
Ambi Dikshitar: Composer and Teacher of Karnatak Music in the 19th Century

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ABSTRACT

Ambi Dikshitar (1863-1936) a great musician, vainika and a composer, belonged to the lineage of Sri Muthuswamy Dikshitar, one of the trinities of Karnataka music, the others being Thyagaraja and Shyama sastry. He was the son of Subbarama Dikshitar, the grandnephew of Muthuswamy Dikshitar.

The objectives of the research are (1) To bring out the *compositions* of Ambi Dikshitar and study the ragas, raga sanchāris, and structural aspects of compositions vis-à-vis his predecessors. (2) To examine Ambi Dikshitar's *contribution* in propagating the compositions of his Guru-Parampara. The study explores his teaching methods, based on *Pratama Abhyāsa Pustakamu* and also his role in bringing out more kritis of Muthuswamy Dikshitar in addition to those found in *Sangeetha Sampradāya Pradarshini*. (both books written by Subbarama Dikshitar).

The research is based on the qualitative approaches to analyze data from secondary sources. The study involves examining audio, video, textual materials, and oral traditions. The study highlights the deep influence of Ambi Dikshitar's musical lineage in his compositions and showcases his contributions in bringing to light the innumerable kritis of Muthuswamy Dikshitar through his Sishyās who were instrumental in relocating their Guru from Ettayapuram to Madras which was the main centre of Karnataka music. The two books mentioned earlier were propagated due to the efforts of Ambi Dikshitar with the help of his disciples. His pedagogical approach is reflected in some of the publications of his chief sishyas like A. Ananthakrishna Iyer, A. Sundaram Iyer and Vedānta Bhagavatar. These methods facilitated a clear understanding of kriti rendition techniques, the defining characteristics (*lakshanās*) of ragas, and the nuances of musical interpretation. The study demonstrates how Ambi Dikshitar ensured the seamless preservation and propagation of his parampara's musical heritage.

Key words: Ambi Dikshitar, Karnataka Music, 19th Century, Composer, Shishya Parampara

INTRODUCTION

Muthuswamy Dikshitar, great granduncle of Ambi Dikshitar, was born to Ramaswamy Dikshitar and Subbalakshmi Ammal in 1775 at Tiruvarur, in Tamil Nadu. He was an enlightened soul blessed by Lord Subramanya. He was a great vaggeyakara who extolled the Devi, Devatās, Shivā, Hari, the Navagrahās and the holy rivers through kritis, in various ragas and talas. His mudra is GURUGUHA. He was a *Vainikā gāyaka*, having obtained a divine Veena from the Ganges river while in Benaras. He employed various gamakas that enriched the kritis. He has composed vilamba kala kritis, madhyamakala kritis, kritis with Pallavi and Samashti charanas and chittaswarams. The kritis had Rāga mudra and apt usage of Swarāksharams, which lend uniqueness to his kritis. His adaptations of Western tunes into Karnataka music as *Notuswarams* are noteworthy. He is also credited with a number of Vibhakti kritis like Kamalāmba, Abhayamba Navāvarnams, Navagraha kritis in Sulādi sapta talās, and many other group kritis and rāgamalikas. He used Sanskrit as the medium of compositions and some in *Manipravāla*, meaning compositions using two or more languages.

Subbarama Dikshitar, grand nephew of Muthuswamy Dikshitar belonged to this illustrious family of musicians. It is important to know that it was Subbarama Dikshitar who brought out the kritis of Muthuswamy Dikshitar through the publication “Sangeetha Sampradāya Pradarshini” in Telugu in the year 1904. This book is important as it not only contains a number of kritis with notations and but also brings out the lakshanās of rāgas of the Venkatamakhi’s Ragānga rāgas by way of slokas, lakshiya gitās, rāga sanchāris, chitta tānas and gamakas which are explained well and are denoted with symbols.

He further brought out a book called “Prathama Abhyasa Pustaka” in the year 1905 which is meant for beginners wanting to learn Karnatak music. This is a very useful book for vocal and veena students to know the techniques of playing the instrument, playing tanam, simple geetams, varnams kritis, and to understand notations. This book helps to appreciate the Sangeetha Sampradāya Pradarshini book better.

