



**“Bhāma Kalāpam” – The Seed of Bhakti Cult in Kūcipuḍi**

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**Introduction**

The term “Bhakti” is often referred to as the devotion towards a form of God. The spread of Bhakti, famously known as the “Bhakti Movement” originated around the 5<sup>th</sup> century C.E. in South India (Hawley) and had a strong connection with temples in South India (Veluthat). The devotees from Śaivism and Vaishṇavism spread Bhakti through their songs, hymns, poems, and compositions on forms of Gods worshipped at temples in each region; In South Indian states like Tamilnāḍu, Kēreḷa, and Karnāṭaka where Ālvār-s, Nāyaṇmārs and other traditional music composers spread Bhakti through music, in Āndra Pradeś dance was at par with music in propagating Bhakti.

An important tool during this movement was Kūcipuḍi Nāṭyam, one of the major Indian classical dance forms which originated from the Kūcipuḍi village in Āndra Pradeś. Traditionally, Kūcipuḍi Nāṭyam was performed in front of Śrī Rāmaliṅgeśvara Svāmi temple at Kūcipuḍi village by the versatile and trained men residing at Agrahāra. However, the father of Kūcipuḍi Nāṭyam, Siddhēndra Yogi who wrote the acclaimed “Bhāma Kalāpam”, also made the men at Kūcipuḍi Agrahāra dance across regions.

The purpose of this study is to explore the connection between “Bhāma Kalāpam” and the temples at Muvva, Śrīkākulam and Kūcipuḍi villages and analyze how “Bhāma Kalāpam” acts as a propagation of Kṛshṇa Bhakti. This study considers the impact of “Bhāma Kalāpam” on the Kūcipuḍi dance form, Kṛshṇa Bhakti cult, and the associated influence on the temple and culture of Kūcipuḍi village. The available literature, research works, and articles on Temples, “Bhāma Kalāpam”, Kūcipuḍi, and the Bhakti cult were collected and analyzed as a part of the historical method of research analysis. Similarly, archived performances of “Bhāma Kalāpam” performed by Kūcipuḍi dancers were viewed to be analyzed. These were all later compiled to provide the research findings.

**Bhakti, Temples and “Bhāma Kalāpam” – An Analysis and Inferences drawn**

The term Bhakti is mentioned and elaborated in Upanishads in the post-Vedic period and referred to as the souls’ unity with the almighty. Pāṇiini’s Ashtādhyāyī, Śvetāśvatāra Upanishad, Bhāgavata Purāṇa, etc. are some of the texts that deal with the concept of Bhakti (Sūryavanshi). The Bhakti concept was spread across India by many poets, saints, and seers like Rāmānuja, Vallabācārya, Caitanya Mahāprabhu, Mīrā Bāi, Tulsidās, etc (Oza and Studies). Though Bhakti was used in both Śaivism and Vaishṇavism, the concept of “Jīvan-Mukti” is emphasized more in Vaishṇavism (Mīśra). “Jīvan-Mukti” is a soul uniting with Lord Nārāyaṇa, who is regarded as the ultimate Parabrahman in Vaishṇavism, thus breaking the cycles of birth and death. The Vaishṇavism-based Ithihāsas and Purāṇas posit Bhakti or pure devotion towards Nārāyaṇa and his Avatāra forms as ways to attain atonement. “Bhāgavata Purāṇa” highlights nine types of Bhakti viz. Śravaṇam (hearing the greatness of God), Kīrtanam (Chanting the names of various forms of God), Smaraṇam (thinking and meditating on God), Pāsasevanam (serving the feet of God), Archanam (offering flowers or leaves along with chanting God’s names), Vandanam (offering prayers and gratitude to God), Dāsyaṁ (serving as a servant to God), Sākhyam (having



friendship with God) and Ātma Nivedanam (surrendering oneself completely to God) (Saha et al.).

Temple is the place of worship that seeds and nurtures Bhakti. The local culture has an impact on temple rituals and vice versa. This interaction between people, culture, and temples can be vividly seen in the art forms presented by the artists in and around the areas of the temples. The sculptures carved on the walls of the temple are inspirations of the dance practiced in those times and also stand as a learning material for the current generation artists. Thus the temples bridge the gap between the generations allowing the flow of knowledge and culture over generations.

Kūcipuḍi, is one such region which has the dance form referred to by the name of that region. Vēṅugopāla Svāmi temple situated at Muvva village, is located near Kūcipuḍi and has inspired the creations of Padams by Kshetranya and “Bhāma Kalāpam” by Siddhendra Yogi. Another temple located right in the middle of Kūcipuḍi village is Śrī Rāmaliṅgeśvara Svāmi temple. Though, Siddhendra Yogi worshipped Lord Kṛshṇa in the form of Rājagopāla Svāmi, which is reflected in the references of Lord Kṛshṇa in his play “Bhāma Kalāpam”, it is believed that after Siddhendra Yogi’s salvation, in place of Rājagopāla Svāmi, a Śivaliṅga was installed and named Śrī Rāmaliṅgeśvara Svāmi. As his consort, Goddess Bāla Tripura Sundari deity of that temple was brought to Kūcipuḍi temple after rituals from Bāla Tripura Sundari temple at a place called “Tripurāntakam” in Āndra Pradeś.

