

# Bhakti as Vernacular Philosophy in Pre-Trinity Telugu Compositions Traditions

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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** *The period preceding the Carnatic Trinity represents a formative phase in South Indian musical and devotional history, during which bhakti functioned not merely as emotional piety but as a mode of philosophical articulation. This study examines Telugu devotional music from the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries as a sophisticated vehicle for transmitting metaphysical, ethical, and theological ideas to the common devotee.*

**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.*

**Results/Analysis:** *This paper studies the works of Annamacharya, Tallapaka Tirumalamma, Kshetrappa, Bhadrachala Ramadasu, and Narayana Teertha and seeks to establish that Telugu bhakti music represented a parallel alternative philosophical discourse to the śāstric traditions. Surrender (or śaraṇāgati), divinity, ethical selfhood, and emotional realism are components of the vernacular lyrics, musical structures, and performative contexts. Temple worship, court patronage, and public processions (or ucchavrities) facilitated the wide circulation of these compositions and their embedding of philosophy into the lived experience of the religious. By interpreting pre-Trinity Telugu devotional music as a vernacular philosophy, this paper seeks to problematize the impenetrable boundaries of emotion and intellect, devotion and metaphysics.*

**Originality/ Values:** *The study demonstrates that long before the formal classicism of the Carnatic Trinity, Telugu composers had already established a robust philosophical ecosystem where song functioned as theology, ethics, and pedagogy for the masses.*

**Type of Paper:** *Exploratory Research.*

**Keywords:** Telugu Bhakti Tradition; Vernacular Philosophy; Pre-Trinity Carnatic Music; Devotional Aesthetics; Lived Theology

### 1. INTRODUCTION :

The formative centuries preceding the Carnatic Trinity mark a crucial yet often under-theorized phase in South Indian intellectual and musical history. During the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries, Telugu devotional music emerged not merely as an expression of personal piety but as a distinct philosophical medium, capable of conveying metaphysical insight, ethical reasoning, and theological reflection to broad social audiences. In this period, bhakti operated as a mode of thinking—a *lived philosophy*—articulated through song, performance, and emotional engagement rather than through formal śāstric prose [1-3].

The composers of this era—most notably Annamacharya, Tallapaka Tirumalamma, Kshetrappa, Bhadrachala Ramadasu, and Narayana Teertha—employed the Telugu language, musical form, and performative context to translate complex philosophical ideas into accessible experiential knowledge. Concepts such as surrender (*śaraṇāgati*), divine grace, human dependence, ethical selfhood, and emotional intimacy with the divine were embedded in lyrics that could be sung in temples, festivals, and domestic spaces. This vernacularization did not dilute philosophical depth; rather, it expanded philosophy's reach beyond scholastic elites to the everyday devotee [4-6].

Temple-centered worship, pilgrimage networks, and musical storytelling enabled bhakti philosophy to become communal and embodied. Emotion (*bhāva*), especially in forms such as *nāyikā-bhāva* and *viraha*, functioned as a legitimate epistemological pathway to the divine. This study situates pre-Trinity Telugu devotional music as a foundational philosophical tradition—one that shaped the ethical and metaphysical sensibilities later refined by the Carnatic Trinity. By reading bhakti as philosophy, the paper challenges rigid distinctions between devotion and intellect, demonstrating that early Telugu music constituted a sophisticated system of vernacular thought [7].

## 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE :

This review of literature examines the scholarship surrounding the evolution of Bhakti (devotionalism) as a "vernacular philosophy" within the Telugu literary and musical traditions, specifically focusing on the era before the "Trinity" (Tyagaraja, Muthuswamy Dikshitar, and Syama Sastri). The term "vernacular philosophy" here refers to the transition of complex Vedantic and Upanishadic concepts into the regional idiom, making spiritual knowledge accessible to the masses through song and poetry.

### (1) The Genesis of Telugu Bhakti and Vernacularization:

The origins of the Bhakti movement in South India are traditionally rooted in the Tamil Alvar and Nayanar traditions (7th–10th centuries). However, the specific "vernacularization" of philosophy in the Andhra region began to crystallize during the Kakatiya and Post-Kakatiya periods. Dey (2017) [8] notes that Bhakti transformed from a religious doctrine into a popular movement based on religious equality, utilizing regional languages to bypass Brahmanical orthodoxy. In Telugu literature, this shift is most evident in the works of the Kavitrāyama (Trinity of Poets), but it was the later Vaggeyakaras (composer-poets) who truly embedded philosophy into song.

### (2) Palkuriki Somanatha and the Saiva Influence:

Pre-Trinity Telugu traditions owe a significant debt to the Virasaiva movement. Rao (2002) [9] highlights that Palkuriki Somanatha (13th century) was a pioneer in using the Dwipada (couplet) meter, a native Telugu form, to express radical social and philosophical ideas. This choice of a "vernacular" meter over the heavy Sanskritized Champu style represented a philosophical stance: that the language of the people was sufficient for the divine.

### (3) Tallapaka Annamacharya: The Architect of Adhyatma Sankeertana:

The most pivotal figure in pre-Trinity Telugu Bhakti is Tallapaka Annamacharya (1408–1503). Known as the Pada-kavita Pitamaha, his work is the primary site for "vernacular philosophy." Pande (2013) [10] argues that the Bhakti movement in medieval Andhra, led by figures like Annamayya, was influenced by the socio-political landscape to foster spiritual reform. Annamayya's Adhyatma Sankeertanas are not merely songs but philosophical treatises on Visistadvaita (qualified monism). Singh (2002) [11] observes that such poetry democratized religious expression, particularly through Annamayya's famous composition "Brahmam Okkate," which asserts the oneness of the divine across social hierarchies.

