

THANJAVUR NATYAM



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Research Reports

'THANJAVUR NATYAM'

**A THOUSAND YEARS OLD HISTORY
WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO DANCE,
IN PARTICULAR BHARATANATYAM,
AND ALLIED SUBJECTS - MUSIC AND
LITERATURE**

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'THANJAVUR NATYAM' WITH THE NODAL
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With special reference to DANCE, in particular Bharatanatyam, and allied
subjects - MUSIC and LITERATURE.

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FINAL REPORT
concluding report 24 is a summary of the reports 1 to 23
preceded concluding notes of Tagore Fellow,
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CONCLUDING NOTES

THE ORIGINS OF THANJAVUR NATYAM

From detailed research it is obvious that Natyam or Koothu has been part of the culture of the southern region of our country from time immemorial. Prehistoric evidence in rock cut caves are still being excavated from sites with figures of human dancers in movement. The kinetics of movement if studied closely of these carvings show that there was an evolved and prescribed set of angular movements of arms and legs and feet. There also seems to be a more common depiction of warrior dancers in martial movements. It is only in the detailed descriptions of various dance forms prevalent at the time of the Silappadikaram authored by the Chera prince Ilango Adigal in Tamil dated to anywhere between the 4th and 6th centuries that we get a clear picture of the origins of the dance forms of South India which got classified into various varieties including Bharatanatyam of the Thanjavur tradition.

DANCE SECULAR – DANCE DEVOTIONAL

The most significant record of ancient Tamil Culture in its triple aspect Iyal, Isai and Natakam (Poetry, Music & Dance) is found in the epic Silappadikaram. The term Silappadikaram is made up of two words Silambu-meaning anklet and adikaram -story. It is "the story of the anklet".

To the student of music and dance it is a treasure house of source material for a correct understanding of the dance and music of the Tamil people eighteen hundred years ago. This epic, written by a Jaina Prince - Ilango Adigal of the Cera royal line is one of the five Perunkappiyams (equivalent of the Mahakavyas of Sanskrit Literature) of Tamil Literature. Like the Tolkappiyam it contains historical material picturing the social life, religious customs and artistic activities of the ancient Tamil people.

The chapters which contain extensive information on dance, music and musical instruments are: Arangetru Kadai, Kadaladu Kadai, Kanalvari, Venir Kadai, and Aychiyar Kuravai. The two commentaries, the one by Arumpadavurai Asiriyar and the other by Adiyarkunallar, who is said to have lived in the 15th century, are invaluable for the reconstruction of several topics of cultural interest. One important fact emerges clear from the study of the Silappadikaram. There were two main streams of dance — the one, secular, performed by professionals, in honour of nobility, following complex technical codes; and the other, ritual dance, part of worship, performed by lay people to invoke the blessings of their pastoral deities. Courtesans popularly known by the term 'Nataka-Ganika" were the experts in entertaining royalty with their skillful dance and music. Their talents were amply rewarded by both royalty and wealthy lay patrons. Ritual dance was more in the nature of a folk tradition. However, it was the common practice of the professional class of dancers to include mythological and devotional themes in their repertoire thus paving the way for the later fusion of the secular and the sacred in dance, with the temple as its stage.

The Silappadikaram, belonging to the category of Sangam classics, refers to the legendary origin of Natya or dance. Once, Indra, the King of the gods gave a royal audience to distinguished seers and sages in his elaborately decorated audience chambers. Jayanta, the son of Indra was also present, besides a number of heavenly dancers and actresses like Rambha, Urvashi and others. In the august presence of distinguished personages and sages, Jayanta and Urvashi are said to have behaved in an indecorous manner enraging the sage Agastya. Seeing this breach of etiquette as an offence Agastya pronounced a curse to the effect that Jayanta should be born as a bamboo stick in the Vindhya mountains and that Urvashi should be born on earth as a courtesan. When the accused couple fell at the feet of the sage and begged for his pardon, he decided to mitigate the rigours of his curse. He proclaimed that from that time onwards, the institution of Dancing would be popularly identified with Jayanta and that from Urvashi would begin a long line of dancing girls and actresses in the world. Thus we find that Madhavi, the dancer par excellence of the Silappadikaram is said to have descended from the heavenly dancer Urvashi. At the very outset she is referred to as a Nataka Ganikai making it clear to us that the arts - particularly music and dance were one of the main vocations of a courtesan who enjoyed a special status in society.

RITUAL DANCES AND THEIR CONTENT

The ritual dances performed by the dancers employed in the temple were simple movements illustrating the sacred lyrics propitiation deities as prescribed by the Agamas in specific sites within the temple, and also on specific occasions for the purpose of sanctifying every corner of the temple. The important fact is that the forefathers of the Tanjore Quartet composed the lyrics and the dances specifically for the Brihadeeswara temple as they were employed in this temple. The deity Brihadeeswara was their Kula Deivam. The Ashta Dikpala are the eight points of the rectangular or square space surrounding the sanctum housing the deity. The points were marked by what is known as Bali Peetams. They are seen even today in the big old temples

and are regularly sanctified at prescribed times in the course of the day like dawn, mid morning, noon, early evening, late evening and so on. Nowadays the priest goes with holy water, sprinkles it on the Peetams which are little stone mounds which are modelled in design on an inverted lotus as we see in the sculpting of the base of pillars. In the olden days, the centre point was right in front of the Dhawaja Sthambam, that is the flag staff which faces the sanctum. This staff is made of wood, and often grandly covered by sheets of brass which gives it a golden hue. In rich temples like Tirupathi the flagstaff is in fact covered by gold plated sheets.

LORD NATARAJA AS THE GREATEST EXPONENT OF DANCE

Perhaps the most widely recognised representation of Hinduism in India and around the world is the image of the dancing Siva. Although there is a wide variety of dancing Sivas, the most familiar form is known as NATARAJA, ‘King of Dancers’. Whether we are talking of concepts, imagination, philosophy or even just words, we fall short in describing the image of Lord Shiva Nataraja by mere words.

The image of Nataraja as a supreme statement of art is represented through the magnificent bronze sculptures of South Indian.

Nataraja dances his *Ananda Tandava* or dance of bliss. It is said that he first performed his dance of eternal bliss at Chidambaram, the heart of the world, accompanied by consort, Sivakamasundari. Nataraja dwells in the heart of every person and the very sight of him at Chidambaram can free one from the cycle of rebirth.

Lord Nataraj’s dance is the supreme art, and its scope embraces all possible themes of human life. Nataraja’s dance can never be separated from music – sangita includes vocal and instrumental music, musical instruments, poetry, literature AND dance. That is why in images of Shiva we also see him as a drummer or as veena Dakshinamurti –Shiva’s very limbs are composed of sangita.

Lord Nataraj chooses the dark dusk of the evening for his dance with the mild tone of the moonlight. This darkness is lit up by his own effulgence and splendour. His mesmerising body, graceful and powerful, his hand gestures gentle and firm, the moon on his crest, a flame in his hand, and the hood of snakes as ornaments. Nataraja's dance can only be comprehended by other celestial exponents of sangita like Brahma, Hari, Indra, Narada or Skanda, who are spectators of his dance as the right audience. Not only do they watch and applaud the dance of Shiva, but also join in to create orchestral music. Vishnu takes up the Mardala drum and starts the musical sound of dance, Brahma takes up a pair of cymbals to keep the time, the Veena played by Sarasvati, and the sound of Indra's flute keeps the world spellbound. Shiva's love for dance and music are found in the Puranas where he is referred to as Vadya Nritya Priya, he who is fond of both music and dance. Or as, Nityaritya, Nartana, Gitasila.

Shiva as the personification of music and dance is described prominently in ritualistic offerings. The ancient rishis would not only extol Shiva by the chanting of the Vedas but also through offerings of dance and music. Shiva as the master of dance is reflected in his name, NATARAJA, the eternal dancer.

Nataraj's dance is not just Tandava, he dances without restrictions and excels when he combines his rudra tandava with laya, which has sringara as its main theme, and expounds this through abhinaya. The combination of these two rasas is seen in Shiva as Ardhanarishvara.