Subbarama Dikshitar was a vainika and a great composer himself. His son, **Muthuswamy**, also known as **Ambi Dikshitar**, was born in 1863. He was well versed in samskrutam, telugu and tamil and learnt the lakshana and lakshyās of music from his father. He was a great musician, and a srividya upāsaka and became the court musician of Ettayapuram samasthānam after his father’s demise in 1906. He carried on the propagation of Dikshitar kritis started by his father. Given below in Fig 1, is the family tree of Dikshitar.

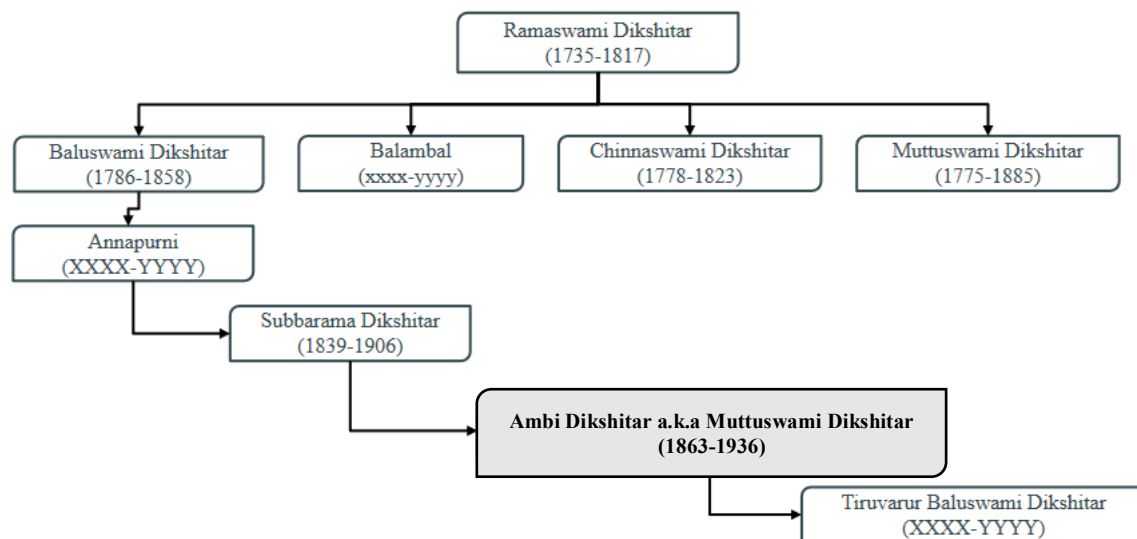


Fig 1: Dikshitar Family Tree

LITERATURE SURVEY

A thorough study was undertaken to know about the family members and sishyas of Dikshitar to know about the lineage and their contribution to music. There are many articles that talk about the lineage and greatness of the Parampara. We do not find any publication by Ambi Dikshitar himself. He has written foreword in a book titled ‘Kamalamba Navavaranam’ by Kallidakurichi Vedanta Bhagavatar and Kallidaikuruchi A. Ananthakrishna Iyer in 1934. In the foreword Ambi Dikshitar has acknowledged the task undertaken by his Sishyas who are eminent musicians themselves and their untiring efforts to bring out the aforesaid publication. ‘In Dikshitar family, all followed the classical Karnataka system as expounded by the great Venkatamakhi’, as quoted by T.S. Ramakrishnan. Some details about Ambi Dikshitar are given in the articles written by T.S. Ramakrishnan (Ramakrishnan, Sept-1975). In the research study, “Sanskrit compositions of Sishya Parampara” of Muthuswamy Dikshitar,” (Ravi, 2020) all the compositions of Ambi Dikshitar are listed and some of it taken up for analysis. It gives an idea of the compositions made by him. In the article, “Dikshitar Parampara” the lineage is given in detail although the compositions of theirs is not discussed. (R. Vedavalli, March 2013). In the journal of Music Academy, commemorating the bi-centenary year of Muthuswamy Dikshitar many authors have written about the compositions and sishya Parampara of Dikshitar and mentions about many of them being composers including Ambi Dikshitar. (Multiple, 1976)

