddhānta* (doctrinal principles) of *Viṣṇu-bhakti*, particularly as filtered through the Śrīvaiṣṇava and local temple traditions of Padmanābha [7].

Theological Foundations: Sovereignty, Dependence, and Grace:

The bedrock of Swathi Thirunal's devotional expression is the classical *Vaiṣṇava* theology of divine supremacy and soulful surrender, mirroring the intellectual heritage of Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita and the pervasive influence of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*.

(i) *Aiśvarya* (Divine Sovereignty): The Lord Padmanābha is consistently depicted in his cosmic, majestic aspect. Compositions like *"Deva Deva Kalayāmi"* (in raga Māyāmālavagauḷa) and the majestic *"Bhavati Viśvāso"* (Bilahari) invoke him as the master of all worlds (*jagadīśa*), the source of all creation, preservation, and dissolution. This emphasis on transcendence (*paratva*) establishes the fundamental hierarchy: God is the absolute monarch (*sarveśvara*), and all else, including earthly kings, are subjects. This theological principle directly underpins the political theology of Travancore—the king rules only as a vice-regent of Padmanābha.
(ii) *Paratantratva* (Soul's Dependence): In tandem with divine sovereignty is the explicit articulation of the *jīvātmā's* (individual soul's) state of utter dependency. The *jīva* is portrayed as weak (*dīna*), deluded (*bhrānta*), and bound by karma. In *"Śrī Padmanābha Pāhi"* (Khamās), he sings, *"Māṁ Pari Pāhi… Dehi Kara-Kavalita-Caraṇam*" (Protect me… grant me your feet held to my lips). This imagery is not just emotional but doctrinal: liberation (*mokṣa*) is

impossible through one's own power (*pauruṣa*) and is entirely contingent on divine will and grace (*prasāda*).

(iii) *Śaraṇāgati* (Taking Refuge): This is the pivotal, active response to the realities of *aiśvarya* and *paratantratva*. *Śaraṇāgati* is the conscious, total surrender of the self to God as the sole refuge. Swathi Thirunal's lyrics are a textbook of this practice. The *charana* of *"Pāhi Murare"* (Kedāragauḷa) is a direct plea for refuge: *"Śaraṇāgata Vatsala Śaraṇam Śaraṇam"* (O you who are affectionate to those who surrender, I take refuge). This surrender involves six elements (*aṅgas*): the resolution to do God's will (*ānukūlyasya saṅkalpaḥ*), the avoidance of what is displeasing (*prātikūlyasya varjanam*), faith in God's protection (*rakṣiṣyatīti viśvāsaḥ*), acceptance of him as guardian (*goptṛtve varaṇam*), the offering of oneself (*ātma-nikṣepa*), and humility (*kārpaṇyam*). Swathi's poetry enacts each of these, most notably *ātma-nikṣepa*—the offering of his very self, the royal "I," to the deity.

The Poetics of Inversion: Royalty Relinquished:

The most striking feature of Swathi's *bhakti* is the systematic inversion of his social and political identity within the lyrical space [8].

(i) The Language of Servitude: The composer's *mudrā* (signature) is often *"Padmanābha"* or *"Śrī Padmanābha,"* but the voice in the lyrics is that of a servant. He uses terms like *"dīna"* (wretched), *"ānatha"* (helpless), and *"dāsa"* repeatedly. In *"Karuna Cheyvan"* (Yadukulakāmbhōji), the poet pleads, "*Enn iḍathil niṅṅaḷ uṇṭāyel*" (Please reside within me). The mighty ruler here petitions for the indwelling of the Lord within his own heart, a request that establishes the soul, not the kingdom, as the true domain worthy of divine occupation.