Nataraja's dance or natya is the supreme art as it embraces all themes of life. Just as it is possible in sculpture or painting, there is no theme not possible in interpreting natya. Natya is so supreme and refined that any shade of meaning can be expressed by the movement of limbs, gestures of the hands, expressions on the face. The Vishnudharmottara refers to a close connection between dance and painting, and Ratnakara reiterates the connection between dance sculpture in Haravijaya 33.3 –wherein the dancing damsel captivated

her audience by presenting dance with picturesque stances and movements of her limbs as if she were a sculpture.

Nataraja's dance, and dance in general is not without purpose but has a message for life. To live life through a path of righteousness and truthfulness. With this view lord Brahma created the supreme art of natya, also referred to as the fifth Veda, compiled by Brahma with essence from the Rigveda, Samaveda, Yajurveda and the Samaveda, which is mentioned in the natyasastra. The Puranas often refer to Shiva's as the very essence of natya. The Vishnudharmottara visualises the dancing Shiva as Nataraja as the personification of natya himself.

The purpose of Nataraja's dance is a representation of the pancha kritya, the five activities of Nataraja –srishti or the creation and evolution, sthiti or preservation, samhara or destruction, tirobhava or illusion, incarnation, and anugraha or salvation.

The dance of Nataraja is believed to symbolise the action of cosmic energy in creating, preserving and destroying the visible universe. The Puranas say that during these dances the whole congregation of gods, demigods and saints present themselves to render their obeisance to Siva as Sabhapati – Lord of the assembly of gods.

At the golden hall of Chidambaram, Nataraja dances his ananda tandava, the joyous dance of the soul within the heart of oneself. Nataraja dancing with the vina is significant of his supreme knowledge as sarvaina. Siva as ashtamurti symbolises omnipresence. Lord Shiva as Dakshinamurthy, Nataraja and Vinadhara as a composite concept suggests his divine omniscience.

For many centuries poetic descriptions of Shiva Nataraja's beauty and form have been part of literature. His movements when he dances, his garments, the Ganga, the moon and the snakes and his dance. Verse 13, 57 of the Raghuvamsa is perhaps the most well-known description of Shiva – snake

ornaments on his chest, neck and shoulders, creating a colourful effect of interspersed black and white, garlands of lotuses and lilies and sapphire. Ratnakara's Haravijaya depicts Shiva as the ash smeared form, grey colour serpents as his armlets, a garland of blue lotuses on his chest. Bana's description of Shiva as the hermaphrodite, Ardhanarishvara as a blend of colours, white with ashes, and the breast of Ambika on the left side covered with dark deer skin. Shiva is capable of laya and tandava because he is eternally Ardhanarishvara.

From the 7th century onwards the cult of Nataraja started growing in South India, particularly in the Tamil country.

This is no ordinary phenomenon. It epitomises mysticism philosophy spirituality and cosmic vision of a dancing Supreme Being with no parallel in the civilisations of the world.

We have included the insightful writings of the great scholar Kodavasal Balasubramanian tracing the origins of the cult of a dancing deity. What gives credence to this historical evidence is the passionate insightful and enormously comprehensive words of the saints ranging from Thirumoolar, Karaikkal Ammaiyar, and the Thevaram Moovar Appar, Sundarar and Thirugnanasambandar. They have envisaged every aspect of Nataraja and sang in pithy verses about those esoteric yet convincing contours of a dancing god and his multifarious activities. The basic tenets of Shrishti, Sthithi and Samharam, along with the attendant acts of Nataraja find eloquent expression in all these saint's words.

It is those words that inspired the very first sculpture, paintings and other artistic depictions of Nataraja. From those origins grew the very contours and kinetics of Dance. Physicality on the one hand inspired beautiful images. On the other it made for the template for dance as a thing of beauty, with a profound cosmic purpose. Such an origin for Dance was not merely a thing of

chance. It was a cult of worship divinity and universal unity in the very concept of the idea of a Universe kept in constant cosmic movement.

The crescendo of the Nataraja cult reached its zenith under Raja Raja Chola. We will see his great contribution to Dance and music. What he universalised in his vast empire was a worship of ADAVALLAN the sacred name in Tamil for Nataraja. ADAVALLAN became a symbol. And an essential part of a life centred around the apex of a temple which eventually became an unparalleled centre for Dance and Music. We will see this magical origin when we visit this temple. Today one significant icon of the dancing god ADAVALLAN named Veethi Vitanakr by Raja Raja stands after a thousand years as testimony to the idea of Dance. He is cast in bronze, and shows us in no uncertain terms the perfect pose for Nataraja. The attributes in a nutshell are all represented. He is as he dances, creating preserving and destroying. A cosmic cycle which even scientists have acknowledged as an essential universal truth.

BRIHADEESWARA – LORD OF THE UNIVERSE

The most important aspect of Brihadeeswara is the very name.

It suggests a universal concept thought out by Raja Raja himself. It means Lord of the Universe and became the term and icon for him to rule his empire which covered a vast area of Tamil country and extended to Eelam. The Lord ruled and all the subjects had to contribute in one way or other to the building and maintenance of this edifice. The inscriptions are living proof of the contributions made by each village, each noble, each general of the army and each queen with generous amounts dedicated to multiple causes. We have copious inscriptions which describe in detail even the donations of live stock, and entire villages to serve the Lord. This was the strategy adopted by Raja to make the people believe they are part of an empire which they owed allegiance to.

In the same spirit every temple was made to contribute the best talents in Dance, Music and other skills to serve this temple.

DANCERS AND MUSICIANS RECRUITED FROM THE LENGTH AND BREADTH OF THE CHOLA EMPIRE

Four hundred women, mainly dancers belonging to the community of Devaradiyar were found attached to various big temples renowned for their antiquity and for their support of artists. It is notable that from Thiruvavur a large contingent of fifty were recruited proving that this temple had been already the centre for dance and music since the time of the Nayanmars, notably Paravai Nachiyar who married the saint Sundaramurthy Nayanar. Such personalities are the stuff of legends. A study of Tiruvavur Thyagaraja puranams is a must for understanding this temple and what it stands for. Raja Raja was aware of this and respected the importance of its place in Tamil cultural history.

The well-known facts about the inscription which details a whole list of dancers and others numbering six hundred are there for all to see and study. They were accorded the privilege of serving a great king, a great temple and above all Brihadeeswara. It is to be understood that they sang and danced too for this Shiva in glorious Tamil. To their aid came the Panniru Thirumurai composed by Manikkavachakar, Appar, Sundarar, and Gnanasambandar. They were in fact rediscovered by Raja Raja after decades or centuries of being lost. With a vigour unprecedented in the history of Tamil the hymns were restored as tools of worship. They have remained so for a thousand years!

A dark period of 100 years followed the fall of the Chola empire. With the kingdom of Vijayanagar coming into power came the Nayak rule of Tanjore. Sevappa Nayak was deputed to Tanjore. A warrior by profession he was soon successful in resurrecting Tanjore and its culture. A renaissance of extraordinary proportion, similar to the golden era of the Medicis of Italian Renaissance took place under the Nayaks.

Brhadeeswara regained some of its past glory. One remarkable addition that Sevappa made is the shrine for Subramanya within the precincts of the Brihadeeswara temple.

SHRINGARA AND ITS DOMINANT INFLUENCE ON POETRY, MUSIC AND DANCE

– Brhadeeswara was the ultimate object of Shringara. The kings and their devotion to this favourite deity and the dancers who in turn expressed their devotion with songs of LOVE addressed in pithy poetry to God and king straddling the two worlds ...temple and palace –

The above is a unique phenomenon pertaining to the Art, Culture and Ethos of the great civilisation of Tanjavur. It is the soul, life, spirit and essentially the character of...Tanjavur Natyam.

