

History of Sadhir- Natyam under the patronage of Kings of Thanjavur

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60

Abstract

The origin of nātya and kūtthu takes us back even before the second century B.C.E. as referred in texts such as *Nāṭyaśāstra* and *Tolkāppiam*. There has been evolution from then to now. Many kings, patrons, literary scholars, composers, actors, dancers, musicians, etc. have contributed for the development of these art forms.

The aim of this research is to deal with the history of *natyam* in Tamilnadu and the contributions of kings of Thanjavur, for the development of *Nāṭyam* from *Kūtthu*, *Aadal*, *Nautch*, *Dāsiāttam*, *Chinnamelam*, *Sadhir* to the present day *Bharatanāṭyam*.

Keywords- Kings, Thanjavur, Koothu, Natya, Bharatanatyam.

Introduction

The art form of music, dance and drama gained its prominence as independent art forms in various states of India. They were promoted as temple art forms. From a historical perspective the evolution of dance, can be noted in three segments, ancient period – from *Nāṭyaśāstra* of 2nd century BCE. (*mārga*), medieval period – from *Sangitaratnakara* of 13th century CE (*deśi*) and modern period after Sangeet Natak Akademi's division of Classical dances – 20th century CE (Neo deśi). Especially for *Sadhir* which has been renamed as *Bharatanatyam* now, the modern period starts from Thanjavur Quartet of 19th century who redefined, structured and formatted the *adavu* system and *margam* of present repertoire. Later Dr. Padma Subrahmanyam re-constructed the *karanas* of *Nāṭyaśāstra* which are seen in the temple sculptures of Thanjavur and brought them into the repertoire of *bharatanatyam* and renamed it as *bharatanrityam* in 20th century.

The dance forms can be categorized as *nāṭya* (dramatized dance), *nṛtta* (abstract dance) and *nṛtya* (imitative dance). They were mimetic, which had beautiful movement of hands and legs, and were performed for vocal and instrumental orchestral music. The meaning of the song was depicted through hand gestures, the feel of the song was brought out through facial expressions and the rhythm was held by the footwork patterns. In dance presentations, the dancer had single costume (*ekāhārya*) and they had to change their role only through actions. The songs performed had different themes (*prtagārtha*). In dance-drama presentations, actors were given a



role and their costume varied accordingly, however, it had a single theme (*ekārtha*). Terms like *rūpaka* (drama) were introduced by Bharata and *uparūpaka* (minor varieties of dramas- mostly dance-dramas) was introduced by post- Bharata writers. There were other terms such as *śravyakāvya* and *dṛśyakāvya* which can be connected with *geyanāṭaka* and *nṛtyanāṭaka* of later years.

Tholkappiyam refers to this, under *Pādān thinai*. “*kūtharum pānarum porunarum viraliyum ātrideike kāchi ouralathe thōndri ip Petra peruvalam perārku ari ouvree chchendru paiyn īdira chonna pākamum.*” It says that these singers and dancers, male and female bards, went to various places sung and danced, thus received wealth from patrons and guided others to generate wealth. So dance and music has been an art form which could generate wealth presented as an entertainment and educate and to pass it on to the next generation.

Kings as patrons of Arts

Kings patronized composers, authors, artists of music and dance and was responsible for bringing out the literary works of their kinsmen. Many kings themselves were experts in literature and made documentations of *lakṣaṇa granthas* on music and dance. Kalyani chaluksya King Someswara III of early 12th century wrote the Sanskrit work *Mānasollāsa*. Sarngadeva wrote his work *Saṅgītaratnākara* during the period of King Singhana II of 13th century who belonged to Yadava dynasty. Jayasenapati was the chief of the elephant corps in the army of Kakatiya King Ganapati Deva of 13th century. His work is *Nṛttaratnāvali*, a text which deals with *mārga* and *deśī* varieties of dance in eight chapters. *Saṅgītasāra* was written by Vidyaranya under the patronage of king Narapati Thakura of Vijayanagar, who belonged to 14th century. Tulaja of 18th century wrote *Saṅgītasārāmṛta*, and Shahaji was skilled in Sanskrit and music. Simhabhupala wrote a commentary for *Saṅgītaratnākara*, Mahendra Varma Pallava has engraved an inscription on music at Kuḍumiyāmalai. Maharaja Svāti Tirunāl was a composer of musical and dance forms and King Kulasekara Varman of Kerala revived the theatre of *Kūḍīāṭṭam* and wrote few Sanskrit dramas.