### (4) Kshetrāyā and the Philosophy of Madhura Bhakti:

As the movement progressed toward the 17th century, the "vernacular philosophy" expanded to include Madhura Bhakti (erotic devotion). Ramaswamy (2017) [12] compares the cultural dominance of Telugu in South India to French in Europe, noting its role as the language of high culture and emotion. Kshetrāyā's Padams utilized the Telugu language to explore the relationship between the Jivatma (individual soul) and Paramatma (supreme soul) through the lens of Sringara (romance). This tradition provided the aesthetic and philosophical foundation that Tyagaraja would later refine.

### (5) Institutionalization and the "Trinity" Gap:

Scholarly critique often highlights how the 18th-century "Trinity" has overshadowed these earlier traditions in the modern canon. Mrinmoy Saha & Anupriya Massey (2023) [13] posits that the 20th-century canonization of the Trinity reflected nationalist agendas, often marginalizing the diverse "vernacular" voices—including women like Tallapaka Timmakka and non-Brahmin composers—who had already established the philosophical framework of Telugu Bhakti.

### 3. OBJECTIVES :

- (1) To examine Telugu devotional music as a philosophical medium, rather than merely an emotional or aesthetic expression of bhakti.
- (2) To analyze key theological and ethical ideas—surrender, devotion, viraha, and divine grace—as articulated in pre-Trinity Telugu compositions.
- (3) To assess the role of temple and performative spaces in transforming music into a lived philosophical practice for common devotees.

### 4. 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.

### 5. VERNACULAR BHAKTI AND PHILOSOPHICAL TRANSMISSION – TELUGU AS THE VESSEL OF METAPHYSICS :

This Study examines the transformative period in South Indian intellectual and religious history, spanning the 15th to 18th centuries, when Telugu emerged as a premier medium for disseminating sophisticated philosophical discourse, effectively rivalling and often surpassing Sanskrit in its reach and impact. Focusing on the era preceding the crystallization of the Carnatic Trinity (Tyāgarāja, Muttusvāmi Dīkṣitar, Śyāma Sāstri, c. 1760-1850), this analysis argues that Telugu devotional composers, operating at the nexus of temple, court, and popular movement, engineered a profound vernacularization of philosophy. Through the medium of *padam*, *kīrtana*, and literary works, they translated the abstract principles of *Vedānta* (particularly Viśiṣṭādvaita and Dvaita), *Sāṅkhya*, and *Agama* into resonant emotional and ethical narratives. This process did not "dumb down" metaphysics but rather re-embodied it, making concepts like *prapatti* (surrender), *māyā* (cosmic illusion), and *jīva-paramātmabheda* (soul-God distinction) accessible to non-elite audiences—women, artisans, farmers, and merchants—thereby democratizing salvation and constructing a shared regional religious identity [14-20].

#### (1) The Linguistic Turn in South Indian Philosophy:

The classical model of Indian philosophy was fundamentally Sanskritic. Philosophical transmission occurred through a tightly regulated chain: *śāstra* (treatise) → *guru* (teacher) → *śiṣya* (student), within institutions largely restricted by gender, caste, and literacy. The *Bhakti* movements, erupting across the subcontinent from the 7th century onward, initiated a radical linguistic turn. In the Telugu-speaking regions (encompassing much of modern Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, and parts of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka), this turn was not a rejection of philosophy but its translation into a new key.

By the time of the Vijayanagara Empire (14th-17th centuries) and its successor Nayaka kingdoms, Telugu had matured into a language capable of immense literary subtlety (*mādhurya*) and doctrinal precision. Composers like Tallapaka Annamācārya (1408-1503), his descendants, Kṣetrāyya (c. 1600-1680), and the early *saint-poets* of the *Dāsu* tradition, consciously chose Telugu as their primary medium. Their work represents a deliberate project of vernacular philosophical transmission, where song became the classroom, and devotion (*bhakti*) the pedagogical method.

#### (2) The Mechanisms of Translation: From Sūtra to Sāhitya:

The vernacularisation of philosophy was not a literal, word-for-word translation. It was a creative transcreation that involved several key mechanisms:

- Narrative Metaphysics: Abstract principles were embedded in the stories of the *Purāṇas* and *Itihāsas*. Annamācārya's *Sankīrtanas*, for instance, use the narrative of Venkateśvara (Balaji) to explicate the Viśiṣṭādvaita theology of *śaranāgati*. The entire story of the devotee's journey to Tirupati becomes an allegory for the soul's journey to God. The complex relationship between the soul (*cit*), the insentient world (*acit*), and God (*īśvara*)—the core of Rāmānuja's philosophy—is dramatized in the longing of the devotee for the distant hill shrine.
- Emotional Epistemology: Classical philosophy validated certain *pramāṇas* (means of valid knowledge): perception, inference, scripture. Vernacular *bhakti* introduced and

privileged emotional experience (*bhāva*) as a valid form of knowing the divine. Kṣetravya's *padams*, ostensibly love songs from a *nāyikā* (heroine) to her lord Muvva Gopāla, are masterclasses in mapping the *Sāṅkhya* ontology of *puruṣa* (conscious soul) and *prakṛti* (material nature) onto the psychology of human love. The anguish of separation (*viraha*) is not merely romantic; it is the philosophical state of the *jīva* separated from *paramātmān*, experienced viscerally by the listener. Knowing God is not just intellectual assent; it is to feel the pangs of separation and the joy of union.