The idea of Shringara or Love is the most common to man in any civilisation. They say it is a timeless emotion. According to all the Sastras including the *Natya Sastra* this emotion or Rasa is the King of Rasas. Why....for it commands the attendant transient Rasas numbering thirty three and many more variations. *Madhavi*, the courtesan who sang and danced to love songs of the epic *Silappadikaram* (4th century) reflecting her own personal state of mind. But later, another idea inspired poets and writers of tales. That is *Madhura Bhakti*. The devotee-poet sings with passion seeking the love of the Lord. The love is extraordinary for it embodies a magnificent obsession which is beyond the self. The devotee, a man speaks as a Nayika or heroine. In fact all the poets and composers were Nayikas even if they were men and the Lord was the only man. To attain him was their goal. They gave themselves to him unconditionally, body and soul. They spoke of an esoteric emotion and to explain it or illustrate it, sang of physical and intimate love in uninhibited terms. Their sensuality and unbridled Shringara is illustrated not merely in poetry, but also in sculpture, as in the temples of India.

Sangam poetry had love themes (in poems known under the generic term *aham*) of a delicate nature, but it was eclipsed by the later *Alvars*, Vaishnavite saints of the pre-mediaeval period who have sung some of the most extraordinary love lyrics of Tamil. Except *Andal*, all were men and their verses are sung even now in temples and homes as the epitome of bakthi. Lord Vishnu in his many avatars commands extraordinary and passionate love, reaching a zenith in his Krishna avatar. These verses are recited as part of worship in all Vaishnavite Temples. Furthermore there is a particular ritual known as *Arayar Sevai* which is a special performative ritual practiced in Vaishnavite temples particularly Srirangam. Generations of a priestly community known as Arayars recite the whole anthology of hymns (four thousand known hymns, known as the *Nalayira Divyaprabhandam*) with accompanying gestures almost in the form of a dance akin to Abhinaya, in Srirangam temple throughout the month of *Margazhi* (December 15th or so to January 14th). The songs of *Nammalvar* are featured prominently in this ritual. Of all the twelve alvars, saint poets devoted to Vishnu who lived and sang their songs in the period sixth to ninth century, Nammalvar and his hymns are predominant examples of poems which are philosophic, poetic, direct in feeling, yet intricate in design. They set the tone and mood for others to follow, over decades and even centuries. *Chaitanya* of the 16th century, *Jayadeva* who wrote the *Gita Govindam*, and others who wrote in pan Indian languages later used the same themes, such as the Lord's creation as play (Lila), his incarnations, Krishna's childhood, Lord and devotee as lover and beloved, to name only a few.

THE NAYAKA ERA - INTRODUCTION

During the renaissance of the Nayaka period of Tanjavur there was continuous experimentation with genres centered in the courtly culture of the time. The finest example is the Telugu Yakshagana, dance drama that dominated the scene. Several Yakshagana were composed by court musicians and poets with various themes including mythology and history. The competitive atmosphere brought about great performances by trained artists.

Staging of such plays became a privilege as the king of the day was the patron who rewarded the artists liberally. The stories naturally were mostly drawn from familiar Puranic and folklore, and audiences enjoyed the retelling of stories as enacted musical plays. Literature and performance became closely knit in the court as well as outside in performances. A sub genre, namely the *Kuravanji* or gypsy drama in Telugu and Tamil found a special place. The *Tyagesar Kuravanji* focused on Tyagaraja the deity of Tiruvarur, and became part of temple ritual, danced by particular temple dancers' families of Tiruvarur. The gypsy lovers and their candid sensual love is a direct contrast to the hallucinatory courtly love portrayed by the heroine for the deity she longs for. A literary masterpiece is Tirukoottarasappa Kavirayar's *Kutrala Kuravanji* centered on Shiva of the temple of Kutralam. It is danced even today at Kalakshetra, originally choreographed with the help of Tanjavur experts by Rukmini Devi. The vast courtly literature related to performance continued in the Maratha period and leads to the vast corpus of Devadasi dance and musical texts, namely Pada Varnams, Padams, and Javalis and other genres. Telugu and Tamil speaking Devadasi dancers and singers active in court and temple preserved performed and extended this astonishing corpus throughout the late Maratha regime and early modern and colonial period until the dance of the Devadasi was proscribed by law under British rule.

TEMPLE RITUALS, MUSIC & DANCE —AGAMAS & THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE DEVADASI SYSTEM

The word *Devadasi* in Sanskrit or *Devaradiyal* in Tamil means servant of god in a temple. She was a dancing-girl dedicated to the service of God in a temple. The Devadasi system can be traced back to Tamil epics such as: *Silappadikaram*, *Manimekalai*, and *Jivaka Chintamani*. These epics contain a lot of information on the various kinds of music and dance. Among the ancient literature *Agamas* bear direct evidence to the development of the devadasi system in the medieval period. They are treatises on temple building and temple worship. They elaborate the Indian tradition of temple building,

icon making and details about rites and rituals. Ritual worship of a deity in a temple consisted of offering food to the deity to the accompaniment of ritual dancing and ritual singing - *Tantras*, the Agamas appear to have evolved from the pre-aryan Indian cults and were intended for all irrespective of caste considerations. In the absence of related material on ritual worship, the Agamas have gained much significance in South India after the fifth and sixth centuries A.D. - *Kamika Agama* elaborates the role of *rudra-ganikayar* in temple worship, particularly in ritual dance and ritual music. Besides other features, the temples built in accordance with rules of *Silpasastra* consist of the *nrttanamdapa* (dance hall), where the devadasis staged their dance performance. Details of *Silpa* (architecture), *Bharata* (dance) *Gita* (music), and *Vadya* (instruments) are found in the Agamas. The Agamic prescriptions helped the systematisation of the devadasi institution in the temples. Therefore the Agamas are of primary importance in tracing the history of the system in Tamil Nadu.

Agamas are classified into Saiva, Vaisnava, Sakti (cult of the Mother Goddess) and Kumara (cult of Muruga). The Saivagamas are twenty eight in number. They are grouped under Kamika Agama, Suprabha Dagama and Vathulagama. The Vaisnava Games are broadly divided into Vaikhanasa and Pancaratra. The latter is said to consist of 108 samhitas (collections). The Sakti Agamas are numbered as seventy seven. All these Agamas are assigned to a period from the ninth century A.D. to the twelfth century A.D. - But their hold in Tamil Nadu has already been noticed by St. Appar in his *Padihams* in the seventh century A.D.

The *Pallava-Pandya* age from the seventh to the ninth century A.D. appeared favourable to the growth of the devadasi system. In the seventh century A.D., there came a political and cultural awakening in the country. The political awakening is evident from the overthrow of the *Kalabhra*s from power and the emergence of the *Cakravartin* model of kingship. The Agamic traditions and the Bhakti Movement, coupled with the Puranic stories, which began to

spread farther into the country, brought about transformation in society. They propagated a different form of religion in the country. The Puranas which contained myths and legends about gods, made their entry into the cultural stream of the Tamil land through North Indian systems and values. They advised the devotees to dedicate their girls in hundreds to the service of God as a sure means of attaining salvation. The Agamas, the works of the priestly class on ritual religion, laid much stress on the Agamic form of temple worship. They prescribed the ways and means of introducing singing and dancing in ritual worship. They informed the people that God took delight in their dancing and singing. Meanwhile, the *Bhakti Movement*, spearheaded by the Nayanmars (Saivite hymnists) and the Alvars, (Vaisnavite hymnist), also propagated the significance of dancing and singing in ritual worship. Convinced of their devotion and dedication, princes, priests and people joined them in their endeavor to bring about a socio-religious transformation. This change in attitude contributed to the institutionalization of the devadasi system in temples.

THE NĀYAK RAJ - A GLORIOUS RENAISSANCE OF MUSIC, DANCE & LITERATURE

The solo presentation of dance by the devadasis as well as dance drama groups flourished simultaneously during the music and dance renaissance under the Nayak and the successive Maratha dynasty. During the reign of the Nayaks, Tanjore became the source and center for the development of literature, poetry, dance, music, and painting. The many varieties of *Tanjore Natyam* were performed in solo and group at the royal court specially to please the King.

