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**Issue I - Article II**

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**Bhajan Singing - A Fine Tuning Act**

Why do we sing Bhajans?

Why do we place importance to music while chanting god's name?

Why are Bhajans and Kirtanas given a high pedestal in our culture?

Why do Bhajans take a priority in the SSSSO throughout the world?

What do we gain out of all of this?

To a normal participant or observer, this is probably a social event where abundant musical talent is available for display and a definite ego-booster for the people leading the show. To others however, this is a party without cover charges where spicy tamarind rice and sambar (both south Indian delicacies) are served occasionally but completely free of charge, and if one is lucky they might end up with ladoos (a globe shaped sweet served during religious festivals). It is also a great way meet new friends who don't ask disturbing questions such as 'how come you have two helpings of tonight's delicacies?'. Nevertheless, there are always two sides to a coin - in this case, the worldly and the spiritual aspect. So, when it comes to the trial of understanding the spiritual significance of Bhajans, just as the sugar is invisible to the naked eye when a cake is consumed, the true essence of Bhajans cannot be understood unless experienced. Here is my perspective that aims to answer some of the questions above.

For all the pop-culture fans in today's economy, the act of singing Bhajans is not comparable to the music rendered by Justin Timberlake. And no, this is not at all a recent discovery. It is in fact a very ancient practice dating back to almost the 'Bhakthi Movement'. Bhakthi movements were Hindu religious movements in which the main spiritual practice was the fostering of loving devotion to God, called Bhakthi. The first documented Bhakthi movement was founded by Karaikkal-Ammaiyar. She wrote poems in Tamil about her love for Shiva and probably lived around the 6th century AD. In the period between 1400 and 1650, a great Bhakthi movement swept through Northern India. The implications of this movement were that people could cast aside the heavy

burdens of ritual and caste and the subtle complexities of philosophy and simply express their overwhelming love for God. All this is great information, but what is the actual meaning of the words Kirtanas or Bhajans?

In Bhakthi Yoga, Kirtan is the practice of singing and repeating the name of God (in both male and female aspects), as well as using descriptive phrases or divine attributes. The word kirtan comes from the Sanskrit root 'kirt' which means "to name, to communicate, to celebrate, to praise, to glorify." Bhajan, another form of spiritual music in the yogic tradition, usually refers to singing prayers or hymns rather than the repetition of God's name which is called 'Naamasmarana'. Its root, 'bhaj' means "to worship, to revere, to love. Kirtan is a devotional practice and an important aspect of the path of Bhakthi Yoga, the yoga of devotion. Kirtan can be seen as a bridge between our outer and inner selves and an expression of our desire to know and love God within. Traditionally, Kirtanas are done in a call and response style very much similar to a regular telephonic communication or the Instant Messengers in today's internet era.

Why sing Bhajans? The very question contains the answer: One's inert self (or God) cannot be experienced through doubt or asking questions, but only through 'FAITH'. Music has the power to generate tremendous energy that drives the mind, body and spirit to believe in god or oneself and this is nothing but another manifestation of faith. Imagine adding another 10000 KW layer called devotion to this existing powerhouse. The results are obviously electrocuting, not in a destructive sense, but the process actually leaves one devoid of any negative emotions. This is why Kirtanas and Bhajans have extremely powerful effects when rendered in the true spirit and style.

It was sometime during the year 1993 when M.S.Subbalakshmi, a legend in South Indian classical music visited Bhagwan Sri Sathya Sai Baba at Trayee Brindavan, the Bangalore residence of Sai Baba. I was on this particular occasion, fortunate to be sitting amidst a group of students that witnessed the dialogue between Srimathi Subbalakshmi and her divine master. Bhagwan said, "Boys, do you know who this lady is? She is one of the greatest musicians India has ever witnessed. In all her life, she has sung nothing but Kirtanas". Subbalakshmi, the humble lady that she was, upon hearing this said, "Swami (master), I would like to sing your name until my last breath". It was only then that I understood the molecular nature of the glow that M.S. Subbalakshmi radiated. It wasn't something acquired by visiting a cosmetologist, but something that reflected as a result of one's character and an intimate connection with her divine self. A true inspirer is also the greatest follower. The act of singing Bhajans albeit simple in concept is actually a very intense process where the lead singer becomes

unconsciously conscious of the divinity within and leads the followers to this level. Bhagwan Baba, time and again, stressed the importance of singing the Bhajans. He says, this act should be done not with a flair to perform but with a feeling of fine tuning oneself to be exposed to the divine energy available in abundance within. We normally don't tap this energy if we sing the Bhajan without understanding the meaning of the words or stressing the right syllables. Normally singers place importance on the Raaga (melody) and Taala (rhythm), however, the meaning contributes to the Bhaava (feeling) which is extremely important for Bhajans. A simple example - take the song 'Gajavadhana Gana Naatha Naatha', Its second line is Gauri Vara Thanaya GunaLaya'. The word GunaLaya was corrected by Bhagwan (Swami). He said, the correct intonation is "Gunaa Laya" which means dissolution of the mind. 'GunaLaya' on the other hand has no meaning at all. Being a stickler for perfection, Swami always tends to drive home the message that lead singers are meant to direct the followers with a perfect understanding of every Bhajan they render.

My favorite Bhajans are those that people can follow easily leaving the singer as well as the listener feeling emotionally satisfied. Swami has sung some beautiful Bhajans with his golden voice and these songs carry the perfect combination to unlock the hidden path to self inquiry. Here is a simple trick to leading good Bhajans: While singing, imagine that as your throat expands and the sound emanates from your naval center, the clouds of doubt are replaced by the sunshine of faith. Now imagine, you can see a beautiful face (the face of the deity that you are propitiating) smiling at you and calling to you with open arms. Wouldn't this moment make you feel blissful? Wouldn't this moment bring tears of pure joy to your closed eyes? When you are happy, how can the followers of this Bhajan you are leading, be disappointed? - think about this before you lead a Bhajan next time. In my humble opinion, all our spiritual radios lack fine tuning and can only receive well if we transmit well too. Transmit devotion through Bhajans, sing from the heart, not the throat and receive pure love in return. The next time you come out of a Bhajan session, just think for a moment how you feel immediately after Arathi is over and ask why do you feel this way?

In closing, I am reminded of a beautiful verse by Swami Chaitanya which glorifies the meaning of Bhajans and Sankirtana.

"Kalim Sabhajayanty Arya; Guna-Jnah Sara-Bhaginah; Yatra Sankirtanenaiva; Sarva-Svartho Bhilabhyate"

"Those who are progressive and thus know the true value of Kali-Yuga worship it because it is a time during which all desired objectives can be achieved simply by engaging in sankirtana."

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