- Domesticating the Divine: Sanskrit metaphysics often dealt with a transcendent, impersonal absolute (*Brahman*). Telugu *bhakti* brought the divine into the kitchen, the bedroom, and the marketplace. God became the lover (Muvva Gopāla in Kṣetravya), the child (Bāla Kṛṣṇa), or the local guardian deity (*grāma-devatā*). This localization made philosophical concepts tangible. The omnipresence of God (*vyāpakatva*) is understood not as a logical proposition, but through the intimate presence of the deity who shares in the devotee's daily life. The *devadāsī* performing a Kṣetravya *padam* in a temple or court was thus embodying a metaphysical relationship.
- Ethical Imperatives as Philosophical Outcomes: Philosophy culminates in a way of life. Telugu devotional music explicitly linked metaphysical understanding to ethical conduct. The *Dāsu* literature (e.g., of Pōtūluri Veerabrahman) and the compositions of composers like Bhadrācala Rāmadāsu (17th cent.) directly connected the recognition of divine immanence with social ethics—compassion, honesty, rejection of caste arrogance, and charity. The philosophical insight that all beings host the same divine principle (*sarva-bhūta-sthitam devam*) translated into the ethical mandate for equitable treatment.

### (3) Key Philosophical Themes Vernacularized:

Several core philosophical concepts were successfully transmitted through the Telugu musical vernacular:

- *Prapatti* (Total Surrender): This central tenet of Śrīvaiṣṇavism, a highly technical doctrine involving the six *aṅgas* (limbs) of surrender, was distilled into the recurrent motif of the helpless devotee begging for refuge. Annamācārya's constant refrain of “*Venkaṭeśa, ninnu*” (O Venkaṭeśa, to you...) and the posture of absolute vulnerability in his songs operationalized *prapatti* for the masses. It taught that the path to liberation was not complicated ritual or intellectual gymnastics, but an emotional gesture of giving up.
- *Māyā/Avidyā* (Cosmic Illusion/Ignorance): The Advaitic and post-Advaitic understanding of the world as a binding illusion found powerful expression in the *padam* tradition. The trope of the *vipralambha-nāyikā* (heroine in separation) often laments her delusion (*moha*) in trusting the worldly lover (a stand-in for *māyā*). The transient nature of wealth, beauty, and relationships—a constant theme—served as a daily meditation on *anityatā* (impermanence), the experiential proof of *māyā*.
- *Bhakti as Jñāna* (Devotion as Knowledge): This synthesis, crucial to philosophies like Viśiṣṭādvaita, was enacted through song. To sing with understanding (*bhāva*) was to know God. The very structure of a *kīrtana*—moving from *pallavi* (thematic refrain) to *anupallavi* (expansion) to *caraṇam* (narrative/elaboration)—mirrors a pedagogical and contemplative process. The listener, by internalizing the song, internalizes the knowledge it contains.
- *Saguṇa vs. Nirguṇa* (God with/without attributes): The great philosophical debate was harmonized in practice. While the *nirguṇa* absolute was acknowledged in invocatory verses (often in Sanskrit), the main body of the composition engaged passionately with the *saguṇa* deity—Kṛṣṇa with his flute, Rāma with his bow, Venkaṭeśvara with his crown. This mirrored the philosophical position that the *nirguṇa* is accessed through the *saguṇa*, making the ultimate reality approachable.

### (4) Social Dimensions: The Democratization of Access:

The shift to Telugu had revolutionary social implications:

- Inclusion of Women: While largely excluded from Sanskrit *pāṭhaśālās*, women were central to the vernacular transmission—as devotees, as performers (*devadāsīs* who sang *padams*), and as implied audience. The use of the *nāyikā*'s voice gave women a powerful metaphoric and sometimes literal platform to express spiritual longing and philosophical understanding.

- Transcending Caste and Occupation: The messages, sung in the language of the land, reached agricultural communities, weavers, and artisans. The philosophy was no longer locked in Brahminical monasteries; it echoed in fields and marketplaces. Saints from non-Brahmin backgrounds (like the *Dāsu* poets) composed in Telugu, further shattering the link between metaphysical authority and birth.
- Regional Identity Formation: This shared corpus of philosophical music, centered on regional deities like Venkateśvara (Tirupati) or Muvva Gopāla, created a cohesive Telugu devotional counterculture. It provided a philosophical and emotional framework that bound together a linguistically defined community, distinct from the Tamil, Kannada, or Marathi *bhakti* worlds.

### (5) The Bridge to the Carnatic Trinity:

This rich vernacular foundation was the essential precondition for the work of the Carnatic Trinity. They inherited a world where:

1. Telugu was already established as a legitimate, sophisticated language for compositional metaphysics.
2. Musical forms (*padam*, *kīrtana*) were already proven vehicles for theological depth.
3. A massive audience was already acculturated to receiving philosophical ideas through song.

Tyāgarāja, while innovating musically, worked squarely within this vernacular philosophical project, using Telugu to explore Advaitic themes of transcendence and the folly of worldly attachment. Muttusvāmi Dīkṣitar, though more Sanskrit-oriented, relied on the musical and devotional structures solidified by his Telugu predecessors. Śyāma Śāstri's Telugu and Sanskrit compositions for the goddess continued the tradition of mapping *Śākta* philosophy onto emotional states.

### (6) The Sonic University:

The pre-Trinity Telugu devotional movement functioned as a vast sonic university, where metaphysics was taught through vernacular song and tested in lived devotion and ethical practice, radically democratizing philosophy through composers like Annamācārya and Kṣetrayya. By transmitting profound metaphysical inquiry in the communal, emotionally charged medium of Telugu *bhakti*, this tradition kept philosophy alive in society and created the cultural–intellectual reservoir that later generations, including the Carnatic Trinity, would draw upon.