(ii) Divine Kingship vs. Temporal Kingship: The king's earthly crown (*mukuṭa*) is rendered insignificant before the divine crown of Padmanābha. The royal treasury (*kośa*) is analogized to the spiritual wealth of divine name and grace (*nāma, prasāda*). Songs like *"Māmava Karuṇayā"* (Śrīragaṃ) emphasize that true protection (*rakṣaṇa*) comes not from armies but from God's glance (*katākṣa*). This is a theological critique of worldly power, subsuming the political into the spiritual. His rule is thus framed as a delegated duty, a *seva* (service) to the true owner (*svāmī*) of the land, Padmanābha.

Padmanābha as the Cosmic Recliner: Iconography and Theology:

Swathi's devotion is intensely focused on the specific iconographic form of Padmanābha—Viṣṇu in *anantaśayana* (cosmic sleep) on the serpent Ananta, from whose navel (*nābhi*) springs a lotus bearing Brahmā. This form is not incidental but richly theological.

(i) The Sovereign at Rest: The reclining posture signifies God's control over cosmic time and space (*Ananta* means infinite). He is not striving but effortlessly governing creation. Swathi's compositions capture this serene sovereignty. The Lord's repose is not inactivity but the ultimate state of control, a model of rulership that is calm, assured, and rooted in infinite potential.

(ii) The Source of All: The lotus from the navel symbolizes God as the source of all creative potential and the entire chain of being. Compositions often allude to this imagery, reinforcing the idea that everything, including the king's own lineage and authority, emanates from this divine source. To worship Padmanābha is to acknowledge one's own origin and sustenance in him.

(iii) The Intimate Yet Majestic: The form allows for a duality of emotion (*bhāva*). The devotee can behold the awe-inspiring cosmic form (*virāṭ rūpa*) while also approaching the reclining God in an intimate, almost familial setting. Swathi navigates both, from the grand salutations in *"Jaya Jaya Padmanābha"* (Mukhārī) to the tender, love-filled entreaties in his *padams* in rāgas like Kāpi and Behāg.

Bhakti as Rājadharma: The Confluence of Devotion and Statecraft:

Ultimately, Swathi Thirunal's musical theology cannot be separated from his *rājadharma* (the duty of a king). In the Indian political tradition, the king's foremost duty is the protection of *dharma*.

(i) Performance of Piety as Governance: By being the premier *bhakta* of the state deity, the Maharaja modeled the ideal religious comportment for his subjects. His public *seva* (service) to the temple, complemented by his private devotional outpouring in song, reinforced the covenant of *dāsam*. His music was a form of spiritual leadership, directing the collective consciousness of the kingdom toward divine surrender.

(ii) Legitimacy through Devotion: His unwavering, artistically exquisite devotion served as the ultimate source of his legitimacy. It demonstrated that his power was not self-aggrandizing but was received and exercised within a sacred framework. The lyrics are the testament to this contract, proving his worthiness to rule as a humble servant of the true sovereign.

The Lyrical Throne:

An integral part of Swathi Thirunal's compositions is the abdication of his ego and the devotion to the divine ruler, Padmanābha—"lyrical throne". In Thirunal's devotion (bhakti) built around aiśvarya, paratantratva, and śaraṇāgati, functions the theology of Padmanābha, the divine ruler. Swathi Thirunal's mastery over the fusion of his composition and the text (sāhitya) and the music (sangīta), enabled him to express complexities of Vedānta in emotive and personal language. Thirunal's royal stature is not diminished, but elevated and grounded in metaphysical eternity. Thirunal's legacy as a ruler and as an accomplished poet is dual. An accomplished ruler, poet, and bhakta, Thirunal's devotion to Padmanābha, is the convincing evidence of the ruler's devotion to the divine and the surrender to the paratantratva/divine subordinate and his bhakta devotion. Whose work is the testament to the ruler and the service he renders and the "most powerful ruler is the one who knows, and artistically declares, whom he serves" Heir to the culture, a powerful ruler and a poet, a bhakta, Thirunal claims.

