

Varṇa-s composed on Dēvi by Cuddalore M Subramaniam

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Abstract

Carnatic music, one of the world's oldest and most sophisticated classical traditions, integrates spirituality, poetic lyricism, and technical mastery. At the heart of its repertoire lies the varṇa, a compositional form that combines melodic beauty, rhythmic intricacy, and pedagogical value, serving as both a training piece and a concert staple. This paper examines the varṇa-s of Cuddalore M. Subramaniam (20th century), an eminent vocalist, and a prolific composer from Tamil Nadu. Composing more than 600 compositions, including kṛti-s in all 72 mēḷakarta rāga-s, varṇa-s, tillāna-s, and a unique set of Śrī Rājarājeśvarī Pañcaratna, Subramaniam occupies a significant place in the lineage of modern carnatic composers.

Focusing on three representative varṇa-s dedicated to Dēvi—Dayajūḍavamma Śrī rāga, triśra aṭa tāḷa, Dēvi Mīnalōcani Jaganmōhini, ādi tāḷa, and Ninnē Namminānu Gīrvāṇi, Kīravāṇi, ādi tāḷa this study adopts a qualitative and analytical methodology. The compositions are analyzed across various parameters, including rāga lakṣaṇa, melodic sañcāra-s, rhythmic construction, prosodic alignment, and lyrical content. Findings highlight Subramaniam's stylistic hallmarks, swift octave transitions, seamless integration of svara with sāhitya, intricate yati patterns, and frequent use of janṭi and dāṭu prayōga-s.

The chosen varṇa-s portray Dēvi in her dual roles as supreme cosmic power and compassionate mother, weaving themes of surrender, divine protection, and grace into their musical fabric. Through this synthesis of technical brilliance and devotional intensity, Subramaniam's varṇa-s stand as both pedagogically valuable and spiritually elevating.

The study concludes that his contributions enrich the Carnatic repertoire by bridging tradition and innovation. They exemplify a holistic approach to composition where melody, rhythm, poetry, and bhakti converge. Future research may extend to comparative studies with other composers, thematic explorations of feminine divinity, and the development of digital archives to preserve his legacy for performers, scholars, and students alike.

Keywords: Carnatic music; Cuddalore M. Subramaniam; Varṇa; Dēvi compositions; Rāga–Tāḷa analysis; Prosody; Melodic sañcāra; 20th-century composers;

Introduction

Carnatic music boasts a vast and deeply rooted tradition that seamlessly weaves spirituality with melodic and rhythmic sophistication. Originating in South India, this classical music is revered not only for its artistic richness but also for its devotional foundation, where music becomes a medium of worship and spiritual expression. At its core, Carnatic music is structured around intricate rhythmic cycles and elaborate melodic frameworks, each carrying unique characteristics and emotional expressions. The compositions are predominantly devotional in nature, praising deities such as Vishnu, Shiva, Devi, Murugan, and various other gods and goddesses, thereby reinforcing the strong connection between music and bhakti. Beyond their spiritual dimension, Carnatic compositions are known for their artistic elegance, blending lyrical poetry, musical grammar, and emotional appeal into a unified form of expression.

The compositional framework of Carnatic music is both diverse and sophisticated. Among the most prominent forms are the *kṛti* or *kīrtana*, the *varṇa*, and the *tillāna*, each serving a unique role in both pedagogy and performance. The *kṛti*, often regarded as the backbone of Carnatic concerts, combines intricate melodic passages with devotional lyrics, offering performers scope for both structured presentation and improvisation. The *varṇa* serves as a foundational compositional type, emphasizing both melodic and rhythmic aspects, and is frequently employed as a training piece as well as a concert opener. *Tillānas* are known for their rhythmic brilliance and lively syllables, often used as concluding items in performances. Together, these forms represent the balance between technical rigor and devotional expression that defines Carnatic music.

The tradition of Carnatic composition has been shaped by a rich lineage of composers, beginning with early poet-saints and evolving through centuries of refinement. The contributions of great composers, from the medieval period to the modern era, have laid a foundation that continues to influence musical practice across generations. From the works of the Trinity—Tyāgarāja, Muttusvāmi Dīkṣitar, and Śyāma Śāstri—to numerous post-Trinity composers, the tradition has not only preserved its core values but has also expanded in scope, embracing new *rāgas*, lyrical themes, and stylistic nuances. Over the centuries, Carnatic music has shown resilience and adaptability, sustaining its devotional essence while encouraging innovation, thus creating a continuum that links ancient practice with contemporary expression.