The dynasty of the Telugu Nayaks of Tanjore comprises roughly a period of about a hundred and fifty years from the second quarter of the 16th century to the third quarter of the 17th century. The Nayaks started their kingdom as loyal feudatories under the patronage and authority of the Vijayanagara emperors, but grew in the course of time to be an independent sovereign

kingdom. The Nayaks were never disloyal to their overlords as they were related to the imperial house and it was only during the time of the last ruler that Tanjore lagged behind in extending her helping hand to the kings of Vijayanagar. The ancient Chola country and its capital, Tanjore became the center of all their activities and it may be said that the period of their rule formed the connecting link between the period of Chola rule and the intrusion of foreign powers into the land. The land after the decline of its indigenous Tamil rulers, passed on under the sway of Telugu rulers coming from the north and after them the Marathas of the west, before it came to be absorbed in the British dominion at the end of the 18th century.

Archaeological remains belonging to the Tanjore Nayaks are mainly found in Tanjore and its immediate neighbourhood. The Seppaneri (named after Sevappa Nayak), the feeding reservoir to the present Sivaganga Tank, the remains of the fort, the almost unidentifiable and disappearing moat around it, the dilapidated palace walls, the temples at Mannargudi and Kumbakonam and the Vallam fort—all these supply us with much of historical details and have their own story to tell of their once pristine glory. Even at the present day, a large body of Telugu speaking people live in various places in the heart of the Tamil country is another instance of the steady migration that took place from the Telugu country during the period of the Vijayanagar and Nayak rule. Their rule was equally noted for its moderation as for its equity and though they were foreigners in the Tamil country at the time of their advent, they made Tanjore their home and became quickly an integral element of the country and continued the traditional policy of protection of the subjects and patronage of religion, arts and letters.

THE NĀYAK RAJ - A BOUNTIFUL ERA OF CULTURAL TRADITIONS

The cultural atmosphere of the Chola dynasty and of the Vijayanagar dynasty seems to have had a definite and lasting impact on the Nayak rulers, who were vibrantly enhanced by the rule of the earlier dynasties. The Nayaks

were great patrons of learning and attracted erudite people from other parts of the country by holding literary durbars frequently. The Nayak era ushered in an exuberant growth of fine Telugu and Sanskrit literature. Liberal grants to mathas and temples were given, considered important centres of learning. The presence of numerous poetesses shows the high level of culture and learning attained by women. It was during the reign of Acyutappa Nayaka (A.D. 1560-1600) that the magnanimous ruler who was a lover of arts, endowed the entire village Unnatapuri (later named: Atchutapuram, Melattur) to 500 brahmin families called 'Bhagavatars' —who were the practitioners and promoters of *nritya natakas* or dance dramas. These families made the village the center of the famous Bhagavata Mela natakam. It is this privileged place, which later produced many illustrious composers of music and dance.

The glory of the Nayak rule reached its highest point during the reign of King Raghunatha Nayaka (A.D. 1600-1634) and his son Vijayaraghava Nayaka (A.D. 1634-1673) who were not only liberal patrons but were men of letters, accomplished royal artists and were credited with many scholarly writings in the field of music, dance and dance-drama compositions. *Telugu Yaksagana*, is a form of dance-drama which gained its highest popularity during the Nayak rule. The yaksagana is a dramatic composition set to music and sung and acted upon on the stage accompanied by instrumental music.

Ramabhadramba mentions skilled women artists, who were past-masters in the art of dancing. King Raghunatha is said to have witnessed such dance recitals and the palace itself contained a stage, on which palace dancers danced to the accompaniment of musical instruments such as the Veena and Mridangam, all played by women musicians.

THE SOURCE OF NATYA NATAKAM IN TANJAVUR

The idea of a dramatic stage performance can trace its roots to the origin of Puranas which tell the stories of celestial beings, their lives, battles, loves, and establishment of Right over Wrong in a world beyond the mortal. Actors took roles to perform stories which had before that been merely recited, or

told in congregations to enlighten people about the efficacy of a traditional moral order in the universe, in their world and in the human landscape at large. Antiquity points to the Natya Sastra where one finds a pointer to the custom of recruiting actors to perform. Natya or the theatrical art has its origins in the gods themselves. It is interesting to note that Acting seems to have been an activity which was common to all be they celestial beings or mere mortals. The myth of the origin of theatre in India, told at the very beginning of the Natyashastra, or the Drama Manual, shows the central role of theatre and dance in Indian culture. Natya, the art of theatre (including dance), was the work of God Brahma, the creator, who was asked to give mankind a fifth Veda, which, unlike the four earlier Vedas, could be understood by everyone, even those who did not know Sanskrit (i.e., the two lowest casts). Thus Brahma created the Natya Veda, with the assistance of other gods. Natya was then taught by God Brahma to the mythic sage Bharata, who is said to have recorded this teaching in the Natyashastra. The origin of the book is thus shrouded in mythology, but the work itself is indeed living reality. The Natyashastra is probably the world's largest and most comprehensive theatre and dance manual, and it still forms the foundation of the classical forms of theatre and dance in India. The instructions of the Natyashastra became established through centuries of practical theatre work. The compilation of this treatise dates back most probably to the second century AD, although the tradition formulated in it was older. Most probably it preserves information and practices that for generations had already originally been conveyed orally.

DANCE DRAMA THEATER —Ancient Times: Nāṭyaśāstra-A summary

The Natya Sastra is the world's oldest treatise on performing arts. It is more than 2,500 years old. This encyclopaedic work on art by Bharatamuni is divided into 36 chapters and contains more than 6,000 verses. Natya Sastra's thirty-six chapters give instructions on almost all aspects of theatre and dance: the theatre building, the stage, the theory of poetry, the use of the voice, make-up, costume, acting styles, dance techniques, and even theatre

criticism. *Rasa*, or “taste” or “essence”, refers to the sentiment that the bhava, manifested by the actor, should evoke in the audience. The rasas were originally eight in number, but the post Natya Sastra tradition added a ninth one.

1. Erotic (srngara)
2. Comic (hasya)
3. Pathetic (karuna)
4. Furious (raudra)
5. Heroic (vira),
6. Terrible (bhayanaka)
7. Odious (bibhatsa),
8. Marvellous (abhuta)
9. Tranquil (shanta)

BHAGAVATAMELA — Nāṭakam of South India

It is remarkable that no period of ancient Tamil land was really barren; for, in some part of the land, some genius was flowering and enriching some form of music or dance. In and around Tanjavur, with its magnificent Brihadeeswara temple and the fertile banks of the Cauvery river, therein were born some of the greatest poets, dancers and musicians. Abundant patronage of the Nayak and Maratta dynasties had musical luminaries from all over South India flock to Tanjavur and flourish there as *Samasthana Vidvans* for many centuries. *Bhagavata Mela* is one such remarkable South Indian Art that reached its pinnacle of excellence in Tanjavur and its surrounding areas.

Bhāgavata Mēla — Ancient Dance Theater

The *Uparupaka* Chapter of the *Natyashastra* is crucial in tracing the historical context and development of Indian dance-drama, which applies music and dance movements. It would be appropriate to divide the history of dance into two major periods: from the second century B.C. to the ninth century A.D., and from the tenth century A.D. to the eighteenth century A.D. During the first period Sanskrit had a firm hold on intellectual life and its rich literature

endowed the development of all arts in the country with unity and continuity. In the second period there was a significant development of the regional styles. The latter half of this period coincides with the growth of the various regional languages. The Sanskritic tradition continues beyond the tenth century A.D., suggesting what happened not only to the dramatic tradition but also to the theatrical traditions of India. By the time of ‘Karpuramanjari’ (a drama by Rajasekhara, ca.1000AD) it is evident that the pure drama form had given place to the musical play. The growth of the musical play later on generally determined the dance-drama forms of the regional languages in the later medieval period. Karpuramanjari was perhaps akin to what is today known as operatic drama.