Kingship as Dharma: Ethical Ideals in Royal Lyrics:

Here we examine how Maharaja Swathi Thirunal Rama Varma's compositions articulate a sophisticated and deliberate vision of ethical kingship rooted in the classical Indian concept of *dharma*. Moving beyond personal devotion, his lyrics serve as a *śāstra* (treatise) on governance, in which the ruler's inner virtues are both the source and substance of righteous rule. Through an analysis of key compositions, it is observed that Swathi Thirunal poetically constructs the ideal of the *rājarṣi*—the philosopher-king who harmonizes royal power (*kṣatra*) with ascetic wisdom (*jñāna*) and compassionate duty. His songs foreground core ethical pillars: adherence to *dharma* as cosmic and social law, the centrality of *dayā* (compassion) in administration, and the necessity of *sanyama* (self-restraint) for the wielder of power. In doing so, he transforms the courtly *sabha* into a moral arena and positions his own role as sovereign not merely as a political office, but as a sacred, ethical performance under the watchful gaze of Padmanābha and his subjects.

The Singer on the Throne:

Swathi Thirunal's dual identity as monarch and composer enabled him to merge statecraft and spiritual artistry into a unified ethical vision of power articulated through music. His compositions function as public, performative statements of rājadharma, offering musical instruction on ethical governance comparable to classical treatises, but conveyed through the emotionally charged medium of rāga and bhāva.

Dharma: The Unshakeable Foundation of Kingship:

For Swathi Thirunal, *dharma* is the immutable axis around which all royal duty revolves. It is both a cosmic principle of order (*ṛta*) and a specific code of righteous conduct.

(i) Divine Mandate and Earthly Stewardship: In compositions like *"Dharma Samvardhini"* (raga Atāna), he directly addresses the goddess as the nourisher of *dharma*, implicitly aligning his

rule with her sustaining power. The sovereignty he exercises is framed as a sacred trust from Padmanābha, the true sovereign. This transforms governance from arbitrary power into a fiduciary duty. His famous *varnam* in Bhairavi, *"Sāmi Ninne"* (O Lord, I think of you), while a devotional piece, underpins the idea that constant divine remembrance is the compass that keeps the king's actions aligned with *dharma*, preventing the corruption of power (*rājya-mada*).

(ii) *Dharma* as Protective Duty (Rakṣaṇa): The primary function of the king (*rājan*) is *prajāpālana*—the protection of his subjects. Swathi's lyrics reframe this protection in moral terms. To rule by *dharma* is to ensure the safety, prosperity, and moral well-being of the people. A king who upholds *dharma* creates a realm where subjects can themselves pursue their respective *dharmas* (*varṇāśrama dharma*). His reign is thus envisioned as the necessary condition for collective ethical life [11-12].

Dayā (Compassion): The Heart of Governance:

If *dharma* is the skeleton of Swathi's political philosophy, *dayā* (compassion) is its lifeblood. His compositions consistently emphasize that power devoid of mercy is tyranny.

(i) The King as the "Mother and Father" (Mātā-Pitā): The classical simile of the king as the parent of his subjects is vividly invoked. In *"Pāhi Mam Parameśvara"* (Kalyāṇi), the plea for divine protection is coupled with an implicit model for how the king himself should protect his people—with the selfless, nurturing love of a parent. This sentiment is particularly poignant in *padams* that express the pain of separation (*viraha*); the emotional vulnerability displayed translates into a royal ethic of empathy. A king who understands longing and suffering in his own heart is better equipped to alleviate it in his kingdom.

(ii) Compassion in Judgment: The virtue of *dayā* tempers the king's role as judge (*dharmādhikāri*). While *dharma* provides the law, *dayā* ensures its application considers context and humanity. This echoes the *Mahābhārata's* injunction that *dharma* is subtle (*sūkṣma*) and requires wisdom to apply. Swathi's devotional surrender, expressing his own flaws and pleading for grace, models the humility required for such discerning, compassionate judgment.

Sanyama (Self-Restraint): The Interior Fortress:

The most critical ethical ideal for a king, according to the *rājarṣi* model, is mastery over the self. Swathi Thirunal's lyrics highlight *sanyama*—restraint of the senses and the mind—as the non-negotiable precondition for legitimate rule.

