

When the bovines swayed to the gentle tunes

Author - D M Kurke Prashanth, Published on - 7.8.2018



As the metallic bells tied around the necks of bovines sway in gentle breeze rendering a tinkling noise, it is accompanied by the wafting, light and mellow music from a flute-like instrument played by the cowherds. The rustle of the leaves, the chirrupy birds, the swarm of bees, the grazing cows and the gurgles of a river in the vicinity create a symphony of music, adding magic to the picturesque scenery. Indeed, the cowherds on the fringes of the forest, or the Kadugollas, are blessed to share a bond so close with nature.

Green mountains, deep valleys and lush meadows are places they frequent to graze their cattle. No wonder, the Kadugollas derive their deep-rooted beliefs from nature. In the first instance, one might confuse the instrument they are so deft at handling, for a flute. But, no. It is Ganey which resembles the flute in every manner.

The five-feet-long Ganey, which is thicker than a flute, is the most revered musical instrument among the Kadugollas, the semi-nomadic tribe that resides in the forest fringes of Tumakuru, Chitradurga and Hassan districts. The Kadugollas are necessarily the cultural ambassadors of folklore, and Ganey, that bears social, religious and cultural significance, is a part and parcel of their daily lives.

Songs of Junjappa (deity of the Kadugollas) and Veeragaras (the martyrs who fought for the welfare of the community) are compulsorily accompanied by Ganey, which the Kadugollas believe, was handed over to them by Junjappa. Not only the Kadugollas have mastered the art of playing the instrument, they are also well-versed with the compositions sung in praise of Junjappa and the Veeragaras.

A lot goes into the preparation of Ganey. An unmarried youth, purified after the ceremonial bath, plucks bamboo sprung up from an anthill, which is filed and fine-tuned, with holes drilled with hot iron rods, with the extreme end of the wooden instrument sealed with wax. Once the Ganey is ready, Kadugollas wash it with cow's milk and urine.

As their fingers open and shut the holes in a rhythm, the soft music synchronises with the songs, providing intermittent relief to the singer to halt and proceed at regular intervals. The Ganey helps maintain the tempo and momentum of the song, says Prof Honnaganahalli Kariyanna, principal of Tumkur University Arts College.

The Kadugollas have segregated the instrument into three types — Devara Ganey, Havyasi Ganey and Oorado Ganey. Devara Ganey, considered divine and found only in temples, is believed to represent Junjappa. The temple priest sits on a blanket (kambali) and invokes Junjappa with Devara Ganey in his hand. The Kadugollas believe that Devara Ganey aids them in seeking answers to their queries.

Havyasi Ganey is played by artistes who accompany singers who render compositions in praise of their Lord. The lyrics are rendered to the tunes of folk songs, in a conversation style, and to the tunes of devotional and auspicious songs.

Just as 'Kamsale Padagalu' are sung in praise of Male Mahadeshwara Swamy and 'Gorava Padagalu' in praise of Mailaralingeshwara, 'Kathopajeevighalu' are sung by the Kadugollas in praise of Junjappa.

The instrument played along with the songs that glorify Junjappa by the nomadic Kadugollas, who visit door-to-door, village-to-village, is called Oorado Ganey. Peacock feathers are stuck to this instrument, which is embellished in silver. All three Ganey are revered by the Kadugollas.

The origins

Recollects Kariyanna, whose brother is an avid Ganey player: "Since Junjappa belonged to Kaluvarahalli village in Sira taluk of Tumakuru district, the origins of Ganey can be traced to Sira taluk. The Veeragaras fought for the welfare of the community and in the process attained martyrdom. As a mark of respect, the members of the tribe play the instrument at places where the battles were fought and also at places where Junjappa tended cattle.

The Kadugollas are found in Hiriyuru, Challakere, Cheluru, Sira and Hagalavadi in Tumakuru district and even in a few pockets of Andhra Pradesh. At Kaluvarahalli, during Shivarathri, the Kadugollas confer 'Ganey Gourava' on people who have served the society.

Legend has it that the chieftain of Cheluru, Rangappa Nayak, escapes with one of the strongest bulls belonging to Junjappa. Junjappa realises the theft of his favourite bull in his dreams. From Kaluvarahalli, he comes to Madagada Gudda in Gubbi taluk, playing his instrument to trace his pet. As soon as the bull listens to the music of Ganey, it breaks the pillar to which it was tied and dashes towards Madagada Gudda in search of its master. Several such incidents of miracle and faith are mentioned in Junjappa's songs, Kariyanna explains.

A flute can be played with ease and comfort in a minimum breath. Playing Ganey requires one to hold breath for a longer duration and also, to blow air with much gusto. Mastery over the instrument can be attained only through vigorous practice. Korale Thimmaiah, Vibhuti Naganna, Ganey Thimmanna, Bandakunte Dodda Thimmaiah are a few Ganey artistes the community prides of.

Even as the Ganey continues to hold sway on the Kadugollas, the veterans are fretful over the diminishing interests among the younger generation who are weaning away from tending cows and playing Ganey, in search of greener pastures.

(Translated by Jyotsna P Dharwad)

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