## 6. EMOTION AS METAPHYSICS: NĀYIKĀ-BHĀVA, VIRAHA, AND SURRENDER :

This note argues that the predominant emotional modes of pre-Trinity and early modern South Indian devotional music—the archetypal states of the *nāyikā* (heroine), the agony of separation (*viraha*), and the culmination in self-surrender (*śaraṇāgati*)—were not mere poetic ornamentation or secular love lyricism. Rather, they constituted a sophisticated, systematic, and legitimate theological methodology. Through an analysis of the *padam* and *kīrtana* traditions, particularly in Telugu and Tamil, this note demonstrates how composers deployed *rasa* theory (the aesthetic of flavor) as a metaphysical toolkit. Emotional expression (*bhāva*) became the primary mode of knowing (*pramāṇa*) the divine, mapping the soul's ontological condition onto a relatable human psychology. This "emotional metaphysics" bypassed scholastic abstraction, offering devotees an experiential, embodied path to understanding and union with the ultimate reality [21-24].

### (1) From Sentiment to Soteriology:

Classical Indian philosophy traditionally privileged intellect (*buddhi*) and scriptural testimony (*śabda*) as paths to truth. The *bhakti* movement, particularly as expressed in the musical forms of the 15th-18th centuries, initiated a radical epistemic shift: it validated emotion as a vehicle for metaphysical realization. In the courts of Nayaka kings and the temples of Tamil Nadu and Andhra, composers like Kṣetrayya, the Tallapaka poets, and early Tamil *kīrtanakāras* did not simply use human love as a metaphor for divine love. They asserted that the structures of human emotional experience—longing, jealousy, servitude, union—were themselves microcosmic reflections of a cosmic reality. The *nāyikā-bhāva* (the mode of the heroine) was thus not a disguise for theology; it was its most direct and potent expression.

### (2) Nāyikā-Bhāva: The Archetypal Soul and Its Ontological Drama:

The *padam* tradition, perfected by composers like Kṣetravya (c. 1600-1680), uses the *nāyikā* (heroine) as a consistent allegorical figure for the individual soul (*jīvātmā*). Her various states—the jealous wife (*khaṇḍita-nāyikā*), the anxiously waiting lover (*virahotkaṇṭhitā*), the one separated by distance (*proṣita-bharṭṛkā*)—are not random romantic scenarios. They are precise diagnoses of the soul's existential condition within frameworks like Viśiṣṭādvaita or Śaiva Siddhānta.

- Theological Correspondence: The *nāyikā*'s singular focus on her lord (*nāyaka*, representing *paramātmā*) mirrors the soul's sole legitimate object of devotion. Her complaints against a rival (*sapatī*) translate theologically to the distractions of the material world (*prakṛti*) or the ego (*ahamkāra*) that usurps God's place. Her detailed recollections of intimate moments with her lord are not mere nostalgia but exercises in *smarana* (remembrance), a prescribed devotional practice for realizing God's immanence. The very specificity of the emotion—the time of day, the broken promise, the scent of betel—grounds the transcendent relationship in tangible, experiential reality, making the metaphysical personal.
- *Sthāyibhāva* as Soul's Constant: In *rasa* theory, the dominant emotional state (*sthāyibhāva*) is what is evoked in the connoisseur (*sahṛdaya*). In devotional *padams*, the *sthāyibhāva* is *bhakti-rati* (devotional attachment). All the transient emotions (*vyabhicāri-bhāvas*) of the *nāyikā*—anxiety, longing, memory, despair—are waves upon this ocean of foundational devotion. This models the theological truth that despite the soul's apparent entanglement in worldly suffering, its core, enduring nature (*svarūpa*) is relationship with the divine.

### (3) Viraha: The Agony of Distinction and the Engine of Desire:

*Viraha* (separation) is the central and most philosophically charged emotional mode. It is far more than a mood of sadness; it is the dynamic principle of dualistic metaphysics.

- The Proof of Reality: In non-Advaitic theologies like Dvaita or Viśiṣṭādvaita, the distinction (*bheda*) between the soul and God is real and eternal. *Viraha* is the emotional experience of this ontological truth. The soul feels its separation as an acute, painful absence. This pain is not a failure but a sign of authenticity—it confirms the reality of the Other and the reality of the relationship. A song expressing *viraha* is thus a performative affirmation of a dualistic or qualified non-dualistic worldview. The agony proves the beloved exists.
- The Catalyst for Journey: Metaphysically, *viraha* is the antithesis of spiritual complacency. It is the force that shatters the illusion of worldly satisfaction (*māyā*). The *nāyikā*'s utter dissatisfaction with her state of separation mirrors the soul's innate dissatisfaction (*anṛta*) with *samsāra*. This divine discontent (*daivī vyasana*) is the necessary fuel for the spiritual journey. It transforms passive existence into an active, desperate quest, making the longing for union (*mokṣa*, *yoga*) not a philosophical abstraction but a visceral, motivating need.
- The Intensifier of Consciousness: Phenomenologically, absence magnifies presence. The *nāyikā* in *viraha* experiences her lord more vividly in memory and imagination than in mundane encounters. Theologically, this models the idea that God's perceived absence (*darśana-rahita*) can, for the mature devotee, deepen the sense of His presence within the heart (*hrdaya-vāsa*). *Viraha* thus becomes a form of *sādhanā* (spiritual practice) that purifies and intensifies consciousness, burning away ancillary attachments.

### (4) Śaraṇāgati: Surrender as Emotional Climax and Philosophical Resolution:

The trajectory of the emotional narrative in *padams* and many *kīrtanas* often moves from the prideful complaint of the *khaṇḍita-nāyikā*, through the desperate anguish of *viraha*, to a final, helpless surrender. This *śaraṇāgati* is the emotional and philosophical resolution.