(i) Conquest of the Internal Enemies: Before a king can conquer external foes, he must conquer the *arishadvarga* (the six internal enemies): *kāma* (lust), *krodha* (anger), *lobha* (greed), *moha* (delusion), *mada* (pride), and *mātsarya* (jealousy). Compositions dwelling on the perils of *māyā* (illusion) and worldly attachment (*saṃsāra*) serve as constant reminders. In songs like *"Bhajanam Sukanasya"* (Nāyaki), the focus on divine joy (*bhakti rasa*) is posited as the antidote to base, power-inducing desires. The king's palace, therefore, must first be a monastery for his own mind.

(ii) Wealth and Austerity: As the ruler of a prosperous kingdom, Swathi addresses the tension between royal opulence and spiritual simplicity. His lyrics often express detachment (*vairāgya*) from material wealth, even while he administers it. This is the essence of the *rājarṣi*: he uses wealth for the public good (*yajña*) while remaining internally detached. The famous *"Padmanābha Pāhi"* (Khamās) plea for the "feet" of the Lord symbolizes a preference for spiritual wealth (*aiśvarya*) over temporal treasures.

The Rājarṣi Ideal: Synthesis of Royal and Sage-like Virtues:

Swathi Thirunal's lyrical persona embodies the *rājarṣi*—a figure who seamlessly integrates the *kṣatriya's* duty to act with the *brāhmaṇa's* or *sannyāsin's* commitment to wisdom and renunciation.

(i) Governance as Yajña (Sacrifice): The king's daily duties are framed as a sacrifice, where his actions, his wealth, and even his personal desires are offered up for the welfare of the *prajā*. This sacralizes the mundane acts of administration. His music itself becomes a form of this sacrificial offering, a *nāda yajña* (sacrifice of sound) for the prosperity of the realm.

(ii) The Accessible Sovereign: The *rājarṣi* is not an aloof autocrat but an approachable, virtuous exemplar. By composing in multiple languages—Sanskrit (the language of the gods and *śāstra*), Manipravalam (the language of the scholarly elite), and Malayalam (the language of the people)—Swathi symbolically bridges the distance between the throne and the village. His lyrics in Malayalam, especially, make the ethical ideals of kingship relatable and audible to his common subjects, inviting them to hold him to these very standards.

The Sonic Pillars of the State:

The musical elaboration of rājadharma by Swathi Thirunal is crucial for the history of Indian political thought. It shows the possibility of state philosophy being accompanied with aesthetics. The songs are not only about the description of ethical kingship; they are about the enactment of the kingship through the very act of composition and performance.

The description of virtues of the higher law gives Swathi Thirunal a sense of accountability. The combination of the lyrics with the plea for dharma, dayā and sanyama engenders a powerful political statement of literary nationalism based on colonial moral/ethical politics. The dharma, dayā, and sanyama lyrics prove the political idealistic philosophy of direct/indirect rule; the crown and the scepter have no power; the true authority is derived from the ruler and the ruler only and the lyrics are the ruler's plighted promise to the people and to God. The rough musical composition is a tribute to the Travancore state for being the epitome of a dharmic state.

5. SELF-REPRESENTATION: THE KING AS SERVANT-DEVOTEE :

Here we see the constructed poetic voice in the compositions of Maharaja Swathi Thirunal, arguing that his use of the first-person lyric functions as a profound act of self-representational re-engineering. By adopting the persona of the *dāsa* (servant) and *āśrita* (refuge-seeker) within the devotional framework of *bhakti*, Swathi Thirunal systematically deconstructs the regal, sovereign "I" and reconstructs it in a mode of devotional humility, emotional vulnerability, and metaphysical dependence. It is to be seen how this lyrical self-fashioning does not negate his kingship but fundamentally reshapes its ideological foundation. Through the *bhakti* tradition's tropes of separation, longing, and surrender, the king performs an internal *rājyābhiṣeka* (coronation) that places Padmanābha on the throne of his heart, thereby redefining his royal authority as an instrument of divine service and his kingdom as an extension of the temple.