In the Monologue of V. Raghavan (Raghavan) it is mentioned that Ambi Dikshitar relocated to Madras and propagated Dikshitar compositions along with his disciples including T.L. Venkataraman. The methods of his teaching and the school of music that he established for this purpose is seen in the books brought out only by his chief sishyas A. Ananthakrishna Iyer and A. Sundaram Iyer. We get to know about Ambi

Dikshitar as a teacher in the writings of A. Anantha krishna Iyer in the journal JYOTHI for which he was the chief editor of music section brought out by him from Calcutta in 1943. The teaching methods of Ambi Dikshitar are also reflected in the book written by Vedanta Bhagavata where he has given notations for singing Ragam, Tanam and Pallavi.

This study is based on interviews with some of the sishyas who learnt directly from Ambi Dikshitar and his sishyas. The books published by A. Sundaram Iyer, “Sri Dikshita Kirtana Mala” contains Ambi Dikshitar’s compositions with notation. The analysis of compositions is based on this notation.

METHODOLOGY

Analysis of Ambi Dikshitar's compositions are done by qualitative methods.

His pedagogy that contributed to propagating the compositions of his Guru Parampara is studied with reference to “Prathama Abhyasa Pustakamu”, “Sangeetha Sampradāya Pradarshini” and from books published by his disciples.

His compositions will be analysed from secondary sources like books and recordings. Out of the 15 compositions available, some compositions have been taken for study.

Table 1: List of Compositions

| Sr No. | Kṛiti | Raga | Tala |
|--------|----------------------------|----------------|-------------|
| 1 | Gananāthaya | Gowla | Adi |
| 2 | Ganapathi Sodharam | Arabi | Adi |
| 3 | Kapāliswaram (Tāna Varnam) | Mohanam | Adi |
| 4 | Kalpāgāmbike | Todi | Rupakam |
| 5 | Kāmākshi | Gamakakriya | Rupakam |
| 6 | Brindāvana Gopāla | Yamuna Kalyani | Rupakam |
| 7 | Maheshwari | Kāśīrāmākriya | Rupakam |
| 8 | Māthrubhōotēswarā | Kēdāram | Adi |
| 9 | Mānikyavalli | Vārāli | Adi |
| 10 | Vandesādha | Srīanjani | Kanda Chapu |
| 11 | Varasiddhi Vināyakam | Chālanāta | Rupakam |

| | | | |
|----|------------------------|-----------------|---------|
| 12 | Śrī Śālīvātīsa Nāyikē | Śankarabharanam | Rupakam |
| 13 | Śrī Mēenākshi | Kālyāni | Adi |
| 14 | Śrī Sāraswathi | Dēvakriyā | Adi |
| 15 | Maṅgalam Jaya Mangalam | Vasanthā | Adi |

1. Kapāliswaram – Mohanam - Varnam (Tana):

The varnam Kapāliswaram in Mohana rāga starts with swaras G and P (Ka and Pa) in Pallavi. In the charanam again Swaraksharam is used as in Kapala with G and P. The varnam has beautiful Etthugade swaras with lots of patterns. This varnam is composed on Kapaliswarar and Karpagambike of Mylapore where Ambi Dikshitar was living and calls it Mayurapuri (kshetra mudra) and his mudra is Guruguha. Interestingly, Kapali, a varnam in Mohana raga composed by Papanāsam Sivan on the same deity also starts with Swarakshara G and P for Kāpāli. This has been popularized by one of his chief disciple, D.K. Pattammal.

2. Kāmākshi – Gamakakriya - Kriti

Kāmākshi in the rāga Gamakakriya also starts with swaraskasharam G and M for Kāmākshi, just like, Dikshitar kriti Kāmākshi in Sumadyuthi rāgam. The krithi has a Pallavi, samashti charanam, and Chittaswara. It is on the deity in Tiruvarur, hence, the kshetra mudra is indicated in the word, “Sripuravasa Niranjani”. One other disciple of Ambi Dikshitar, Vedānta Bhāgavatar, has composed a varnam on Goddess Meenākshi of Madurai in Raga Gamakakriya.