Bhāgavata Mēla — Patronage of the Maratta Kings

A crucial point of the development of Bhagavata Mela was during the time of the Maratta dynasty. From the palace records we can infer that Bhagavata Mela was performed at the Sangeetha Mahal, and received high praise from the Raja and connoisseurs of music and dance. Bhagavata Mela enjoyed bountiful patronage at the hands of Raja Shahaji (1687-1710), when many villages in and around Tanjavur became the stronghold of Bhagavata Mela. Under the rule of Raja Tulaja II (1764-1787), Bhagavata Mela dramas were enacted during important festivals such as the *Arubathimuvar* festival at the Adikum Besar temple in Kumbakonam. Raja Serfoji-II, and his son, Raja Sivaji II were the last of the royal patrons of Bhagavata Mela, and it was during their reign that Bhagavata Mela Natakam was professionally staged at the Sangeeta Mahal of the court. Detailed documentation and administration became part of the court proceedings, and the Bhagavatars could now consider turning their art into a paid profession.

Bhāgavata Mēla — Performance Rituals

Bhagavata Mela dance theater has a deep connection with Vaishnavism, in particular with Lord Narasimha, the man-lion incarnation of Lord Vishnu. Bhagavata Mela, in its structure presents songs, dances, dialogues and spoken word which gradually unfold the dance-drama. A balanced combination of gestures and postures (*angika*), words (*vachika*), representation of

temperament (sattvika), decoration, costumes, make-up (aharya) gives the dance-drama its unique form.

Bhagavata Mela in Madras — Dance-dramas of Rukmini Arundale

Bhagavata Mela in Madras —A path breaking experiment by Rukmini Devi Arundale, and a precursor to communities other than Isai Vellalars becoming aware of the artistic worth of Sadir. Followed by Brahmin girls plunging into the learning of ‘Bharatanatyam’, an offshoot of the old Sadir.

When I was in high school and a junior in college my home was an open house to many people even remotely connected with the Arts. They probably visited us even before that, but I was rather young to observe them with more interest in their work and background. Hailing from Tanjavur, my parents always had contact with that region and the people who lived in that remarkably artistically rich region. I was given to understand that my Father and his brother would both go to Melattur to see the Bhagavata Mela ritual performances as it was quite near their father’s home in Papanasam. I think the adventurous K. Subrahmanyam, my uncle even donned a *vesham* once just for the fun of it when requested by the families of Melattur. In Santhome where we grew up, our house was situated strategically near the Mylapore temple and its environs. On 10 Sullivan street which was a quiet road with pretty Portuguese style cottages, was our lovely Art-deco type three storied bungalow with a vast jasmine garden and a driveway from the street. Anybody going to Marina beach for a walk or for a holy dip on special days walked past our house and we being the only family known to practically all Mylaporeans, they would stroll in to have a chat with my mother.

One such person was Kalyani Ammal, daughter of Natesa Iyer of Melattur. More about him later, for he was the pioneering revivalist of the Melattur Bhagavata Mela festival held every summer in a manner suitably authentic to its original form and structure in both stage craft and particularly its inimitable music. Kalyani Ammal visited us often by sunset, while we, my

siblings and I were playing or reading on the verandah. Our traditional living room was the room where visitors were welcomed with coffee and made to sit for a while on the iconic cane chairs. I knew Kalyani belonged to the great Bhagavata Mela families. One evening she came with a notebook and was discussing the contents with my mother. She then revealed that Rukmini Devi had asked her to bring it over with a plan of producing some of the dramas at Kalakshetra. She would not have known that Rukmini Devi would cast her spell on those old dance dramas for eternity. They are enacted today with the same authentic flavour of Bhakti, Raga bhava, Melody, dramatic allure, and sophisticated re-imagining of ancient ritual dramas. But Rukmini Devi went one historic step further.

Bhagavatamelam featured until then only young men and boys playing the female characters and learning Bharatanatyam or rather the courtly *Sadir* technique from Nattuvanars for the purpose. Nattuvanars came to Melattur to teach them, and also conduct the relevant parts of the drama with Sollukattus. Thus was born a cultural ethos in the Bhagavata community, exclusively Brahmin, endowed with rich lands and villages by the Nayak and Maratha kings of Tanjavur to enact their Natakams. The visionary king of Tanjavur, Achutappa Nayak provided the Bhagavatars and their families with the comfort of life, so they could carry on their musical, scholarly and Vedic vocations.

For me as a researcher of Tanjavur Natyam, the Bhagavata Mela is an important artistic and social history phenomenon. Anthropology experts may also find interesting features in the human element in the artistic and religious developments sparked by the Brahmin communities in the Tanjavur kingdom. For their ritual practices the Bhagavatars used their skills in languages such as: Telugu, Sanskrit and Tamil. They had eminent musicians who were the composers following the libretto written by scholars well versed in the Puranas. For dance they had to get the expertise of the Nattuvanars who till today go to Melattur to teach the pure dance and

Abhinaya to the boys and conduct the Natakams. What is most significant is the interaction of Brahmin artists with the Nattuvanar or Chinna Melam community. Young men and boys of the Brahmin community learning Sadir in my opinion opened a new road that led to the awakening of interest in Sadir by the conservative Brahmins in general. It may have even led to an interest in taking up the art by young Brahmin girls in and around Tanjavur. They were just opening the gates before the catalytic Madras music and dance syndrome took over in the early twentieth century caused by migration of Chinna Melam families, particularly the Nattuvanars and some prominent young female dancers of the community. A new wave began in Madras. That part of the history of Bharatanatyam is the most important milestone in the modern history of this dance art.

Rukmini Arundale's Kalakshetra Natakams

The efforts of Rukmini Arundale to bring the dance-dramas from the village temples to Madras dates back to 1950 when she visited Soolamangalam (along with E. Krishna Iyer) to see the Bhagavata Mela Natakam staged there. At the invitation of Rukmini Arundale, Kalyaniammal came to Kalakshetra, and with the assistance of Balu Bhagavatar she guided Rukmini Arundale to mount the production of *Usha Parinayam* using the original text. The text was edited by Telugu pandits and the dance-drama was produced on the lines of Kalakshetra productions. While reconstructing the dance-dramas, Rukmini Arundale followed the traditions prevailing at Melattur with the expert assistance of Balu Bhagavatar who spent around three years at Kalakshetra. And so on March 3rd, 1959 a traditional Bhagavata mela natakam was staged at Madras. In the same year *Rukmangada Charitram* was also staged. The enactment of both natakams with appropriate scenic arrangements, music, costuming, and acting was considered a landmark in the history of dramatic performances in Madras. Rukmini Arundale produced three dance-dramas in the Bhagavata mela format: *Usha Parinayam*, *Rukmangada Charitam*, and *Dhruva Charitam*.

ANALYSIS OF THE TRADITIONAL DANCE-DRAMAS

Rukmini Kalyanam — Introduction written by Rukmini Devi

The production of Rukmini Kalyanam began with the idea of presenting another of the Melattur Bhagavata Mela dance dramas. The first was *Usha Parinayam* which has already been presented to the public and the second was *Rukmangada Charitram*. The first was presented in the traditional style though there were certain changes and improvements in the costumes and presentation. Rukmangada was also in the traditional style with a few more dramatic changes. I find that the Bhagavata Mela dance dramas always have the same pattern and often lack the stage sense. Using the great Melattur Venkatarama Bhagavata's composition I have made a departure according to my own ideas in this production. The music is mainly as has been handed down, though much has been added and changed for the purposes of the dance drama with the help of Sri Thuraiyur Rajagopala Sarma. I have also introduced into this drama many Padams and slokas from Pothana's Bhagavatham. I find that for the modern public the long speeches or Vachanas have to be cut short and therefore there has been a departure in many ways though I have used the traditional and classical style of the dance of Bharatanatyam. It is inspiring to present these wonderful stories from our Puranas and from the lives of the great Ones who have inspired our nation. The story of Sri Krishna and the marriage of Sri Krishna with Rukmini are indeed well known to all and there is no need to explain it further. I wish to thank Srimathi Kalyani Ammal Daughter of the famous Sri Natesa Bhagavathar of Melattur, for kindly lending us their manuscripts of Rukmini Kalyanam from which the script and sahityam for the present production has been taken. I am grateful to her for all the help that she has given. The great Sanskrit and Telugu scholar Sri S. Venkatachala Sastry of the Besant Theosophical High School has been giving us invaluable help. To him also I express my gratitude.