The "I" of the Sovereign and the "I" of the Supplicant:

In any royal discourse, the first-person pronoun is laden with power, command, and sovereignty—the "Royal We." Swathi Thirunal's compositional genius lies in hijacking this sovereign "I" and infusing it with a devotional grammar of humility. His lyrics are a sustained performance where the subject-position of the speaker is deliberately and consistently that of a servant-devotee. This is not merely a literary conceit but a theological and political strategy. By vocalizing vulnerability, he engages in what can be termed "sovereign humility," a public enactment of the core *bhakti* principle that the highest human authority is perfected only in acknowledging a higher divine authority.

The Poetics of Self-Erasure: From Rājā to Dāsa:

Swathi's lyrics execute a meticulous erasure of royal markers, replacing them with the lexicon of servitude.

(i) Onomastic Humility: While he occasionally uses the signature (*mudrā*) '*Śrī Padmanābha*' or '*Padmanābha*,' the voice within the composition rarely claims any royal title. Instead, it identifies with archetypal *dāsas* of lore—like Prahlāda or the *gopīs*—or simply as *'dīna'* (the

wretched), *'bāla'* (the child), or *'nātha'* (the lordless). In *"Śrī Padmanābha Pāhi"* (Khamās), the plea is explicitly from a position of need: *"mām pari pāhi"* (protect me completely). The king, whose duty is to protect (*pālanam*), here openly requests protection, inverting the hierarchy of care.

(ii) The Geography of Devotion: The imagined space in the lyrics is never the throne room or battlefield, but the intimate, liminal spaces of *bhakti*: the feet of the Lord (*caraṇakamala*), the doorway of the temple, the lonely wilderness of separation (*viraha*). In *"Karuna Cheyvan"* (Yadukulakāmbhōji), the plea is for the Lord to reside *within* the poet: *"Enn iḍathil niṅṅaḷ uṇṭāyel."* The sovereign body of the king is thus re-mapped as a humble dwelling place (*ālaya*) for the divine, a vessel rather than a commander.

Emotional Vulnerability as Royal Discourse:

The most radical aspect of this self-representation is the king's exhibition of raw, emotional states—longing, despair, joyous submission—typically considered antithetical to the stoic ideal of kingship.

(i) *Viraha* (Separation) as Political Theology: Swathi's *padams*, especially in rāgas like Saurāṣṭra, Behāg, and Kāpi, are masterclasses in the aesthetics of separation. Songs like *"Pannagendra Śayana"* (Saurāṣṭra) express a soulful ache for the divine presence. For a king symbolically married to the kingdom (*śrī*), this expression of conjugal longing (*madhura-bhāva*) for God performs a critical function: it declares that his primary, spousal loyalty is to Padmanābha. The kingdom is not his ultimate object of desire; it is a secondary trust. This emotional vulnerability immunizes his rule from the corruption of absolute possessiveness.

(ii) *Bhāva* as Bona Fides: The sincerity (*sahṛdayatā*) of these emotional expressions is crucial. They are not theatrical but are rendered credible through the sophistication of the musical setting. The use of *śṛṅgāra* and *karuṇa rasas* proves his qualification as a true *bhakta*. In the economy of *bhakti*, this emotional authenticity (*bhāva*) becomes a higher form of legitimacy than lineage or power. The king establishes his right to rule not just through birth, but through his publicly performed, artistically refined capacity for love and surrender.

Surrender as the Source of Authority:

The act of *śaraṇāgati* (surrender) is the climax of this self-representational project. It is where the king's agency is voluntarily relinquished to become an instrument of the divine will.