- The End of Agency: The *nāyikā* ultimately abandons strategies of recrimination, bargaining, or search. She collapses into a state of total, childlike dependence (*dīnatva*, *bālyam*). This mirrors the core theological act in *prapatti-śāstra* (the doctrine of surrender), where the soul relinquishes all personal effort (*sva-rte*) and takes refuge. The emotional breakdown is, paradoxically, the spiritual breakthrough. The music often mirrors this shift: agitated, uneven phrases give way to a slower, steadier, pleading refrain centered on the lord's name or a simple plea for mercy (*karuṇā*).
- The Union in Submission: The resolution of the *padam* is not always physical union (*saṃyoga*). Often, it is the realization of union through surrender. By giving up her separate will,

the *nāyikā* (soul) achieves a unity of purpose with the *nāyaka* (God). This emotionally enacts the philosophical concept that liberation is not annihilation of self but the alignment of the soul's will with the divine will. The peace that follows surrender is the *rasa* of *śānti* (peace), the ultimate aesthetic flavor, which signifies the soul resting in its proper, dependent relationship.

#### (5) Musical Embodiment: Rāga as Metaphysical Mood:

This emotional metaphysics was not confined to lyrics; it was composed into the very sonic fabric through *rāga*.

- *Rāga* as Ontological Atmosphere: Each *rāga* was understood to possess an inherent emotional-energetic signature (*bhāva*). Composers chose *rāgas* not for mere variety but for theological alignment. A *padam* of intense, dark *viraha* might be set in a *rāga* like *Mukhārī* or *Saurāṣṭra*, whose melodic contours naturally express pathos and longing. A song of tender, intimate surrender might use *Kāpī* or *Ānandabhairavī*. The *rāga* thus pre-conditioned the listener's heart (*hṛdaya*) to receive the specific metaphysical truth encoded in the lyrics, creating a total sensory and emotional immersion in the doctrine.
- *Sangati* and *Neraval* as Contemplative Expansion: The musical techniques of melodic variation (*sangati*) and lyrical improvisation (*neraval*) on key phrases served a contemplative function. By repeating and ornamenting a line like "*Ennallu rakṣincirā...*" (Won't you protect me?) or "*Rāma nīyāda...*" (Is it proper, Rāma?), the performer and listener were led into a deep, meditative exploration of that single emotional-theological state. This musical elaboration was a form of *bhāvanā* (contemplative cultivation), making the feeling—and its attendant metaphysical insight—inescapable and profound.

#### (6) The Felt Truth:

The *padam* and *kīrtana* tradition dissolved the divide between emotion and intellect by advancing a somatic epistemology in which ultimate reality is known through embodied feeling—where *nāyikā-bhāva* and *viraha* articulate the soul's predicament and *śaraṅgati* enacts its resolution. By sanctifying emotional experience as metaphysical knowledge, this tradition democratized theology and established performance itself—long before the Carnatic Trinity—as a rigorous mode of philosophical inquiry, where longing sung in *rāga* and *tāla* became a direct path to Brahman.

### 7. TEMPLE, FESTIVAL, AND PUBLIC DEVOTION :

This Study examines the integral role of physical spaces, calendrical rituals, and collective musical performance in shaping and transmitting philosophical understanding in pre-modern South Indian *bhakti* traditions. It argues that philosophy was not merely an intellectual discipline confined to texts, but a public, sensory, and somatic reality experienced by communities through the interlocking systems of temple architecture, festival cycles (*utsavam*), and devotional music (*sankīrtanam*). The temple served as a three-dimensional *maṇḍala* of cosmology; pilgrimage enacted the soul's journey; and public musical performances during festivals translated metaphysical principles into shared emotional and ethical experience. Together, these elements transformed abstract doctrine into lived, collective consciousness [14-24].

#### (1) Philosophy as Lived Architecture and Collective Rhythm:

The spread and internalization of *bhakti* philosophy—whether of the Śrīvaiṣṇava, Dvaita, or Śaiva Siddhānta schools—cannot be understood solely through textual analysis. Its success lay in its environmental embodiment. Doctrine escaped the palm-leaf manuscript to become stone, procession, and sound. The temple (*kōyil*, *ālaya*) was not just a place of worship but the primary classroom; the annual festival calendar was its curriculum; and the gathered devotees, from learned *ācāryas* to illiterate farmers, were its student body, learning through collective sight, movement, and hearing.

#### (2) The Temple as a Cosmological and Philosophical Diagram:

Temple architecture and ritual space were designed as physical manifestations of metaphysical truths.

- *Gopuram* to *Garbhagr̥ha*: The Journey Inward: The towering gateway (*gopuram*), adorned with myriad terrestrial and celestial figures, represented the manifest, diverse world of *māyā* or *prakṛti*. The progressive movement through successive courtyards (*prakāram*) toward the dark, unadorned sanctum (*garbhagr̥ha*) mirrored the soul's philosophical journey: from the distractions of the external, pluralistic universe toward the singular, formless essence (*nirguṇa brahman*) within. Yet, within that sanctum, this essence was encountered in a particular, loving form (*saguṇa*, the *mūrti*), resolving the *nirguṇa-saguṇa* dialectic in architectural experience.
- *Dhvajastambha* and Axis Mundi: The flagstaff (*dhvajastambha*) represented the axis of the universe, connecting earth to heaven, the human to the divine. Circumambulation (*pradakṣiṇā*) around this axis, always keeping the sanctum to one's right, enacted the devotee's understanding of revolving one's life around God as the central, orienting principle. This was philosophy in motion—a kinetic understanding of dependence (*paratantratva*).
- Spatial Hierarchies and Social Metaphysics: The movement from outer to inner spaces often reflected social hierarchies, but *bhakti* music, especially during festivals, could subvert this. The performance of Tamil *Tēvāram* or Telugu *padams* in outer *maṇḍapas* (halls) made complex theological poetry accessible to all castes gathered there, using the temple's own spatial logic to broadcast an inclusive message.