SYNOPSIS

King Bhishmaka expresses his wish to Queen Rukmangi to arrange the marriage of their daughter Rukmini to Krishna. He announces their plan to the court, which rejoices. The news enrages Rukmini who decries Sri Krishna as the cowherd and as he who killed his own Uncle Kansa. He extols his Friend Sisupala, asserts that he is the fittest match for Rukmini and says he will arrange the wedding accordingly.

KURAVANJI NATAKAM

Kuravanji is essentially a religious dance-drama part of oral traditions stemming from dance forms enacted in the ancient South Indian temples. The dance-dramas, in its current form appears to be over 300 years old and had a wide appeal in South India with found manuscripts written not only in Tamil but also in Telugu and Kannada. From the 17th century a transition from temple to court took place as the Kuravanji began to be part of the Tanjore court culture, with successive kings serving as erudite patrons to dance and music in general. In the royal courts the Kuravanji retained its form of presentation as was done in the temples, along with the basic content revolving around a heroine, a hero, and a Kurati or gypsy as the main storyteller. With the end of the Tanjore kingdom as well as the smaller kingdoms of Tamil Nadu, and the abolition of temple dance in 1947, the Kuravanji (and other dances) was in dire straits of finding itself new appropriate places to be staged. Presently, the Kuravanji dance-drama is alive and presented on the proscenium through the great pains taken by dance-masters (nattuvanars who started teaching non hereditary dancers) and staged by their disciples with a high standard of choreography and music.

A short general synopsis of the dance-drama known as ‘Kuravanji’

In Kuravanji Natyam the basic story revolves around a fortune teller associated with the Kurava hill tribesmen, who proclaims to foresee the future by reading the palm of the protagonist. The protagonist, seeing a deity

or nobleman or passing by in procession, falls in love with him. She is from a wealthy family, and is surrounded by her sakhis (friends, haidmaids) to whom she divulges her love. They console their mistress who is overcome with pangs of separation. The sakhis call upon a Kurati or gypsy fortune teller who predicts that the heroine will one day be united with her lord. As a reward, gifts of jewelry are bestowed upon the Kurati as a reward for her predictions.

Kuravanji is an ancient form of danced dramas originated by the *Kurava* tribe in South India. These hill tribes would enact dance plays in the hill temples during festivals when the townsmen gathered there. The later compositions (in royal courts from the 17th century on) are similar dance-dramas, and are refined adaptations of these dramas retaining the traditional characteristics of the Kurava tribes. In Tamil Nadu the dramas were thus called Kuravanji. Today, Kuravanji is part of important dramatic literature as its lyrical poetry is sung to suitable music and to be interpreted with the refined language of *Mudras* and *Abhinaya*, and it combines the three aspects of Tamil literature: *Iyal* or poetry; *Isai* or music, and *Natakam* or drama. The Kuravanji is also included in the list of Prabandas.

ROOTS OF KURAVANJI

Enactment of hymnal songs as an offering to the gods has been a tradition of Hindu Temple festivals of South India for centuries. The Alvars or Vaishnavite saints who are known to be the authors of the magnificent compendium the NALAYIRA DIVYA PRABHANDAM lived more than a thousand years ago. In a well understood Tamil language, their poems are to this day used in worship as ritual chants, songs, and above all as a dramatic offering in which words, music and Abhinaya (expressional dance movements) come together in a play presented in the presence of the deity of the temple on a particular day during the festival in the month of Margazhi (Dec.15 – January 14). Those who have been performing the special ritual music recitation and dance are from hereditary families of savants known as

ARAYARS. This ritual performed on special occasions, and particularly once a year is known as ARAYAR SEVAI (the offering or benediction by Arayars). This is unique as a ritual especially in the Srirangam Ranganatha temple. We propose here to establish not merely the antiquity of this ritual performance but to put in perspective as the roots of the later Kuravanji Natakam . The Kuravanji both as literature and performing art can be traced to the Mutthukkuri of the ARAYAR SEVAI.

SRINGARA IN KURAVANJI NATAKAM

The predominant sentiment in any Kuravanji Natakam is sringara rasa, of the vipralambha nature, in short: feelings of desire and love whilst in separation from a beloved. The nayika or protagonist of the drama sees the Lord in procession, and she is immediately struck with feelings of desire. But her desire to be with him remains unfulfilled. This type of sringara finds ample scope in all the kuravanjis. The nayika loses interest in all comforts of life; nothing soothes her agony which she expresses in various ways.

Since the nayika is also *mugdha*, or one who has not experienced love's pleasures (*rati*) she will represent love in ten stages. Of the ten stages, *abhilasha* or longing arises from efforts born of desire, and the wish that leads to the means of meeting him. The nayika goes out to see where the beloved was seen first, she then speaks to the messenger words such as: "by what means and in what manner will there be union with my beloved?" She sighs and again is lost in her thoughts of her beloved, and disliking other engagements, she reminisces about him only *anusmrti* - that is, being engrossed in thinking of him she does not attain composure in sitting or lying in bed and remains without going about her usual day.

When the sakhis (friends, handmaids) of the nayika, in an effort to divert her mind, comfort her, put on her dresses and jewellery to decorate her, she rejects these refineries and says that it is no use getting ready when there is no prospect of being together with her beloved. When a sakhi plays on a

musical instrument, she cannot bear it; another handmaid anoints her body with sandal paste to cool it off, so to remove the *viraha tapa*, but she is unable to find comfort in such remedies. Another sakhi gently fans her but the breeze bothers her; the mating sound of the kokila birds pierces her ears; the rays of the moon strike her like arrows; she loses appetite, does not like drinks or sweets; she is restless, loses sleep and suffers from the pangs of separation. She blames them all, the moon, admonishes Manmatha, the cool breeze and the kokila bird. She implores the clouds, wind, birds and the moon to carry her message to her lord.

TANJAVUR MUSIC & Dance OF THE MARATHA KINGS

Maratha period and palace records in Thanjavur —It is on record that Kottayur Sivakozhundu Desikar composed the Brihadeeswarar Kuravanji in the 18th century. This was during the reign of Serfoji II.

The Serfoji reign saw a Renaissance for all aspects of devotion to Lord Brihadeeswara and the Big temple. Earlier Sahaji has composed songs on the lines of Krithis in praise of Brihadeeswara. Compositions of remarkable depth and variety in Ragas were composed by Muthuswamy Dikshitar in praise of Brihadeeswara and the goddess Brihannayaki. Following their Guru DIKSHITAR the Tanjore Quartet too composed worthy Krithis on Brihadeeswara. It is said that Sivaji the last king also composed songs on Brihadeeswara.

The Thanjavur palace, centre of Culture for more than 300 years

The palace was built by the Nayak dynasty in 1550. They started the Saraswathi Bandaram library, and placed enormous numbers of palm leaf manuscripts, paper manuscripts and artefacts in this centre of learning. It was developed further during the Maratha rule and they added to the Telugu, Sanskrit and Tamil manuscripts, and their own Modi manuscripts.

These Modi manuscripts are valuable for the study of the literature, social history and artistic records of the Maratha period. In Serfoji II period, he himself was the author of a Telugu Bhagavatamela Natakam *Mohini Mahesh*

Parinayam. The date recorded is November 22 1804, and Serfoji as the author. The records show that it was staged for 4 days during the Vasantha Utsavam in the temple. The manuscript also names the artists who participated in this Bhagavatamelam drama.

According to the manuscripts twenty Bhagavatamelam Natakams are preserved. The authors are king Tulaja, Sarabhoji Raja, and the court Composer Rama Pandithar.