3. Brindāvana Gopala – Yamuna Kalyani - Kriti

Brindāvana Gopala in raga Yamunakalyani is set to a slow vilambit tempo like Dhrupad style and the raga suits the lyrics and tempo. It has been used as a bhashanga raga with Suddha and prati madhyamas. Suddha Madhyama is seen in the descending phrases like GM`RS. There are many prāsas like *Mandahasa vadana*, *Mandaragiri dhara*, *muralidhara* in this song. The word *Brinda* and *Manda*, *Giridhara* and *Muralidhara* also rhyme.

These words and the general tune seem to be similar to the Dikshitar kriti, Nandagopala in the same rāga. The influence of his guru Parampara is seen.

4. Varasiddhi Vinayakam – Chala Natai – Kriti

The kriti Varasiddhi Vinakayam describes lord Vinayaka or Ganesha and it is set in the raga Chala Natai. Interestingly, in this kriti, we see the prayoga S R G M P N S – S N P M G R S. The usage of Dhaivata is not seen as in P D N S.

5. Maheshwari – Kashiramakriya – Kriti

This Kriti Maheshwari is in raga Kashirāmakriya and set to Rupaka Thala. The Prayoga S G R G M P D N S is used and can be seen in the chittaswaram. Muthuswami Dikshitar and Subbarama Dikshitar have composed in this raga.

CHITTASWARA - His kritis have chittaswara with patterns and mukthaya endings adorning them. The chittaswara in the Devakriya kriti, Sri Saraswathi has progression of swaras like:

m p d, r m p d, s r m p d, d s r m p d

and the ending in swaras of 9 like:

s, r, m r s d, | d, s, r s d p, | p, d, s d p m, |

are interesting.

The Maheshwari Kriti in Kashiramakriya has the following chittaswaram:

p, pmgr-gmpmgr | snsrg,-sgrgm | g, mp-gmpd-nsrg | mgrsndp-gmpdn ||

We see the prayoga of S G R G in multiple place of this chittaswaram

PRASA – The composer has used Dwitiyakshara prasa as in:

Maheshwari | Mahadeva | Mahishasura |

(Kriti Maheshwari in Raga – Kasiramakriya)

He has also used Antya parasa as in:

Matrubhuteswara | Jagatprasiddeswara | Kunthalambamanohara |

(Kriti - Matrubhuteswara in Raga - Kedara)

In the kriti ShaalivaTiSa Nayike, there are lot of rhyming words like:

Roopini Rasaroopini, Mohini and Vaasini

Interestingly we see the letter “Sha” used throughout the kriti in words like **Shalivateesha** nayike, **Shankari** Tripureshi, **Shiva Shakthyaikya** Roopini, **Shringara** Rasa Roopini, **Shiva Kamesha** Mohini, **Sri** Guruguha **Vishvasini** and is set to Raga **Shankarabharanam**

KSHETRA MUDRA

- Shālivatipuri (Tirunelveli)
- Madurapuri (Madurai)
- Kumbesvara (Kumbakonam)
- Mayurapuri (Mylapore)
- Sripuravāsa (Tiruvarur)
- Trisiragiri (Tiruchirapalli)
- Vaidyapuri (Vaitheeswaran Koil)

RAGA MUDRA

He has brought the Raga Mudra as seen in the kriti, Sri Meenakshi in the line Vāni **Kalyāni** set in **Kalyāni** raga. Another example can be seen in the kriti Manikyavalli in Varāli Raga where the raga mudra can be found in “Veena Pani **Varali** veni”.

He has travelled to many temples in South India and composed on different deities. There is also a Mangalam (Mangalam Jaya Mangalam) in raga vasantha, which is janya of 15th mela Mayamalavagowla and is a bhashanga raga with chatusruthi Dhaivatam, as in the Venkatamakhi tradition. The compositions are in Sanskrit. Ambi Dikshitar being a vainika has used a lot of gamak ās like Kampita, Jāru, vali.