The twentieth century was particularly significant for Carnatic music, as it witnessed several composers who both upheld tradition and contributed fresh dimensions to the art. One such distinguished figure was Cuddalore M. Subramaniam, an accomplished vocalist, prolific composer, and dedicated educator hailing from Cuddalore in Tamil Nadu. His contributions are remarkable not only in terms of quantity but also in the breadth and depth of his musical imagination. These include more than 600

compositions, kṛti-s set in all 72 melakarta rāga-s, as well as varṇa-s, tillāna-s, and a unique set of Śrī Rājarājeśvarī Pañcaratna compositions. (Subramaniam, 1971)

His works reflect a mastery of rāga and tāla, lyrical refinement, and deep devotional spirit, making him a significant figure in the landscape of twentieth-century Carnatic music.

The present paper focuses specifically on the varṇa-s of Cuddalore M. Subramaniam, particularly those dedicated to Dēvi. These compositions are not only musically sophisticated but also thematically rich, portraying the Goddess in her many forms as a compassionate mother, a supreme cosmic force, and the ultimate bestower of grace. Through these works, the composer blends technical brilliance with devotional fervor, crafting pieces that are pedagogically valuable, aesthetically engaging, and spiritually elevating. By analyzing these varṇa-s, this study seeks to highlight both the unique stylistic elements of Subramaniam's compositional approach and the devotional depth that anchors his oeuvre within the broader Carnatic tradition.

Research Objective

To explore and analyze the Varṇa-s composed on dēvi by Cuddalore M Subramaniam.

Research scope

This study aims to explore the Varṇa-s composed on dēvi by Cuddalore M Subramaniam. A qualitative approach is used, taking three Dēvi Varṇa-s of Cuddalore M Subramaniam for analysis from one of the available works of the composer.

Methodology

Qualitative and Analytical

Data collection:

Primary:

- Available works of Cuddalore M Subramaniam.

Secondary:

- Books

The analysis of the selected compositions will be done based on the following parameters:

- Meaning and coordination of melody and lyrics
- Rāga lakṣana
- Melodic analysis – Rāga sancāra in the composition
- Prosody and Rhetorics in the composition

In this paper, an analytical study is conducted on three varṇas composed by Cuddalore M. Subramaniam. The selected varṇas have been chosen based on the diversity of their rāga and tāla structures:

- Kīravāṇi – a mēḷakarta rāga: "Ninne Namminānu Gīrvāṇi"
- Jaganmōhini – a janya rāga: "Dēvi Mīnalōcani"
- Śrī Rāga – set to trisra aṭa tāḷa: "Dayajūḍavamma"

Analysis

1

Dayajūḍavamma

Rāga – Śrī rāga

Tāḷa – Triśra aṭa tāḷa (2 laghu, 2 dhruta – 10 akṣara-s)

Pallavi :

|| Dayajūḍavamma dēvi ||

|| Nīnāpai palikeranamma ||

Anupallavi :

|| Māyē Pāṭaliśa Priya Nāya ||

|| ki Sadānanda mukha vilāsini ||

Carana :

|| Śrī Rāgava sōdari Śankari || (Subramaniam)

Meaning:

This passage is a heartfelt devotional plea to Dēvī, seeking her boundless mercy, compassion, and protective grace. It reflects the essence of complete surrender, where the devotee places full trust in the Goddess as the ultimate refuge in times of need. At the same time, it serves as a humble invocation, acknowledging her supreme divinity, her association with Lord Padmanābha, and her role as a nurturing mother. By addressing her as Pālālōcani—the one with compassionate, protective eyes—the devotee not only highlights her tender, maternal nature but also recognizes her as the embodiment of divine bliss and auspiciousness. The verse thus combines reverence and intimacy, portraying Dēvī as both the cosmic power that governs the universe and the ever-compassionate mother who responds to the cries of her devotees.