### (3) Festival (*Utsavam*) as Enacted Theology:

The annual festival cycle was a dramatic, large-scale performance of core philosophical narratives.

- Procession (*Yātrā*) as Cosmic Movement: The central ritual of most festivals is the procession of the deity (*utsava-vigraha*) outside the temple sanctum, through the streets of the town or village. This is theology in transit. The deity, normally hidden and static in the *garbhagr̥ha*, becomes mobile and visible (*darśanam*) to the entire community. Philosophically, this enacted the doctrine of divine grace (*prasāda*) actively reaching out into the world of suffering (*samsāra*), affirming God's accessibility and immanence (*vyāpakatva*). The procession route often mapped a sacred geography, transforming the entire town into a temporary, expanded temple.
- Narrative Enactment and Collective Memory: Major festivals re-enact key episodes from the *Purāṇas*: Kṛṣṇa lifting Govardhana, Rāma's coronation, Śiva's subduing of Tripura. These were not mere pageants. For an illiterate populace, they were the primary means of absorbing sacred narrative and its embedded ethics. Watching Rāma's exile, the crowd viscerally experienced the concept of *dharma* upheld at personal cost. The festival calendar thus organized time itself as a repetitive instruction in philosophical and moral truths.

### (4) Public Musical Performance as Collective Interpretation:

Music was the essential sonic layer that animated the architectural and ritual frame, providing emotional and intellectual interpretation.

- *Harikathā* and *Kalakshepam*: Narrative Exegesis: In these performance arts, a learned exponent (*kathākār*) wove together storytelling, philosophical commentary, and musical rendering of *kīrtanas*. During a festival, a *Harikathā* on the "Bhakti of Prahāda" would use Purandara Dāsa's *kīrtanas* to explain the nature of unwavering devotion (*ekāntika bhakti*) and the folly of earthly power (*aiśvarya*). The public gathering became an open-air lecture hall where doctrine was clarified through drama and song.
- *Bhajana* and *Sankīrtana*: Participatory Embodiment: Community singing (*bhajana*) during festivals, especially at night vigils (*jāgaranam*), allowed every individual to participate in the philosophical act. Repeating the names of God (*nāma-sankīrtanam*) was understood as both a means of purification and a statement of non-dualistic truth—the name and the named are one. Singing Annamācārya's "*Venkaṭeśa, ninnu*" in a massive chorus transformed individual surrender (*śaraṇāgati*) into a collective roar of dependence, physically vibrating the shared air and bodies of the devotees, creating a powerful sense of communal identity (*satsaṅga*) defined by shared philosophical orientation.
- *Devadāsī* Performance as Ritualized Metaphysics: The *padam* performance by *devadāsīs* within the temple precinct, often during festival times, was a ritual act. When

a *devadāsī* sang a Kṣetravya *padam* expressing the *nāyikā*'s *viraha*, she was not entertaining but ritually embodying the state of the soul (*jīva*) for the community's contemplation. The temple provided the sacred stage, the festival the auspicious time, and her performance the living, emotional exegesis of separation and longing for the divine.

##### (5) Pilgrimage (*Tīrthayātrā*) as Existential Philosophy:

Pilgrimage condensed the philosophical journey into a personal, arduous undertaking.

- The Body as Philosophical Instrument: The hardships of pilgrimage—blistered feet, extreme weather, scant food—were a form of *tapas* (austerity) that dismantled bodily arrogance (*deha-abhimāna*). This physical struggle mirrored the philosophical struggle to transcend identification with the material self. Reaching the temple was not just arrival at a place, but the experiential realization of a goal (*puruṣārtha*), making abstract concepts like *mokṣa* tangible.
- Dissolution of Social Hierarchy: On pilgrimage routes and in crowded temple towns, conventional social identities were often suspended. The shared goal and shared hardship fostered a sense of unity that mirrored the theological concept of the equality of souls before God. The collective singing of pilgrims walking to Pandharpur or Tirupati was a moving school of *bhakti* philosophy, where the path itself was the teacher.

##### (6) The Ecosystem of Understanding:

In the *bhakti* tradition, philosophical understanding emerged from an integrated ecosystem of temple space, festival time, and communal musical performance, ensuring that doctrine was not merely believed but physically and emotionally inhabited.

By embedding complex ideas in total ritual environments, this model made philosophy experiential rather than textual, so that surrender (*prapatti*) was learned through awe, sound, movement, and collective devotion rather than through books alone.

## 8. NARRATIVE, MUSIC, AND EMBODIED THEOLOGY :

This note examines the sophisticated systems of musical storytelling in South Indian performance traditions—including *Bhāgavata Mela*, *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*, *Yakṣagāna*, and the dance repertoire of *Bharatanatyam*—as vehicles for an integrated, embodied theology. It argues that these forms did not merely illustrate religious narratives but constituted a complete epistemological and soteriological pathway. Through the synergistic fusion of literary text (*sāhitya*), melodic mode (*rāga*), rhythmic cycle (*tāla*), and stylized gesture (*abhinaya*), performers and audiences engaged in a direct, multi-sensory experience of philosophical truths [14-24]. This analysis focuses on how these traditions used narrative as a scaffold for emotional and metaphysical exploration, transforming myth into a somatic curriculum on the nature of reality, the self, and the divine.

##### (1) Performance as *Sādhana* (Spiritual Practice):

In the pre-colonial and early modern performative cultures of South India, the boundary between artistic presentation and religious ritual was porous. A night-long *Bhāgavata Mela* performance in a Tamil village temple, or a *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* enactment of a Sanskrit drama in a Kerala *kūttambalam*, was understood as a communal sacred event (*mahotsava*). These were not entertainments about theology; they were, in their very structure and execution, theology in action. The performance was a *sādhana*, a means of spiritual attainment, for both the performer—who underwent rigorous purification—and the audience (*sabhā*), who participated through disciplined witnessing (*darśana*). The narrative provided the recognizable framework, while music and embodiment supplied the transformative medium for philosophical insight.