The Maratha rule from 1675 to 1850 saw the following kings and queens: EKOJI, SAHUJI, SARABHOJI I, THULAJA, BABASAHEB, SUJANBAI, PRATAP SIMHA, TULAJA II, AMARASIMHA, SARABHOJI II, SIVAJI, AND KAMAKSHIBAI SAHEBA.

This 275 years of Thanjavur history witnessed the extraordinary Renaissance of music, dance, and drama in both the Temple and other Temples of the kingdom and the palace.

Almost as a tribute to their patronage and devotion to the Brihadeeswara temple, their colourful portraits are seen on the walls of a special Mandapam built by Sivaji II in front of the Subramanya shrine in the Brihadeeswara temple. The larger than life paintings on the walls display not only royalty but also a Hindushthani Dancer, a Sadir dancer in period costumes. Courtiers and soldiers are also seen in typical gear. But it is the kings and queens who we see in grand royal regalia, painted in vivid detail, making us admire them with awe, and respect for their Culture, and patronage of the Arts.

Taṅcai Mahārajah Bhōsala Śāhaji (1684-1712)

The Mahratta dynasty that ruled the Tanjore kingdom between 1673 and 1855 may best be described as a golden era of literature, philosophy, dance, music, and the development of Art in general. Scholars and artists of the highest order were patronised in the royal court. The Maratta kings themselves were often erudite scholars who have left behind a treasure trove of artistic expressions through music and dance, that is yet to be unearthed in its entirety, today. Śāhaji, the scholarly prince and great admirer of the Arts,

was the second Mahratta king to be elevated on the musnud of the Tanjore kingdom.

Śāhaji was the oldest son of Maharajah Venkoji, and the second Mahratta king to rule over the Tamil land and its capital, Tanjore. He ruled from 1684 till 1712 (he became an ascetic 1710), and died heirless at the young age of forty. The king ascended the throne at the early age of twelve, but the administration was carried with great ability and success, with the ministers of his father to advise him. Sahaji and his brothers ruled jointly; Serfoji I who lived at Sakkottai (near Kumbakonam), and Tukkoji (Tulaja) who lived at Mahadevapatnam in Mannargudi. After the death of Sahaji, Serfoji ruled jointly with Tukkoji till his death in 1728, after which Tukkoji remained the sole ruler till his death in 1736. (See timetable) During his rule, king Sahaji improved the fort at Tanjore, built choultries and hospitals for which he secured physicians from Arabia, and he established civil and criminal courts.

THE CULTURAL FRAGRANCE OF TANJAVUR PADAMS

Padams during Nayak times

The cultural fragrance of the Padam as a musical and dance composition can be traced back to the glorious Tanjavur Nayak dynasty, which flourished during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Under the reign of king Vijayaraghavanayaka (1634-1673), himself a master in the theory and practise of music and dance, the court poets composed several dances such as the *Navapadam* and *Darupadam*— danced exclusively by court dancers, Lokanayaki and Ratnagiri, in the presence of the king. The padam became highly popular during this period, and it is said the court dancers performed many *Madana* and *Dutya* padams. Many poets and poetesses were patronised by the king, who honoured his subjects with royal insignia such as gold, pearls and titles for their poetical talents.

A pathbreaking and timeless contribution during the Nayak times is a collection of songs known as, ‘Kshetrayya’ padams; sung and danced at the

Tanjore court of King Vijayaraghava. It is said that a thousand Kshetrappa padams were presented in the presence of the king. The poetry of the padams consists mainly of *Vipralambha Sringara* of Lord Krishna's love and is intensely erotic and less devotional, although the Nayaka is referred to as *Muvva Venu Gopala*. The Nayika of the padams is significantly left unnamed and the community background is left undescribed as insignificant.

When it comes to the performance of the sringara padams it is appropriate to suppose that the padams were performed in an intimate setting, on a palace balcony, close before the king with the court dancer in a sitting posture without any movement of the legs—to express the intimate feelings depicted in the poetry. The royal courtesan would take place on a wooden seat covered with a soft rich carpet, and under a set of lights and torches, to create the perfect intimate atmosphere. Several other courtesans would stand in the background, perhaps waiting their turn to perform for the king. The eyes of the king transfixed on the court dancer who rendered the padams with exquisite abhinaya and mudras, keeping *sruti* with the *tambura*, operated by the dancer herself, as she was equally proficient in the art of dancing and singing and, thus, the best interpreter of the music and meaning of the padas. The fact that most of the padams are set in Tripata talam (Lagu 3 +drutam 2 +drutam 2= 7 beats) and *Vilambita* or slow pace in itself is an indication to use the poetry in a sitting performance. To bring out the delicate erotic feelings through *Satvika Abhinaya* to its fullest extent must have mattered the most. (Even as recently as the early part of the twentieth century it is known the padam love songs were performed in a seated position during performance—today referred to as 'saloon' or chamber concerts).

Kshetrappa has made an incomparable effort of poetry of *sringara* and *bhakti sahitya* combined with exquisite music, employing a range of ragas; kalyani, *mohana*, *surati*, and *kedaragowla*, to name a few, in effort to depict the mood of *sambhoga* and *vipralambha* sringara. The use of a slow tempo and subtle gamakas provide a detailed interpretation of the raga of the pada, and enable equally detailed abhinaya expressing the mood by the dancer. The musical

excellence of abhinaya padas also made for easy instrumental rendering on the *vina*.

Around twelve Kshetrayya padams extol the virtues of the King. The Padam: *Samanyamukade - Vahi Pondu* in raga Kambhoji details the unique characteristics, the literary and artistic accomplishments of the King. The mudra 'Muvva Gopala' of Kshetrayya is not mentioned in these padams. The Caranam of the poetry goes as follows:

*'...One must be mature and clever
Respond to his poetic and lyrical exercises
Efficient so as to read and write his lovely lyrics and, as a musician, capable
of presenting the charms in melody
Must be dexterous in dance, softly stroking on Tambura, expanding melodic
structures
Should sing away sonorous songs about him and talk, preconceiving his
whims...'*

PADAMS OF THE MARATHAS OF TANJORE

The change of rule in the third quarter of the seventeenth century, from the Nayaks to the Marathas (the last of the Tanjore kingdoms) did not, as is usual with foreign invasions, produce any serious unsettlement in the existing social and other conditions of the people of the land. Earlier military successes have always meant a full stop, and particularly Art and other non-political activities vanquished. This was never the case with Tanjore; after the Nayaks, the Maratha rulers have been even greater patrons of literature and art in general than their predecessors.

The magnificent Tanjore palace library (Saraswathi Mahal) has been built from the nucleus left by the Nayaks. The important results of their rule were the migration of a large number of Telugu speaking people into the Tamil land and the evolving of a colloquial form of Telugu with a large admixture

of Tamil words. The library holds the greatest of manuscripts libraries and its unique value lies in the fact that it has preserved the literary works of authors spread over three and a half centuries. The collections which date back as early as the mid-fifteenth century were continued both by the Nayaks and their successors in power, the Marathas. The most notable contributions of the Nayaks during their harmonious rule is still apparent in the field of literature, music and dance.

King Sahaji's padas referred to as *Tyagesa padas* are soulful padas with a variation of lyrical themes (sringara, bhakti, etc.),

The king took exceptional interest in nurturing dance and music, with the darbar of the court hosting frequent performance of padas. The Abhinaya padas have scope for expressing subtle feelings of sringara. The padas must have been the songbook repertoire of the court dancers, performed to extol and arouse the king. Next to his major operatic works, Shahaji poured out his soul in innumerable Padas on Tyagaraja Swami. In total, these are called „Tyagesha Padas” - out of which some survive even today in the contemporary repertoire of the Nagaswara musicians at Tiruvarur. King Sahaji's padas referred to as *Tyagesa padas* are soulful padas with a variation of lyrical themes (sringara, bhakti, etc.), set in a slower tempo to facilitate ample space between the words, providing the dancer to imagine varied ideas relevant to the theme of the song. Just like the pada varnam, padams can be demanding for any artist to prove their range of imagination in exploring in-depth interpretations of the poetry, to bring out the varied emotional state of nayika and nayaka. The structure of a padam is made up of three main sections: *pallavi* —in which the core idea of the song is introduced; *anupallavi* —elaboration of the theme; and two or three *caranam* stanzas the resonant mood of the song is fully established.