Temples in India, were not only treasured as mere places of worship but also seen as a big asset and source for the healthy sustenance of the society. Temples preached the age-old knowledge and wisdom to the people, which helped them carry out their lives happily, peacefully, and in service of the society and the almighty. There were various communities of people, who had caste-based duties and responsibilities towards the society. This resulted in a hierarchy, creating differences in the minds of people and untouchability. In many places, people categorized as lower-caste were denied basic human rights, and their needs were not addressed. This denial extended to fine arts too, which were confined to the royal palaces or the temples. Dance and music were offered to the deities as part of the rituals. Only some people could witness them. The arts presented in the royal courts could also be enjoyed only by a small section of people.

In such a situation, arose a dance group “Kūcipuḍi Bhāgavatamela” who performed Kūcipuḍi Nāṭyam, which was aimed to reform the society and spread the fragrance of Bhakti. This art form was also performed outside the temple amidst every class of the society, thus making this art accessible to everyone. As Bhakti was considered as a spiritual emotion that calms people’s minds and brings a state of balance in human emotions, the pre-British rulers and Kings chose this dance form to propagate Bhakti to both literates and illiterates alike.

The Kūcipuḍi Bhāgavatamela’s presented the “Bhāma Kalāpam” which marks the beginning of the illustrious journey of the Kūcipuḍi clan (Kuppusvami and Hariharan). Though there are many literary definitions given to Kalāpam, the most relevant one is “Kalāh āpnōtī kalāpah,” meaning the presentation which encourages and propagates the arts. The reference for this Kalāpam is found in the ‘Śrīgaditam’ which is one of the Upa Rūpakas in the chapter of Daśa Rūpakas, in Nāṭyaśāstra (Ghosh). Nāṭyam is the art form that highlights and portrays the epitome of Bhakti. Especially, Kūcipuḍi Nāṭyam, the dance form having the background of dance drama tradition, portrays various historical stories and plays highlighting and emphasizing Bhakti.



“Bhāma Kalāpam” is a play that deals with Madhura (Love) Bhakti of Princess Satyabhāma, one of the eight main consorts of Lord Kṛshṇa. This play involves three main characters viz. Satyabhāma, Mādhavi (friend of Satyabhāma) and Lord Kṛshṇa. Bhāma loves Kṛshṇa deeply and has great devotion towards him. She yearns to be with Kṛshṇa and asks her friend Mādhavi to convey her longingness to him. What happens between Bhāma and Kṛshṇa, how does Mādhavi communicate to Kṛshṇa, Kṛshṇa’s response and union of Bhāma and Kṛshṇa forms the whole play.

Siddhendra yogi took ‘Sanyāsam’ at a young age and wanted to spend the rest of his life in Kṛshṇa Bhakti. Therefore he chose to construct the “Bhāma Kalāpam” at the back-drop of the three temples, namely- The ‘Āndhra Mahāvishṇu’ temple at Śrīkākulam, ‘Vēṅugopāla Svāmi’ temple at Muvva and ‘Rājagopāla Svāmi’ temple which was situated at the present-day Kūcipuḍi Village. The Śrīkākulam and Muvva temples had devadāsīs associated to them. The learned men from the nearby villages used to visit them to teach the art of dancing and singing. Witnessing such learned boys, who were practicing and learning the Nāṭyam, Siddhendra took them under his wings and trained them with “Bhāma Kalāpam” and also encouraged them to present it themselves. These men settled in an ‘Agrahāram’ by the name ‘Kūcipuḍi’, formed a Bhāgavata Melam (group of artists presenting and preaching the Vishṇu Bhakti) and started calling themselves ‘Kūcipuḍi Bhāgavata Melam’. This melam took the responsibility of staging “Bhāma Kalāpam” which preaches the ‘Jīvātma-Paramātma Tatva’ and hence educating while entertaining the audiences. Thus, the nāṭyam which was so far handled by the devadāsīs and predominantly consisted the śṛṅgāra rasa, changed its path towards madhura Bhakti.

“Bhāma Kalāpam” is the most prized possession of the practitioners of Kūcipuḍi. In this Kalāpam, Satyabhāma, who is the most beloved to Kṛshṇa among all his sixteen thousand devoted women, laments her separation from her lord and yearns to unite with him. According to the Hindu Vaishṇavite philosophy, Nārāyaṇa or Lord Mahāvishṇu is the only man and all his creation are women who are yearning to unite with him. To establish this thought and to propagate it, the character of Satyabhāma was chosen. Satyabhāma, a powerful character, has the ability to exhibit a spectrum of rasas and can also uphold the Ashta Vidha Nāyika lakṣhaṇas prescribed by Sage Bharata in his Nāṭyaśāstra. As Bhāma’s characterization represents a common person’s character, the story also gets very close to every spectator’s heart.