(i) The Paradox of Empowered Surrender: In compositions like *"Pāhi Murare"* (Kedāragauḷa), the repeated cry *"śaraṇam śaraṇam"* (I take refuge) is an active, empowering choice. By surrendering to Padmanābha, the king taps into a source of authority that transcends the temporal. He becomes a *nimitamātra* (mere instrument), a conduit for a sovereignty that is eternal and unchallengeable. This frames his political decrees as attempts to enact divine order (*dharma*), lending them a sacrosanct quality.

(ii) The Ritual of Lyrical Prapatti: Each composition can be seen as a performative ritual of *prapatti* (self-surrender). The six elements of surrender (*aṅgas*)—positive resolution, avoidance of the displeasing, faith in protection, prayer for guardianship, self-offering, and humility—are all vividly present in his lyrics. The *ātma-nikṣepa* (self-offering) is explicit: the king offers his very self—his mind, his speech, his actions—to the Lord. His royal authority, thus offered, becomes a form of *seva* (service).

The Devotee-King and the Public Gaze:

This lyrical self-representation was a public act. Performed in the temple and cultural assemblies, it served a critical socio-political function.

(i) Modeling Hierarchy for the Kingdom: By so vividly portraying himself as a servant of Padmanābha, Swathi Thirunal modeled the ideal hierarchical relationship for the entire social order. Just as the king serves God, the minister serves the king, and the subject serves the realm. This created a cohesive *dharmic* cosmology, with devotional service as its binding principle.

(ii) The Accountability of Vulnerability: By exposing his devotional dependence, the king invited his subjects to see him as ultimately accountable to a higher power. This acted as a check on autocracy, assuring the people that their ruler was bound by a conscience shaped by humility and divine fear (*bhaya*). The "servant-king" is inherently more trustworthy than the "god-king."

The Crown of Servitude:

Swathi Thirunal's self-representation as a servant-devotee represents a unique articulation of political theology in Indian history. It manages to address the dualistic tensions of temporal power versus spiritual aspirations by collapsing the former into the latter. His poetics do not relinquish the throne; they 're' consecrate it. The crown is not to be removed; rather, it is to be worn as a 'dāsatva' (servitude) to Padmanābha.

This lyrical self-fashioning transforms the formal ideal of Śrī Padmanābha Dāsam into a lived and emotionally grounded ethic of rulership. By presenting power as service and authority as devotion, Swathi Thirunal bequeaths an enduring model of leadership in which the king's voice, resonant with bhakti, claims divine sanction beyond imperial command.

6. MUSIC, POWER, AND CULTURAL AUTHORITY IN TRAVANCORE :

Here we see the court of Maharaja Swathi Thirunal as a point of intersection where the integration of musical practice, political authority, and religious power in the construction of a complex regime of soft power ow. Looking beyond the framing of the compositions as an act of personal devotion or an aesthetic endeavor, this analysis contends that Swathi Thirunal's patterned act of sponsorship, innovation, and self-performance of music as a cultural project. It was aimed at bolstering the king's moral authority, cultivating the image of unparalleled cultural sophistication (saṃskṛti), and constructing a particular regional-cum-devotional identity focused on the Padmanābha-centric Vaiṣṇava stream. In the context of growing indirect colonial subjugation, music served the primary, and ideally, non-combative means of asserting sovereignty, and of exercising the kingdom's civilizational and spiritual grandeur along the lines of the dharmic state.

The Court as a Sonic Sovereign Space:

The early-to-mid-19th century in Travancore was a period of political complexity, with the kingdom maintaining internal autonomy while operating under the suzerainty of the British East India Company. In this context, hard power—military or direct political defiance—was constrained. Consequently, Swathi Thirunal's court astutely cultivated soft power: the ability to shape preferences and assert influence through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion. Music, as the preeminent classical art form, became the central instrument of this policy. The royal court transformed into a *sabha* (assembly) that was simultaneously a seat of governance, a temple of the arts, and a theater of statecraft, where sonic excellence signaled divine favor and royal virtue.