Kings of Tanjore as patrons of music and dance

Rajaraja Chola was a great patron of art who built the Brihadeesvara temple of Thanjavur. “The division of the land into musical and dance regions like ‘*gīta vinoda valanadu*’ and ‘*nṛtta vinoda valanadu*’, the appointment of 400 dancing girls in the Big temple and providing them with lands and houses to live, and the vast endowments to the temples for the perpetual conduct of musical services in the temples, bear ample proof of the abundant love of the royal artiste towards arts.” Rajendra Chola and other kings have built temples in and around Thanjavur which has been the store house of arts till date.

Vijayanagar kings have built many temples and thus have been the patrons for the development and revival of temples and arts during 14th century in Tamilnadu after the dark period by the invasion of Malik Kafur. During the period of King Krishnadevaraya, of Vijayanagara empire many gopurams were built in Tamilnadu.

Acchutappa Nayaka who was one of the foremost kings of Thanjavur Nayaks gave away the village of Melattur as a free gift to five hundred brahmin families who were scholars in literature of music and dance who later set up the *bhagavatamela nataka*. This village was



known as Acchutapuram named after King Acchutappa. Raghunatha Nayaka who was a scholar in Telugu and Sanskrit wrote many kavyas such as Sri Parijataharana Prabandham, Gajendra Moksha, Sri Rukmini Krsna vivaha yakshagana, Nalacharitra and many more. In the Telugu kavya Valmiki Charitra he describes beautiful dance of Rambha and Urvashi and their challenge where he brings in the technicalities of dance such as *an̄ga*, *upaṅga*, *karana*, etc. and this proves that he was an expert in *Bharatasāstra*. Raghunatha was praised as 'Prabandha Paramesvara' ie. one who was the lord of the art of *prabandha* compositions. Raghunatha Ramayana, one of his works has references to *nāṭakaśālas* which reveals that music and dance were part of Kings court from the ancient period. Vijayaraghava Nayaka, the son of Raghunatha wrote *Raghunathanayakabhyudaya*. Vijayaraghava composed many *yakshaganas* such as *Prahlada charitramu*, *Putanaharana*, *Kaliyamardana*, etc. These were enacted as *dr̄śyakāvya*s which is known through the stage directions. A court poet of his time called Chengalvakala kavi in his work *Rajagopala vilasa* chapter 1 gives a list of dances performed during his time.

Raghunathābhyudaya by Ramabhadramba, a favourite mistress of Raghunatha gives a graphic description of the *nāṭyasāla* and says that the king arrived to the *nāṭyasāla* followed by a retinue of dancers and scholars. This text also talks about the performance of *karanas* by court dancers. There are also mention about how the King used to come to the dance hall to witness the dances and courtesans dancing the *sringara padas* in the King's court. Many *yakshaganas*, *kuravanjis*, *sringara padas* and *jakkinis* for dance were composed by these kings and their court poets. Thus Nayak kings were profound scholars and music and dance flourished during their period.

Shahaji II who ruled Thanjavur during later 17th century was proficient in many languages such as Telugu, Sanskrit, Persian, Marathi and Hindi and a scholar in *Sangita* and *sahitya*. Sahaji wrote many *prabandhas*, which were basically musical forms but when they were composed based on the styles of *yakshaganas* it was also used for dance. These forms had dance movements based on the traditional classical style which came down with generations. He was the author of many *padams* and *prabandhams*. He composed various *padams* on *bhakti*, *sringara* and *vairagya* themes which were collectively known as *Tyagesa padas*. He wrote many *geyanātakas* such as *Śankara pallakīseva*, and *Viṣṇu pallakīseva*, which were sung and danced. *Prabandhas* were more of *kavya* variety of literature and *Yakshaganas* were of drama variety. He combined the *yakṣagānas* and *prabandhas*, introduced the dance dramas, as *geyanātakās*. The *kuravanji natakas* became popular during Sahaji's period. The famous *Thyagesar Kuravanji* was enacted during his time. Many Tamil composers who penned operas were also fostered during his period.