Analysis of his compositions shows the following:

1. The language used is Samskrutam like Muthuswamy Dikshitar
2. He has followed the Ragānga raga tradition of Venkatamakhi.
3. Some ragas like Gamagakriya, Kāsiramakriya, having the same name as mentioned in Raānga raga tradition, Vasantha being used as janya of 15th Mela, and so on.
4. The composer has used Kshetra mudra and names of deities and their consorts, and his own mudra GURUGUHA, which is similar to Muthusway Dikshitar and this many a times has misled musicians to ascertain the authorship of kritis .
5. He has used Pallavi Samashti charanam with Madhyama kala with chittaswaram. Some songs have Pallavi, anupallavi and charanam format.

6. He has composed on ghana ragas like Naatai, Arabhi, Varali, Gowlai but not in Sri Raga. He also has composed in Hindustani ragas like Yamuna kalyani.
8. He has used shabda alamkaras, yamakas and gamakas suitable for playing the veena
9. He has not composed any Ragamalika.
10. They are simple devotional kritis.

AMBI DIKSHITAR AS A TEACHER

Ambi Dikshitar was an excellent teacher. His contribution in the field of music is the transmission of Dikshitar kritis and others that he had learnt. A. Ananthakrishna Iyer a young lad of 16 years was yearning to learn music. By chance he met Ammalu ammal the eldest daughter of Ambi Dikshitar who brought him to her father at Ettayapuram and thus began his journey into music through many years of gurukulavāsam. Having learnt a lot of kritis he persuaded his Guru to relocate to Chennai so that the music can be propagated far and wide through his shishyas and musicians.

At the same time, a chance meeting with T. L. Venkataraman in the Kovilpatti station was perhaps a turning point for Ambi Dikshitar as TLV persuaded him to relocate to Chennai in the year 1919. T.L. Venkataraman had a lot of regard for Dikshitar's kritis, and he also learnt a lot under him. Once settled in Chennai, Ambi Dikshitar established a music school called, "Dikshita Kala salai" with the help of his chief sishya A. Anantha krishna Iyer. Many eminent musicians had an opportunity to learn from him.

“ Dr.V. Raghavan, Head of the Department of Sanskrit, University of Madras and Secretary, The Music Academy, Madras combined their efforts of spreading Dikshitar's kritis and passed on their repertoire to several musicians. Thus, the Dikshitar movement grew to great proportions, the seed being sown by Ambi Dikshitar”. (Ravi, 2020)

Ambi Dikshitar brought out a lot of kritis from manuscripts which were not published in Sangeetha Sampradaya Pradarshini by his father, Subbarama Dikshitar. “ Ananthakrishna Iyer along with his younger brother A. Sundaram Iyer made copies of Dikshitar's kritis from the manuscripts which were in the possession of Ambi Dishitar and later on published them .” (Ravi, 2020)

List of disciples:

1. Kallidaikuruchi A Anantakrishna Iyer

2. Kallidaikuruchi A Sundaram Iyer
3. T. L. Venkataraman Iyer
4. Kallidaikuruchi Vedanta Bhagavatar
5. Kallidaikuruchi Ramalinga Bhagavatar
6. D.K. Patammal

It is important to know about the teaching methods of Ambi Dikshitar through his Sishyas. According to D.K. Pattammal, her guru would ask her to sing a phrase in a raga and he would play the phrase on the veena to get the right gamaka. So teaching vocal through veena is one method followed by him. This is said by D K Pattammal in an interview published by Vaak foundation.