Music as Moral Legitimacy: The Dharma of Refinement:

The king's role as the premier patron (*yajamāna*) and practitioner of *sangīta* (music) was intrinsically linked to the concept of *rājadharma* (the duty of a king), which included the fostering of arts and culture (*kalā-puṣpaṇam*).

(i) The Aestheticization of Virtue: Swathi's meticulous adherence to the grammatical and emotional rules (*lakṣaṇa* and *bhāva*) of Carnatic music mirrored the ideal of a ruler adhering to *dharma*. Just as *rāga* requires discipline (*yama*) within a framework to reveal beauty, so does kingship require righteous restraint to reveal prosperity. His famous *navaratri* music festivals and daily court concerts (*sadas*) were not mere entertainment but public rituals demonstrating the kingdom's inner order and harmony. A court that produced and appreciated refined music was, by implication, a court governed by refinement, wisdom, and piety.

(ii) Patronage as Purificatory Duty: The king's generous support for musicians, musicologists, and instrument makers was a form of *dāna* (charity) enjoined upon rulers. By attracting the finest talents—like the legendary *vainika* (veena player) K.C. Kesava Pillai and musicians from Tanjore—Swathi's court became a magnetic center of cultural capital. This patronage system

mirrored the royal duty to nurture the community, positioning the king as the fertile ground from which the arts could flourish. His own scholarship, composing in Sanskrit, Malayalam, and Manipravalam, proved his personal worthiness to be such a patron, embodying the *rājarṣi* (sage-king) ideal.

Cultural Refinement as Political Distinction:

In the landscape of British India, where "princely states" were often viewed through an Orientalist lens as decadent or backward, Swathi Thirunal's court presented a counter-narrative of supreme sophistication.

(i) Systematization and Canon-Formation: Swathi did not merely compose; he institutionalized. By standardizing musical pedagogy, integrating Hindustani elements with Carnatic rigor (evident in *rāgas* like Kāpi and Behāg), and composing in all major compositional forms (*kṛrti, padam, varṇam, javali, tillāna*), he demonstrated an encyclopaedic command. This asserted a cultural sovereignty equal to, and independent of, the courts of the Tamil country or Mysore. His output was a statement: Travancore was not a periphery but a center of classical tradition.

(ii) The Language of Power: His trilingual composition strategy was politically astute. Sanskrit compositions (e.g., *"Deva Deva Kalayāmi"*) claimed universality and *śāstric* orthodoxy. Manipravalam (Sanskrit-Malayalam blend) pieces appealed to the scholarly and temple-oriented elite. Malayalam compositions (like the *"Āṭṭakkathā"* excerpts and *padams*) rooted this high culture in the vernacular soil of Kerala, fostering a unique regional pride. This linguistic triangulation created a cultural identity that was simultaneously cosmopolitan, orthodox, and locally resonant, insulating it from being subsumed by broader colonial or pan-Indian narratives.

Devotional Identity and the Consolidation of a Sacred Polity:

Music was the most effective medium for reinforcing the foundational ideology of the state: that Travancore was *Śrī Padmanābha Dāsam*.

(i) Sonic Theology: Every concert in the palace or temple was an act of collective worship, blurring the line between courtly performance and religious service. Swathi's *kṛrtanas*, overwhelmingly addressed to Padmanābha, Viṭṭhal, or related *avatāras*, continuously resounded the theological basis of the king's authority. The state's identity was literally sung into being on a daily basis. This created a powerful affective bond between the ruler, the deity, and the people, who shared in this devotional-sonic culture.

(ii) Ritual and Regulation: The king's deep personal involvement in the musical liturgy of the Śrī Padmanābhaswamy Temple—the literal and symbolic heart of the kingdom—was paramount. His compositions for temple rituals (*seva*) integrated royal artistry directly into the core of the state's sacred apparatus. This made his cultural authority inseparable from his religious role as the chief *sevaka* (servant) of the deity, the guardian of the realm's spiritual heart.

Soft Power in a Colonial Context: Asserting Sovereignty Through Culture:

Facing the limitations imposed by the subsidiary alliance with the British, Swathi Thirunal's musical project became a form of non-violent resistance and assertion of autonomy.