Saraboji I was an ardent patron of arts who promoted the tradition of the performance of plays in temples. He has gifted the *agraharams* at Tiruvengadu and Tirukkadayur, one of the village known as Sarabojirajapuram. Tukkoji or Tulaja I of early 18th century was the author of the *lakshana grantha* on music and dance, *Saṅgīta Sārāmṛta*. He was a great musician and a composer and a great scholar in languages. One of the famous *Yaksagana natakas* he wrote was *Sivakamasundari Parinaya Nataka*.

In his work *Saṅgīta Sārāmṛta* King Tulaja elaborates on *sikṣārambham* and *aḍavus*. He is the first one to mention the names and *laksana* of *aḍavus*, which must have been later codified again by Ponniah of Thanjavur Quartet to suit the *sadhir* format. These are now predominantly



used in present day *Bharatanāṭyam*. The special feature of this work is that, the author mentions the names of various *aḍavus* out of which some are prevalent now and some that have different names in the present. Names mentioned are *taṭṭaḍavu*, *khanatpāda kuṭṭanam*, *nāṭṭi taṭṭaḍavu*, *pārśva kuṭṭanam*, *digidigi aḍavu*, *pāda pārśva kuṭṭanam*, *utplutthothanam*, *santāḍya bhramaṇāhvayam*, *santāḍya pārśni kuṭṭanākhyam*, *anukkur aḍavu*, *kaṣraṇāhvayam*, *kaḍasakkāl*, *sāraṇagati aḍavu*, *cakkaracuttu*, *moṭitam*, *prasārīta pāda* and so on. Almost all the *aḍavus* have their names in Sanskrit. Some of these *aḍavus* are out of vogue now, but this is the only text that has the references of present day *aḍavus*.

Ekoji was also a great admirer of music and dance. The performance of dances such as *jakkini*, *padacali*, *tullal*, *abhinaya* were famous during his period. Pratapasimha was the patron of the famous Melattur Virabhadrayya and Matrubhutayya. The musical forms used for dance such as *svarajatis* and *varnams* were composed by them. Tulaja II (Later 18th century) brought Mahadeva Annavi from Tirunelveli to Thanjavur who performed with his disciples at the court of Tulaja. Gangamuthu Nattuvanar and Subbaraya Nattuvanar were great composers patronized by the king. Serfoji II (Early 19th century) was a great scholar and a composer who has composed many *sabda*, *varnam*, *pada*, *svarajati*, etc. and he patronized *nattuvanars* and also encouraged folk and classical dance forms. He composed the *nirūpaṇas* for dance mostly in *Marāṭhi*. They were based on single stories *ekārtha* concepts such as *uparūpakas*. They had compositions such as *jeyajeya*, *alaru*, *varnams*, *kouttas* and many more which were danced. Sivaji II encouraged Tamil and Telugu languages and during his period he patronized Thanjavur Quartet. Thus, in South India, the Pallavas and Cholas patronized temple architecture, Vijayanagar fought for the revival of the temple arts and the Nayaks and Marathas were experts in literature.

Court poets as composers

The kings were ardent lovers of art, that they promoted *vaggeyakaras*. Melattur Venkatarama Sastri, Melattur Virabhadrayya and Kasinathayya belong to the village given by Acchutappa Nayaka. Composers like Govinda Dikshita, Venkatamakhin, Kshetrayya, Girirajakavi, Venkatagiri, Vasudeva Kavi, Virabhadrayya, Tanjore Quartette, Ghanam Krishnayer, Pattabhiramayya, Melattur Virabhadrayya, etc. wrote *padams* and *javalis* based on *śṛṅgāra rasa* which were performed in front of the kings by the court dancers. These performances were done in the *nāṭyaśālas*. Govinda Diksita, a scholarly minister of Raghunatha Nayaka of 17th century wrote *Saṅgītasudha*. There are versions of opinions which say the king himself was the author.