##### (2) Narrative as Philosophical Scaffold: The *Itihāsa-Purāṇa* Corpus:

The stories drawn from the *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Mahābhārata*, and *Purāṇas* were not chosen merely for their dramatic potential. They served as essential philosophical allegories, their characters embodying specific ontological and ethical principles.

- Archetypes and *Dharma*: The character of Rāma was the embodied ideal of *rājadharmā* and personal sacrifice. Duryodhana's narrative arc illustrated the fatal consequences

of *lobha* (greed) and *dambha* (arrogance). Draupadi's humiliation and vindication explored the nature of divine grace in the face of *adharma*. By watching these stories unfold, the audience did not simply follow a plot; they witnessed a dramatized *dharmaśāstra* (treatise on righteousness). The familiarity of the plot allowed attention to shift from "what happens" to "what it means," enabling deep philosophical contemplation (*manana*) within a known framework.

- Epic as a Mirror for Inner Conflict: The *Mahābhārata*, in particular, was understood as an internal landscape. The war of Kurukṣetra was staged not just as a historical battle but as the eternal war within the human psyche between the forces of light (*Pāṇḍavas*, often aligned with *devas*) and darkness (*Kauravas*, aligned with *āsuras*). A *Yakṣagāna* performance of a *Bhagavadgītā* episode, with its vigorous dance and resonant musical recitation, made Arjuna's ethical crisis (*viśāda*) and Kṛṣṇa's theophany an immediate, visceral experience. The philosophical dialogue (*saṃvāda*) was lifted from page to pulsating life, its teachings absorbed through the body and emotions before being processed by the intellect.

### (3) Music as the Atmospheric and Emotional Carrier of Doctrine:

Music in these traditions was not background accompaniment but the primary carrier of *bhāva* (emotion) and *rasa* (aesthetic flavor), which were themselves the gateways to metaphysical understanding.

- *Rāga* as Ontological Environment: Each *rāga* established a specific cosmological and emotional atmosphere. In a *Bhāgavata Mela* play like "*Prahlāda Charitram*," the invocation might use a solemn *rāga* like Bhairavī to establish the majesty and terror of Hiranyakaśipu's rule (*aiśvarya*). Prahlāda's unwavering devotion might be sung in a serene, steadfast *rāga* like Madhyamavati or Śrī. The demon's rage could be rendered in a fiery, asymmetric scale like Vijayanagari. The audience, even without technical knowledge, felt the shift in reality through the music. The *rāga* system thus sonically mapped the spiritual conflict between divine sovereignty and tyrannical ego.
- *Sāhitya* and *Svara*: The Marriage of Word and Tone: The musical setting (*dhātu*) of a lyrical line (*mātu*) was designed to amplify its theological weight. A line expressing surrender, like "*Śaraṇāgata Vatsala*" (O protector of those who seek refuge), would be given a melodic phrase (*saṅgati*) that descended gently, evoking the act of bowing down. A cry of *viraha* would be set to a soaring, unresolved phrase, physically manifesting the ache of separation. This synergy ensured the philosophical message was not just heard but felt kinesthetically through the contour of the melody.
- *Tāla* as Cosmic Order and Dramatic Time: The rhythmic cycle (*tāla*) provided the temporal architecture. Its unwavering, cyclical return mirrored the cosmic order (*ṛta*) and the inevitable workings of *karma*. Breaks in the cycle (*tāla bheda*) or dramatic pauses (*virāma*) could signal divine intervention, a shift in consciousness, or the suspension of ordinary time—as in the moment of Kṛṣṇa revealing his *viśvarūpa* (cosmic form). The audience's subconscious tracking of the *tāla* grounded them in ordered reality, making its deliberate disruption a powerful theological device.

### (4) Embodiment: *Abhinaya* as the Somatic Realization of Truth;

The performer's body, through the intricate language of *abhinaya* (expressional acting), became the site where narrative and philosophy were made flesh.

- *Aṅgika* (Physical) and *Sāttvika* (Involuntary) *Abhinaya*: The stylized hand gestures (*hastamudrā*), facial expressions (*mukha abhinaya*), and stances conveyed literal narrative and symbolic meaning. A single gesture for "Kṛṣṇa" (*murali hasta*—flute-holding) could instantly invoke the entire theology of God as the divine cowherd whose call draws the soul. More profoundly, the cultivation of *sāttvika abhinaya*—the involuntary physiological responses like horripilation, trembling, or tears—was considered the highest achievement. When a performer playing Rādhā truly manifested the physical symptoms of separation, it was not acting but a ritualized manifestation of the *bhāva*, offering the audience a direct vision (*darśana*) of the emotional truth underlying the philosophy of *viraha*.

- The Performer as a Yogic Instrument: The training of the performer involved immense physical and mental discipline, akin to *yoga*. Through this discipline, the performer's individual identity was meant to temporarily dissolve, allowing them to become a clear vessel (*nimiṭa mātra*) for the archetype they were portraying. In becoming Prahlāda, the performer embodied the state of *ekāntika bhakti* (exclusive devotion). The audience's witnessing was thus not of an individual acting, but of the philosophical principle itself made temporarily visible and audible. This transformed the performance into a *yajña* (sacrifice), where the offering was the performer's own self in service of the story's truth.

##### (5) The Integrated Experience: A Case Study of the *Gīta-Govinda* in Performance:

Jayadeva's 12th-century Sanskrit poem *Gīta-Govinda*, set to music and dance, exemplifies this integrated theology. Its narrative of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa's separation and reunion is a supreme allegory for the soul's relationship with the divine.