Ankita nāma – Anupallavi – “**Pāṭaliśa** Priya nāyaki”

Rāga mudra – Caraṇa – “Śrī rāgava sōdari śaṅkari”

Rāga lakṣaṇa:

S R2 M1 P N2 Ś

Ś N2 P M R2 G2 R2 S

Śaḍja, Catuśruti Riṣabha, Sādhāraṇa Gāndhāra, Śuddha Madhyama, Pañcama, Kaiṣiki Niṣāda

Janya of 22nd mēḷakarta Kharaharapriya rāga (Ramanathan)

Prosody:

Pallavi – Daya (Simha prāsa) – 1 pāda

Anupallavi – Māyē (Gaja prāsa) – 1 pāda

Svarākṣara:

Pallavi –

R G R S

Ra . . . (Sūcita)

Ṛ Ś N P M

Amma (Śuddha)

Anupallavi:

Ś N Ś Ṛ Ś Ṛ

Sa . . . dā . . (Śuddha)

Carana:

Ś, Ś N P

Śrī . . . (Śuddha)

Rāga sañcāra in the composition:

Pūrvāṅga

This varṇa is composed in triśra aṭa tāḷa. Each section of svara sāhitya (Pallavi, Anupallavi and Carana) begins after an eḍuppu of 4 akṣara-s.

In Pūrvāṅga, the Svara Sañcāras are explored across all three octaves—Maṇḍra, Madhya, and Tāra.

The sañcāra-s in the pūrvāṅga section exhibit sudden transitions between octaves from one phrase to another.

Pallavi – S, ;; N P | N M P R M P, M ||

Mma..dē | vi ||

Svara patterns :

1. MMR PPM
Kē
2. ŚRĠ ŅŚR ĠNŚ MPN RMP ||
Pā . . ṭa . . . lī . . śa . . . pri . . ||
3. ŚRŅŚ, PNMP,
4. PN, MPN, RMPN, - Gōpuccha yati
5. PNŚR MPNŚ RMPN

Jañti and Dāṭu svara-s:

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| 1. S, S Ṇ Ṗ Ṗ N,
Ḍa . . . va . . . | 1. N M Ṗ R M Ṗ, M
. vi |
| 2. MMR PPM
Kē | 2. Ś, Ś Ṇ Ṗ N, N Ṗ M Ḡ, Ḡ R S
Vi lā si |

Uttarāṅga

The Caraṇa and Ettugaḍe Svaras have a 4 Akṣara Eḍuppu.

Since the Caraṇa line begins with Ś, all Ettugaḍe Svaras conclude with N or Ṛ. Rāga sañcāra-s and svara patterns :

We observe a sudden transition between octaves, with rapid rises and falls. In the Ettugaḍe Svaras, the Sañcāras exhibit unexpected shifts from one Svara to another, lacking a gradual upward or downward progression of phrases.

1. ŚNŚ Ṗ, N ĠRĠ N, Ś
2. N, Ś Ṗ, N M, Ṗ
3. RS, RĠRŚN
4. Ś, Ś Ṗ, Ṗ R, R
5. Ś, N, Ṗ,; N, Ṗ, M,; Ṗ, M, R,;
6. ŚRŅŚ PNMP

Dēvi mīnalōcani

Rāga – Jaganmōhini

Tāḷa – Ādi

Pallavi :

|| Dēvi mīnalōcani mānpāhi ||

|| Tāraka brahma svarūpiṇi ||

Anupallavi :

|| Kavi hrudaya nivāsini ||

|| Pāṭalīpura nāyaki ||

Carana :

|| Jaganmōhini mātāṅgi || (Subramaniam)

Meaning

The varṇa is a devotional prayer to Goddess Mīnalochani, describing her divine attributes and requesting her protection. She is portrayed as the supreme reality (Brahman), the source of poetic inspiration, and the compassionate deity who grants liberation and grace to her devotees.

This composition is a devotional hymn praising Goddess Dēvi, Mīnakshi or another form of Pārvati. It highlights her divine essence, her association with wisdom and poetry, and her role as a compassionate protector.

Ankita nāma – Anupallavi – “Pāṭalīpura dāyaki”

Rāga mudra – Carana – “Jaganmōhini mātāṅgi”

Rāga lakṣana :

S G3 M1 P N3 Ś

Ś N3 P M1 G3 R1 S

Śaḍja, Śuddha Riṣabha, Antara Gāndhāra, Śuddha Madhyama, Pañcama, Kākali Niṣāda

Janya rāga of 15th Mēḷakarta - Māyāmālavagowḷa (Ramanathan)

Prosody:

Pallavi – Dēvi – Gaja prāsa – 1 pāda

Anupallavi – Kavi – Simha prāsa – 1 pāda

Svarākṣara:

1. M G M P,

Māmpā... (Śuddha)

Rāga sañcāra in the composition:

Pūrvāṅga:

The Pallavi section primarily stays within the Madhya Sthāyi, with minimal Maṇḍra Sthāyi Sañcāras, avoiding any Svaras in the higher octave. In contrast, the Anupallavi features Sañcāras that span across all three octaves. We can observe that each Āvartana in this composition begins either with Śaḍja or Pañcama.