Interviews with disciples and family members of A. Ananthakrishna Iyer revealed a lot of information about teaching methods . These were followed by A. Ananthakrishna Iyer himself when he was teaching. These are given below:

Teaching methods of A. Ananthakrishna Iyer:

1. Raga Sanchara – He has composed around 15 raga sancharas which are in simple ragas like Mohanam and Malahari but also in rare ragas like Megharanji and Manirangu.
2. Shlokas in different tunes – He has tuned Ganesha shloka, Subramanya Shloka, Annapoorna Ashtakam in Ragamalika to teach students.
3. Akaaram Practice – To practice in 3 octaves using different vowels like a – e – I – o – u
4. Prabandams that are composed in four octaves are taught and Chitta Tanams for Veena
5. Practice in different sthayis in Veena
6. Importance of Sahityam – emphasis on the pronunciation of the lyrics and knowing the language for the meaning of the lyrics .
7. Sangeetha Bala Bodhini – This is a very useful book for students of music published by A. Ananthakrishna Iyer from Calcutta. It contains lot of information about music. It also contains information on history of music. It contains swaravalis, Raga Sancharams, Geethams, Lakshana Geethams, Prabandams of Ramaswamy Dikshitar, Rare Varnams and kritis.
8. He has published a lot of books containing Dikshitar Kritis with notations, word-to-word meanings in Sanskrit and Tamil.
9. Guru-Shishya Samvada – As editor of the journal, JYOTHI, a section called Guru-Shishya Samvada was introduced where the guru clarifies the doubts of the shishyas regarding various aspects of Carnatic music in the form of questions and answers.

The above teaching methodologies of A. Ananthakrishna Iyer shed light on the close resemblance between his approach to music instruction and that of his guru, Ambi Dikshitar. They highlight how

Ananthakrishna Iyer carefully adopted and continued the pedagogical principles passed down by his teacher. This includes a strong emphasis on tradition, precision in musical rendition, and a deep respect for lyrical and cultural context. His methods clearly reflect the lasting influence of Ambi Dikshitar's disciplined and holistic style of teaching. The above teaching methodologies of A. Ananthakrishna Iyer throw a light on the similarity of the teaching methods of his guru Ambi Dikshitar.

Similarly, the other disciples of Ambi Dikshitar like A. Sundaram Iyer and Vedantha Bhagavathar have also published books for students by employing similar teaching methodologies following the footsteps of their guru Ambi Dikshitar. By adopting these methods, they contributed to the continuity and dissemination of their guru's pedagogical legacy.

ANALYSIS, RESULTS & DISCUSSION

1. Ambi Dikshitar spread music through his disciples to ensure its continuity for posterity.
2. He followed the publications of Subbarama Dikshitar, namely the *Sangita Sampradaya Pradarshini* (SSP) and *Pratama Abhyasa Pustakamu*.
3. He taught the nuances of gamakas through the veena.
4. He gave importance to lyrics while singing and playing.
5. He laid a strong foundation for music by having students practise swara excersises, Gitams in different octaves, play raga sancharis, and perform Chitta tanams on the veena.
6. He emphasized the need to learn languages in order to render the songs correctly.
7. He provided the meaning of the songs before teaching them.
8. He encouraged his sishyas to celebrate Venkatamakhi Day and Muthuswamy Dikshitar Day as a mark of reverence.

CONCLUSION

Ambi Dikshitar played a significant role as a bridge between theoretical knowledge and practical application by transmitting the subtle nuances of ragas and kritis to his disciples through the oral tradition. He also encouraged his disciples to bring out publications, thereby ensuring that the knowledge was documented and preserved. The fact that he agreed to move out of Ettayapuram and settle in Madras solely with the aim of propagating kritis is truly remarkable and demonstrates his dedication to the cause of music. The popularisation of many unpublished kritis, sourced from manuscripts and brought to light by his capable disciples through the publication of books, is highly commendable, as it has contributed to preserving these compositions for future generations. His sishya paramparas have spread widely, and they continue to uphold and practise the musical traditions of the Dikshitar parampara even today. Though Ambi

Dikshitar's own compositions are few in number, they reflect the musical style of his predecessors adhering to the Venkatamakhi tradition.

FUTURE SCOPE

Ambi Dikshitar is one of the lesser-known composers in his family. His Kritis are simple and meaningful. These can be taught and sung by musicians and popularize them. Also he laid emphasis on the raganga ragas of Venkatamakhi which can be adhered to while rendering Dikshitar kritis. The teaching methods can also be implemented as much as possible for the benefit of the students.

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