

## COPPER PLATES OF TALLAPAKA COMPOSERS

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Music is universally extolled as the queenliest of arts. From times immemorial India has been known for giving it a spiritual dimension. The most ardent aspirations of the human spirit found their expression through music. In fact, one gains the feeling of seeing the Almighty. This pure devotion is reflected in the music of our great composers.

During the 15th and 16th centuries, the Tallapaka family of poets and music composers, belonging to the Kadapa region of Andhra Pradesh, sang the glory of Lord Venkateswara, and popularized the Sri Vaishnava faith. Sri Annamacharya the progenitor or the Mula purusha of the family, had the manifestation (vision) of Lord Venkateswara in his dream and he commanded Annamayya to compose at least one sankirtana per day. From the age of 16 till his end at 95 years, he carried out the Divine command, and had a colossal output of 32,000 sankirtanas. Originally, these sankirtanas were written on palm leaves. Later, Annamacharya's son Pedda Tirumalacharya got them inscribed on copper plates during 1525 to 1545 A.D. It is very interesting to note that no other composer, before or after the Tallapaka family got their compositions inscribed on copper plates. Music ran through their genes for almost four generations, and all of them had their works inscribed on copper plates. It is believed that all Tallapaka composers worked for the publicity of the Ramanuja siddhanta. They put 5 copper plates to a ring and several such bundles were tied using the hanging roots of banyan trees. These were carried by the pallanquin-bearers to many places.

Annamacharya expressed in one of his songs, "Okka sankirtane chaalu oddika mammu rakshimpaga, Takkinavi bhandaaraana daachi yundanee". As if to fulfill his wish, the copper plates were stored in a rock-built cell called, 'Sankirtana Bhandaaramu' inside the temples at Tirumala, Ahobilam and Srirangam by the Tallapaka family.

For reasons unknown, the copper plates lay hidden for almost three centuries. Their existence was first mentioned in 1816 A.D. by Alexander. D. Campbell in his Introduction to Grammar of Telugu Language'. He wrote: Having heard that a number of poems engraved on some thousand sheets of copper had been under the care of pious family of Brahmins in the temple on the sacred hill at Tirupati, I deputed a native for the purpose of examining them. But with the exception of a treatise on grammar of which a copy was taken, the whole collection was found to contain nothing but voluminous hymns in praise of the Deity'. No action was taken to bring out those plates to light till 1922. Later, Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams (TTD) discovered 2500 copper plates hidden in the cell opposite the Hundi in the Tirumala temple,

Of these copper plates, 363 plates contained Adhyatma sankirtanas, 192 with Sringara sankirtanas, 205 plates of Pedda Tirumalacharya's, and 37 of China Tirumalacharya's (Annamayya's grandson) compositions. 5 copper plates were found to contain other compositions and Sringara Manjari. A rhyming couplet of poems called Dwipada written by Tallapaka Chinnanna (grandson of Annamacharya), enlightens us about the life and works of Annamacharya, the great mystic saint composer, Chinnanna also hails his grandfather as the Telugu Padakavita Pitamaha.

The Copper plates are now with Sri Venkateswara Oriental Research Institute, Tirupati. The copper plates are in 3 different sizes - 9/18 inches, 18/30 inches and 18/36 inches. Each Copper plate contains around 6 sankirtanas. The copper plates were cleaned under the leadership of

DrAyyappa the then Madras Museum Superintendent, Later these copper plates were gold-plated.

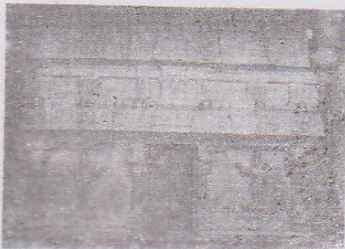
The palm leaf manuscripts of the Tallapaka composers were also found in the Saraswati Mahal Library, Tanjore and Madras Oriental Manuscripts library.

TTD entrusted the task of writing down the sankirtanas in the copper plates on to paper to Sri Veturi Prabhakara Sastry and his team of vidwans. All the sankirtanas were printed and published in 29 volumes. Of the 32,000 sankirtanas that Annarnacharya wrote, only 14,000 are available now. It is very sad to know that some of the copper plates were either lost or sold by the family members for the value of the metal,

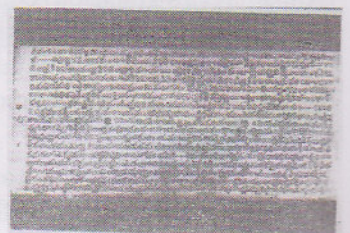
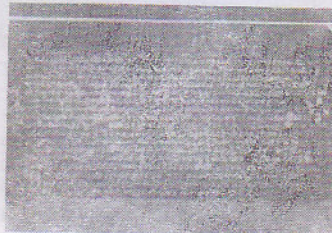
Unfortunately, little is known about Annarnacharya's music and his musical thought, While his poetry was preserved in the copper plates, his music could not be, for reasons unknown. Not only is there no written record of his music, there is no living tradition of singing his songs. The copper plates contain only the text of the sankirtanas and mention is made only about the raga of the composition. What tala and musical form did Annamacharya assign to them, is not known. He did not have the advantage of an institution like Dasakuta which has, in a way preserved the tradition of singing Dasarapadagalu in Karnataka. However since Annamayya's Sankirtanas are very similar in structural patterns to Dasarapadagalu it is likely that they resemble musically too.

The fact that Annamayya knew all musical modes and forms of his times is obvious from his works. But he conceived his sankirtanas primarily as devotional poetry. Music was only a vehicle to render them effectively. The krithis of Thyagaraja and others are conceived generally as musical compositions, and their poetry, however impressive, is mainly a verbal scaffold for raising a musical structure. Therefore while singing Annomayya's compositions, importance has to be given to the meaning, since sahyam takes precedence over the music. The ragas used by Annamayya in his songs as mentioned in the copper plates are about 100. A good number of them like Amarasindhu, Kondamalahari, and Sourshttragujari etc. have either become rare or extinct now. Even the commonly used ones today like Sankarabharanam, Mukhari, Kambhoji, Devagandhari and Sri have probably undergone subtle changes since his time. TTD invited veteran musicians like Sriman Rallapally Anantha Krishna Sarma Dr. Mangalampalli Balamurati Krishna, Sri Nedunuri Krishnamurthy and others to set the sankirtanas to tune. TTD is relentlessly making efforts to propagate the compositions of Annamacharya and other members of Tallapaka family through the Annamacharya Project, established in 1978.

The farsightedness of the Tallapaka composers to preserve their works for posterity is commendable. Had they not inscribed them on sheets of metal, we would not have had the good fortune of learning their great compositions and works, and their rich contribution to our heritage, in particular to Carnatic music.



Sankirtana Bhandagar



Copper Plates