Kshetrayya who lived during pre-Thyagaraja period was a great composer of *padams*. He has visited the court of Raghunatha and Vijayaraghava nayaka. It is said that he has composed nearly 100 *padams*. They were rich in musicality and emotional content which were performed in Kings court by court dancers.

Giriraja Kavi and his brother Venkatagiri were the court poets in Thanjavur during the reign of Sahaji II and Saraboji I. They have composed a number of *Yakshaganas* in praise of the kings. *Lilavati kalyanam* written by Giriraja kavi talks about the marriage of Lilavati with Saraboji. *Rajamohana kuravanji* was one of his famous compositions. Nearly two hundred *śṛṅgāra padas* are preserved in the manuscripts. "For most of the *padas*, there are plural *charanas* and those with *jatis* or *sollukattus* were intended for dance". He was known as *Sahitya bhoja* of Thanjavur.



Vasudevakavi who adorned the court of Sahaji was a great *padam* composer who was proficient in Tamil, Telugu, Sanskrit and Manipravala. Ramabharati was also known for his scholarship in many languages and *śṛṅgāra padas* and *varnams* where Sahaji was the hero. Pattabhiramayya has also composed many *śṛṅgāra padas*. All these were performed by court dancers of yesteryears.

Virabhadrayya is one of the earliest composer of *Svarajatis*, His huseni *svarajati* is very popular among dancers. *Varnams* and *Thillana*. North Indian musical form *Tarana* became popular in Thanjavur during the period of Virabhadrayya. Based on these *taranas* he composed a *Thillana* in *Pantavarali* which was the earliest. His *mudra* seems to be *Achyutavarada* in many of his songs.

Melattur Venkatarama Sastri was the composer of many dance dramas of *Bhagavatamela* which are full of emotional content. *Rukmangada Caritra*, *Usa Kalyanam*, *Prahlada Caritram* were some of the famous *Bhagavatamela natakas*. They were also known as *Yakshaganas* prior to this as the influence of *bhajan sampradaya* and *yakshagana paddatis* are seen in these. He has written *padavarnams* and *svarajatis* based on Virabhadrayya's compositions which were used in the dance dramas.

In South-India *geyanātakas* were written by great composers who lived in and around Thanjavur. *Kṛṣṇlīlā tarangiṇī* was written by Narayana Tirtha who lived in the banks of Kaveri during Nayak period. Narayana theertha's tarangam became popular in *bhajan sampradaya* of Tamilnadu. His work *Krishna leela tarangini* is the longest opera in Sanskrit was based on *Bhagavatam* and was also influenced by *Jayadeva's Gitagovinda*. *Todaya mangalam* was also taken to dance from *bhajan Sampradaya*. Utthukkadu Venkatasubbier wrote songs on the story of Krishna the presiding deity of Uthukkadu which were collectively known as *Raasa Sabda*. Thyagaraja who wrote *Prahlada Bhakti Vijayam* and *Nauka charitram*, Arunachala Kavirayar's *Rāmanātakam*, Gopalakrishna Bharati's *Nandanar caritram*, etc. were very popular.

Conclusion

Thanjavur Quartet, the four brothers Cinnayya, Ponnayya, Sivanandam and Vadivelu have set a milestone for present days *Bharatanatyam*. Their grandfather Gangamuthu nattuvaran who was invited to Thanjavur from Tirunelveli became a famous nattuvaran. He composed the Navasandhi Kauthuvams and was well praised by the kings. His son Subburaya Nattuvaran was also appointed in the Big temple. Thus the quartets were also appointed in the temples as *Odhuvans*. They learnt carnatic music under Muthuswamy Dikshidar. Due to their prolific knowledge and dedication they became stalwarts in the field of music and dance and have recorded their names in the history of *Bharatanatyam*. They were patronized by Maratha Kings, Mysore king Chamaraja wodeyar and Travancore King Swati Tirunal.

Thus the kings of Thanjavur have been patrons of music and dance and the composers and dancers have been supported by these kings and they have been promoting these art forms to a great level.