Svara patterns:

1. Ś,Ś P,P S,S

We find certain phrases that make a sudden transition from Tāra Sthāyi to Madhya Sthāyi while maintaining the same Svaras, along with some gradual descents from the higher to the lower octave, forming beautifully structured Svara patterns.

1. ṀĠṚŚ MGRS

2. Ś,Ś P,P S,S

Uttarāṅga:

Since the Caraṇa line begins with Ś, the Ettugaḍe Svaras conclude with N or Ṛ. The Ettugaḍe Svaras feature beautifully crafted Sañcāras, which also resemble Dāṭu and Jaṇṭi Prayogas.

1. PMNP,M; - MGPM,G; - NPŚN,P,

2. ŚṚṆŚPNMP

3. GMN,N - MPŚ,Ś - NŚĠ,Ġ

4. M,GRS – N,PMP – Ś,NPN

5. ŚŚṚ NNŚ PPN MMP

Just as in Pūrvāṅga, Uttarāṅga also features phrases that exhibit sudden shifts between octaves.

1. ḠṚŚ, - GRS,

Ninnē namminānu gīrvāṇi

Rāga – Kīravāṇi

Tāḷa – Ādi

Pallavi :

|| Ninnē namminānu gīrvāṇi ||

|| Ninnu brōva samayamide ||

Anupallavi :

|| Padmanābha sahōdari ||

|| Pālālōcani nā talli ||

Carana :

|| Pāṭalīśa priyē dēvi ||(Subramaniam)

Meaning:

This passage is a deeply emotional plea that reflects the essence of śaraṇāgati, or complete surrender to the divine. By declaring, “I have placed my complete trust in You,” the devotee conveys absolute dependence on the Goddess, acknowledging that her grace alone can provide refuge. The urgency of the appeal—“Now is the time to protect me”—reveals a moment of vulnerability and faith, where divine intervention is sought as the only means of relief. The Goddess is invoked not only in her cosmic stature but also through relational identity as the sister of Lord Padmanābha (Vishnu), situating her within the Vaishnavite theological framework. At the same time, the tender epithet Pālālōcani, meaning the compassionate mother with nurturing eyes, emphasizes her boundless mercy and maternal affection. The passage thus harmonizes reverence and intimacy, portraying the Goddess as both supreme protector and loving mother, embodying the dual aspects of majesty and compassion central to bhakti traditions.

Ankita nāma – Carana – Pāṭlīśa priyē dēvi

Rāga mudra – Ninne namminānu **Kīrvāṇi** (Gīrvāṇi)

Rāga lakṣana:

S R2 G2 M1 P D1 N3 Ś

Ś N3 D1 P M1 G2 R2 S

Śaḍja, Catuśruti Riṣabha, Sādhāraṇa Gāndhāra, Śuddha Madhyama, Pañcama, Śuddha Daivata, Kākali
Niṣāda

21st Mēḷakarta rāga (Ramanathan)

Svarākṣara:

Pallavi:

1. NDN

Nu... (Sūcita)

Anupallavi:

1. ŚRĠ

Sa... (Śuddha)

2. NŚR

Ni . . (Sūcita)

Rāga sañcāra in the composition:

Pūrvāṅga:

The Pallavi is confined to the Madhya Sthāyi, while variations in Svaras across other octaves emerge in the anupallavi and ciṭṭesvara.

Svara patterns:

The Pūrvāṅga contains only a limited number of Svara patterns.

1. MGM NDN

Na....nnu...

2. ŚRĠGRŚ NŚRŚN.

Sa...hō...da.....

Evident dāṭu svara-s:

Ṛ,, N,, D,, M, GRSRG

Uttarāṅga:

Since the refrain begins with P, all the Ettugaḍe Svara-s conclude with M.

The Ettugaḍe Svaras showcase diverse phrases, beautifully structured with rich melodic appeal, while also highlighting Dāṭu patterns.