- Narrative Level: The cycle of longing, search, despair, and ecstatic union maps the *bhakti* path from restless seeking (*jijñāsa*) to unitive experience (*samyoga*).
- Musical Level: Its prescribed *rāgas* and *tālas* (like the sensuous *rāga* Gujjari for Rādhā's lament) create an overwhelmingly emotional atmosphere that bypasses intellectual resistance.
- Embodiment Level: A *Bharatanatyam* or *Odissi* dancer performing an *ashtapadi* uses *abhinaya* to externalize Rādhā's inner turmoil—her jealousy (*īṛṣyā*), her pride (*māna*), her ultimate surrender. The dancer's body becomes a map of the soul's transformation.

For the audience, the experience is holistic. They do not analyze the doctrine of divine love (*madhura-bhāva*); they are immersed in its sensory and emotional reality. The philosophical teaching—that God is the ultimate beloved whose grace is obtained through passionate, single-minded longing—is transmitted not as a proposition, but as a lived, communal feeling.

##### (6) The Body as a Text, Performance as Philosophy:

The narrative-musical-embodied traditions of South India challenge text-centric histories of philosophy by showing that profound theological understanding emerged through collective performance rather than silent study.

In this paradigm, the human body became the primary text, and philosophical truth was known through embodied experience—felt in sound, movement, and shared emotional resonance rather than confined to language alone.

## 9. BHAKTI- SINGULAR ALTERNATIVE :

Annamacharya, Tirumalamma, Kshetrappa, Ramadasu, and Narayana Teertha's works serve as proof that devotion, in this case *bhakti*, was the singular alternative to philosophy and one of the most effective means of expression. The Carnatic Trinity created the first systematic grammar of concerts. Before that, the Telugu devotional music and its philosophers created the very first and the best South Indian Devotional Music. Their works also justified and validated the use of emotion to philosophically know the entity that one is devoted to or used to shift their gaze to, or even to create a longing or surrender before them, and certainly not just as a weak sentiment [4-7].

With this, the Telugu Devotional Philosophers also created the first of many philosophies in Indian History. The works of these first philosophers composed the Indian History in a way that allowed freedom of verse, voice, and music, even movement.

This philosophy was as old as the Indian History But was forgotten with the arrival of post British Rule Indian Systems. The Indian Knowledge Systems of the present and the democratization of philosophy are rooted in the Telugu Devotional Music before the Trinity. The thought of the Devotional Telugu Music may inspire and remind us of the importance of philosophy that can be sung, remembered, and lived.

## 10. CONCLUSION :

The devotional music that precedes the Carnatic Trinity pays attention to the interweaving of the philosophical, the affective, and the quotidian in devotional practice. To describe the works of

Annamacharya, Tirumalamma, Kshetrappa, Ramadasu, and Narayana Teertha as simply expressions of faith would be to overlook the theological depth and vernacular sophistication of these works. They suggest that philosophy in the Indian milieu need not be restricted to the written word; it can as well be sung and performed.

The idea of the divine as sovereign, and the articulation of human dependence, self-regulation, and the relational right to be emotionally close to the divine are some of the philosophical insights articulated through the music and the lyrics. In this context, it is important to note that the absence of vernacular literary ornamentation and the presence of *nāyikā-bhāva* and *viraha* as metaphysical concepts, speak of the reconfigured soul-divine relationship. The emphasis on temple performance as an expression of the music of the community ensures that the concepts articulated are not abstract, but rather lived experiences that are remembered and handed down.

This study reframes pre-Trinity Telugu devotional music as an intellectual tradition that helped shape later Carnatic classicism by repositioning *bhakti* as a philosophy. The Carnatic Trinity refined musical grammar, while the philosophy of vernacular theology, emotional realism, and devotional ethics was already in place. Identifying this continuity offers a broader and more constructive appreciation of the Indian philosophical tradition, which calls attention to the non-written, oral, musical, and performative traditions, along with the text-based traditions of the *śāstra*. In the current re-evaluation of Indian Knowledge Systems, Telugu *bhakti* music reminds us that philosophy can be lived and sung, even before a formal system is established.

The South Indian musical storytelling traditions teach us something important. Philosophy, at its most alive, is not an idea but a body and a people. In these performative traditions, where narrative, *rāga*, *tāla*, and *abhinaya* are intertwined, are the full range of an epistemological system. They engaged the metaphysical in ways that made it more than an intellectual abstraction. It became a lived reality that could be known through the resonant body and the attuned, feeling heart.

The temple theatre and village square served as spaces for the enactment of epic archetypes and devotional lyrics. Unencumbered by textual literacy, the audience received the “direct” transmissions of the intricate doctrines of *dharma*, *bhakti*, and *mokṣa*. Diligent performers and the witnessing audience created a *sādhana* space to cooperatively enact a participative understanding as the audience received the teachings.

This legacy exemplifies the most profound intuition about the self and the Divine—it has always been about the body. It has been, and continues to be, the gooseflesh of the audience and the perfected gesture of the dancer, and the collective breath of the community, that unifies them through the story, song, and sacred sight. Knowledge has always been more than a scholar's mind. It was, and is, the devotee.

Pre-Trinity Telugu *Bhakti* compositions were not merely devotional outpourings but constituted a vernacular philosophical tradition of remarkable sophistication. Poets like Annamayya and Ramadasu translated metaphysical categories — divine immanence, *śaraṇāgati*, and *nāma-siddhi* — into lived, lyrical theology accessible beyond Sanskrit's ritual boundaries. This democratisation of philosophical inquiry through Telugu verse laid the essential conceptual and affective groundwork upon which the Trinity would later build.

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