(i) The Arena of Unchallenged Excellence: While military and foreign policy were circumscribed, the British Resident had no grounds—or ability—to interfere in the king's patronage of Carnatic music. In this arena, Swathi could be, and was, an undisputed sovereign. His court's cultural brilliance became a proxy for the kingdom's overall vitality and independence, a source of prestige that commanded respect from both Indian peers and colonial observers.

(ii) Cultural Diplomacy: The court attracted scholars, artists, and dignitaries from across India, becoming a hub for intellectual and artistic exchange. This reinforced Travancore's status as a major Indian kingdom, not just a "native state" under the British. The soft power exerted through cultural magnetism enhanced the king's standing in diplomatic negotiations and in the wider Indian imagination.

The Resonant Throne:

Swathi Thirunal's reign demonstrates that in pre-modern and early modern polities, cultural production was not a leisure activity divorced from power but a primary modality of its expression and reinforcement. His musical project was a holistic strategy of statecraft that:

(1) Legitimized his rule through public performances of piety and virtue.
(2) Distinguished his kingdom as a beacon of refined civilization.
(3) Consolidated a cohesive devotional-political identity among his subjects.
(4) Asserted a robust form of sovereignty in a constrained political environment.

The enduring legacy of Swathi Thirunal's *sangīta* is thus dual. Artistically, it gifted the Carnatic repertoire with some of its most exquisite compositions. Politically, it stands as a masterclass in how soft power—the power to attract, inspire, and define a civilization's highest ideals—can be orchestrated. In the halls of the Travancore palace, the resonance of the *vīṇā* and the clarity of the poetic word did not merely accompany power; they were its most eloquent and authoritative voice.

Swathi Thirunal Rama Varma's nineteenth-century lyrics unite devotional aesthetics and royal ethics, crafting a theology of kingship through Bhakti. His compositions, addressing Padmanābha as both personal deity and sovereign ideal, transform rule into worship power disciplined by surrender. In his poetic idiom, monarchy is moral yoga: authority purified by service, sovereignty subdued by song. The lyrics translate Vedantic non-duality into political self-reflection, where the king recognizes himself as instrument (dāsānudāsa) of the Divine Order. Through rāga, metaphor, and language fusion, Swathi Thirunal re-imagines governance as ethical art and devotion as statecraft, creating a luminous model of self-representation that fuses Bhakti's interiority with the public responsibility of Dharmic kingship.

7. CONCLUSION :

Swathi Thirunal Rama Varma's compositions demonstrate how bhakti can transform expressions of political power and moral leadership. In his compositions, he does not defend his kingship through the use of power or grand shows of power. Instead, he shows the use of power through his royal position as an act of devotion, humility, and surrender to Lord Padmanābha. This represents a break from the typical use of royal representation and symbolizes the bhakti value of placing divine power above secular authority.

As kritis and padams exemplify, the ideals of divine kingship are best explained as a reflective practice of the predominant royal dharma, where kingship as an act of divine or moral service. For the public, the authority of the sovereign to act must stem from service rather than the exercise of authority by virtue of power. In this sense, music is not only an act of devotion to God, but also a way of teaching the people of Travancore the moral value of the exercise of sovereign power.

In addition, the Indian bhakti movement, exemplified by Thirunal, sought to break the barriers of caste and community through his use of varied languages and artistic compositions. The `ruler-composer` role of Thirunal uniquely combined political authority, devotional religious power, and artistic social authority. As a royal author, Thirunal integrated, for the first time, religion, ethics, and royal self-representation.

His lyrical corpus should be understood, not simply as musical literature, but as a complex engagement with elements of discourse on kingly power, ethics, and devotion. In contemporary debates on leadership and moral authority, Swathi Thirunal's bhakti inspired kingly power illustrates a balanced doctrine—where power is justified by a lower status and where authority is holy because of devotion.

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