1. P,, DN,, ŚŖ,, ĠM,,
2. PDNŚ MPDN GMPDN
3. PDNM,P GMPR,G
4. DNŚ PDNŚ M,PDNŚ;
5. ŚŖĠM,,ĠŖN DNĠŖ,, NDM RGMP, ĠŖŚ

The third Ettugaḍe Svara emphasizes N, prominently featuring it in every phrase of the Sañcāra.

Findings:

- Cuddalore M. Subramaniam's works exhibit unique melodic and rhythmic innovations compared to other composers.
- His unconventional prayōga-s expand rāga vocabulary significantly.
- Complex yati, janṭi, and dāṭu patterns show advanced rhythmic sophistication with pedagogical value.
- Lyrics aligned with svara sañcāra-s enhance bhakti rasa through music-text integration.
- Many varṇa-s highlight feminine divinity, reflecting theological and cultural themes.
- Strong poetic structure places his compositions within Carnatic literary traditions.
- Performers emphasize both technical skill and devotional expression in his works.
- Notated compilations and digital archives improve accessibility for study and performance.
- His style balances technical depth with accessibility, influencing contemporary Carnatic composition.
- An interdisciplinary approach reveals the cultural and spiritual depth of his contribution.
- The compositions display swift and seamless transitions of svara-s across octaves, executed with clarity and precision, bringing out the layered depth of the rāga.
- Intricate rhythmic patterns are employed extensively, with creative use of yati, janṭi (paired notes), and dāṭu (skipping notes), lending both structural elegance and rhythmic vitality.
- Several passages feature unconventional prayōga-s that are rarely seen in other works of the same rāga, giving his compositions a distinctive identity.
- A wide range of svara combinations is explored, aesthetically structured to preserve the rāga bhāva while offering fresh melodic progressions.

- The lyrical content is enriched with poetic elegance, marked by evocative imagery, symbolic expression, and strict adherence to prosodic principles that ensure smooth alignment with the music.
- A defining feature is the perfect synchrony between the lyrical ideas and svara sañcāra-s, allowing the melody to heighten the devotional essence of the text.
- Although he composed on multiple deities, a considerable proportion of his works, particularly varṇa-s, are dedicated to Dēvi.
- These Dēvi compositions often take the form of heartfelt appeals for grace and blessings, portraying her as both a compassionate mother and a supreme cosmic force.
- His writing employs diverse expressive devices to capture the essence of bhakti, ranging from direct supplication to descriptive praise.
- Despite their technical sophistication in both melody and rhythm, the compositions remain accessible, enabling engagement by learners while still challenging advanced performers.
- Taken together, these features establish his works as valuable contributions to Carnatic music, uniting melodic innovation, rhythmic intricacy, literary refinement, and devotional depth.

Conclusion :

The varṇa-s of Cuddalore M. Subramaniam reveal a composer deeply rooted in the Carnatic music tradition, yet unafraid to explore and innovate within its boundaries. His compositions are distinguished by their swift and crisp transitions between octaves, displaying technical finesse and mastery over svara movement. The presence of intricate yati patterns—especially through the frequent use of janṭi and dāṭu phrases—adds rhythmic complexity and vitality, enhancing both the aesthetic and pedagogical value of his works.

Moreover, his ability to incorporate occasional unconventional phrases within the framework of traditional rāga-s showcases a unique compositional voice that balances creativity with rāga integrity. These diverse melodic patterns are carefully structured to bring out the essence of each rāga, contributing to their rich and appealing musicality.

Equally remarkable is the lyrical depth and poetic elegance in his compositions. The seamless integration of prosody with musical phrasing reflects his sensitivity to both language and melody. In particular, his varṇa-s dedicated to Dēvi stand out not only for their musical brilliance but also for their emotional and devotional intensity. These compositions frequently center around pleas for divine grace and blessings, articulated through a variety of expressive lyrical themes and musical devices.

Cuddalore M. Subramaniam's body of work—especially his varṇa-s on Dēvi—demonstrates a holistic approach to composition, where melodic structure, rhythmic intricacy, lyrical beauty, and spiritual expression coalesce. His contributions enrich the Carnatic repertoire and serve as a valuable

bridge between tradition and innovation. These varṇa-s, while grounded in classical principles, continue to inspire musicians, scholars, and listeners alike, ensuring the enduring relevance of his legacy in the evolving landscape of Carnatic music.

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