Śṛṅgāra rasa is supposed to be the king of all the emotions. It is also believed that the one who hasn’t experienced the Śṛṅgāra or the love in one’s individual life is not even qualified to attain moksha or salvation. Siddhendra Yogi, who hadn’t experienced this in his lifetime, imagined him to be that Satyabhāma and considered her yearning to be his own to finally unite with the almighty. Therefore, Siddhendra Yogi chose Śṛṅgāra rasa which spans throughout the Kalāpam.

Similarly, a lot of importance has been given to the concept of beauty. Satyabhāma is perceived as the most beautiful, intelligent and the smart one among all the wives of Kṛshṇa. It is again philosophically believed that when the Arishaṭvargas (the six hidden demons inside a human mind) namely - Kāma, Krodha, Lobha, Moha, Mada and Matsara, are suppressed, one becomes capable of truly appreciating the beauty. This is the beauty beyond the physicality, which is divine and the threshold of Bhakti. In this story, Satyabhāma is shown to be getting rid of all those six demonic qualities, thus adding beauty to the soul, which further unites with the beautiful lord.

The story of “Bhāma Kalāpam” is understandable to both learned class of the society and to the laypeople. This has been constructed with all the elements mentioned in the Nāṭyaśāstra,



which adds classicism to the presentation and also makes it more interesting being an audio-visual treat. This Kalāpam has crossed many centuries and has arrived where it is today. Therefore, it has gathered ever-evolving dialogues, music and dance moves. These make the presentation look new every time to watch it. Emphasis has also been given to our ancient science and knowledge and also to the societal set-up. In our society, the marriage has a very significant role. Only a healthy marriage can ensure and assure the future of a healthy society. We see the acceptance of multi-genders of the society. A lot of respect is also insisted upon the woman. With all these aspects, “Bhāma Kalāpam” aims at social awareness, preaching the philosophy, educating the scientific information, appreciating the artistry of music, dance and literature and thereby giving the audience a wholesome experience, which would give them life lessons.

The language used for constructing this Kalāpam is of a very sophisticated Telugu language. Ever since the beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, Telugu language enjoyed a very high regard in the southern region of India and was widely used for artistic creation. Nānnyaya, Tikkaṇṇa and Yerrapragada are considered to be the trinity of Telugu literature. They are known to have jointly authored the book ‘Āndhra Mahābhāratam’. In this work, we find references and mention of Nāṭyam. During the same period Annamācārya has also written many śrīṅgāra Kīrtanams on lord Vēṅkaṭēśvara and his consort. Many of his works prove that he has drawn inspiration from the Kūcipuḍi presentations.

This Kalāpam spans for three nights where the story is gradually narrated with each character being introduced and presented at a convenient time. The first night begins with the narrator entering the stage with a veil on which the braid of Satyabhāma is hung and the praise of the braid is sung, danced and explained. The Jaḍa is supposed to be a precious gift to her from lord Indra which marks her sophistication and puts her on par with the goddesses of the heavens. The ‘Jaḍa’ signifies the constellations, sun, moon, stars, planets and also the planetary positions. Icons of all the deities too take position in the prestigious Jaḍa. This makes the Jaḍa a perfect tutorial for the Indian astrology. This is a Jaḍa which was adorned by Lord Mahāvishṇu when he descended on earth to protect the mankind in the form of Mohini. It proves that the lady who is chosen to adorn this Jaḍa has to be eligible and should have that greatness too. This puts the character Satyabhāma at a higher pedestal.

Further, the character Satyabhāma enters the stage introducing herself and exhibiting a myriad of emotions as she narrates why and how she got separated from her Lord Kṛṣṇa and how she wants to unite with him. She calls her Sakhi Mādhavi to carry a letter penned by her and hand it over to him, so that he can come and join her. When Kṛṣṇa finally arrives, Satyabhāma’s ego doesn’t allow her to unite with Kṛṣṇa. She once again enters a quarrel with her husband. Just then her soul-mate Mādhavi intervenes and explains the greatness of the Lord and asks her to surrender to him. She preaches that surrendering oneself is the sole way to attain the almighty. Satyabhāma obeys her teachings and unites with her lord.

## Conclusion

“Bhāma Kalāpam” not only excels as a dance drama, but also in the portrayal of Satyabhāma, taking inspiration from the deities of the temples at Kūcipuḍi region and spreading Kṛṣṇa Bhakti. Considering all these aspects, “Bhāma Kalāpam” can rightly be regarded as one of the seeds that grew as the tree of Kṛṣṇa Bhakti in South India.

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