The padam in the *nirupana* repertoire of king Serfoji included two versions — a pada, also known as *svarapadam* included *svara* passages between *anupallavi* and *caranam* stanzas — this form is rarely seen today. *Abhinaya*

padam was purely an expressional dance without solfa notes; consisting of pallavi, anupallavi, and charanams. Padams of this type are usually *srīngāra rasa* themed depicting the different shades of emotions between the protagonists or *nāyikā-nāyaka bhāva*. However, the nirupana padam also includes devotional poetry, based on the theme of the nirupana. The abhinaya padam is still part of present day bharatanatyam repertoire.

THE TANJORE QUARTET

For Bharatanatyam practitioners around the world the city of Thanjavur (Tamil Nadu) is synonymous with the magnificent 11th century Brihadeeswara temple, and the marvellous masters of dance, the Tanjore Quartet. They were the master archers in creating a ‘new’ syllables for the basic dance units of Bharatanatyam, the Adavus, as well as an afresh repertoire – Margam. The adavu system, as they imagined it, and the Margam is still the backbone of today’s Bharatanatyam.

The Tanjore quartet belonged to a hereditary family of musicians. They were the sons of Subbarayan, a nattuvanar (master in fine arts) attached at the Tanjore court of Tulaja II. His four sons, Chinnayya (1802-1856), Ponnayya (1804-1864), Sivanandam (1808-1863), and Vadivelu (1810-1847) grew up as the disciples of Muthuswami Dikshitar, and later became grand Vidwans of the royal courts of South India.

It was during the reign of Maharajah Serfoji (1799-1832) that several hundred accomplished musicians were employed at the palace at any given time. These musicians would flock from all over India to Tanjore, the epicentre of dance and music. Although performances by these musicians were frequent, only once a year each of these court Vidwans had the privilege of a performance in the presence of the king. So also four brothers: Chinnayya, Ponnayya, Sivanandam and Vadivelu - later simply known as the Tanjore Quartet. Although there were several other important dance families at the court, it was these four brothers who set off a one-of-a-kind relationship with Raja Serfoji, as well as with his successor, and son, Raja Sivaji. This artistic relationship most likely started when the quartet presented their maiden dance composition, the pada varnam– Nee Saati Dora– which celebrated the greatness of the king. The varnam was praised so much so that the king stated there was no other Bhairavi varnam equal to this one.

The cosmopolitan court of Raja Serfoji created the right atmosphere for the further development and refinement of music and dance. The palace darbaar or music and dance hall was filled with creative outlets of art. This inspired the brothers to reimagine and innovate a “new” repertoire for dance. At the behest of the Maharajah, the quartet recodified the adavu system, and wrote a treasure trove of dance repertoire exclusively for their royal patron, with the eminent courtiers as the sole inspiration for the poetic lyrics.

The reasons for reimagining the dance at that specific time was for the adavus to have a contemporary version of the existing system. For the repertoire of the precursor of the Margam, the Nirupana, was that it was simply too long of duration, with similar dances more or less repeated. There was also a growing need to more accurately document and preserve art, still keeping in mind a dark period between the 14th and 15th centuries, during which South Indian cultural traditions were irretrievably broken.

With this refined standardised adavu system, and a new repertoire, the ‘Sadir Margam’, the Tanjore Quartet created a dynamic courtly dance that would not only appeal to the Raja, but also to his melange of art connoisseurs from around the country and the world. It is this dance that evolved into the ‘Sadir Chamber’ dance of the early twentieth century, and later on into Bharatanatyam presentation for the proscenium stage.

The Tanjore Quartet is synonymous with reimagining a previous courtly dance into the dynamic exclusive palace dance – *Sadir Margam* – a performance repertoire that was not only meant to appeal to the king but also to his melange of art connoisseurs from around the country and the world. It is this dance that evolved into the *Sadir Chamber* dance of the early twentieth century, and later on into *Bharatanatyam* presentation for the proscenium stage.

List (no.1) of published compositions of the TANJORE QUARTET:

ALARIPPU : description

The conductor (Nattuvanar Guru) should begin by reciting the Sorkattu with the syllables Tha they thatthaam (Thatthakaaram). The Dancer should face the audience standing in Sama position, feet together, and in a meditative posture hold her hands in Anjali hasta above her head in an obeisance gesture, and move her neck and head from side to side in the Attami

movement. This is the beginning of Alarippu and is known as Sabha Vandanam or Sabha Vanakkam. To embellish this the eyes and eyelids move in a variety of angles, coordinated with different Angas of the body using appropriate gestures accompanied by footwork in varying rhythms. This is a dance number emphasising Laya and is accompanied for many avarthanas only by Sorkattus in Thatthakaaram. The speed alternates between the slow and medium pace. In the end a small Jothi korvai brings the Nrta to a close. The Alarippu can be danced in the 5 Tala rhythms – Thisram, Chathusram, Misram, Khandam, and Sankeernam. The Sorkattu syllables are common to all Alarippu: ThathThai thatthaam, etc.

JATHISWARAMS:

Ragam.	Talam
Todi	Thisra Ekam
Sankarabharanam.	Thisra Ekam
Atana.	Thisra Ekam
Bhairavi	Thisra Ekam
Kalyani	Thisra Triputa
Todi	Adhi
Kamas	Thisra Ekam
Ragamalika	Misra chapu
Sankarabharanam	Misra Chapu
Saveri	Thisra Ekam
Chakravakam	Thisra Ekam
Kalyani	Thisra Ekam
Vasantha	Thisra Ekam
Hemavathi	Misra chapu
Purvikalyani	Chatusra Adi (Sankeerna Nadai)

Of the above list Nattuvanars taught at least 5 or 6 of the Jathiswarams to students in the early 20th century in Madras and popularised them. It is proposed to do audio recordings of the lesser known ones for performance repertoire.

SABDAMS

All the SABDAMS begin with Kambodhi Ragam and some go on to use a Ragamalika format for the following charanams. Commonly Kambodhi is followed by Ragas like Nattakurinji, Kalyani, Surati, Madhyamavathi, etc. They are all in Misra Chapu tala.

Srikarasuguna	Misra chapu
Sadhayadana	Do
Sami Ninne	Do
Sarasijakshulu	Do
Nirathamuni	Do
Gokulambudhi	Do
Venyuda	Do

Note – Guru Ellappa had taught the last Venyuda in Karaharapriya Ragam followed by Ragamalika.

Other composers from the Nattuvanar community have composed Sabdams which will be recorded.

SWARAJATHIS

Gopala	Dhanyasi	Adi talam
Sami Nee rammanave	Atana	Rupakam
Samiki	Todi	Rupakam
Sarojakshiro nasamini	Yadukula Kamboji	Rupakam
Sadaya Ika tala	Chakravakam	Adi
Emandhayanara.	Useni	Rupakam
Netiki	Sahana	Rupakam
Sami Mel	Chakravakam	Rupakam
Kana Avalanen	Kambodhi	Rupakam

CHOWKA VARNAM also known as PADA VARNAM

Manavi	Shankarabharanam	Adi
Sami Nee rammanave	Khamas	Adi
Sami Nee rammanave	Bhairavi	Adi
Sarasalanu Ipudu	Kapi	Rupakam

Samika Natha	Mohanam	Adi
Sami Napai	Dhanyasi	Adi
Nee Saati Dora	Bhairavi	Rupakam
Sarasa shikamani	Kalyani	Rupakam
Karuna Judave	Atana	Rupakam
Dhanike	Todi	Rupakam
Sarojakshiro Evela	Kedaram	Adi
Dani Sati Podi	Todi	Adi
Sami Ninne	Yadukula Kamboji	Adi
Sami Neeveyani	Kalyani	Adi
Calamujesithe	Anandabhairavi	Adi
E maguva bhodinchara	Dhanyasi	Adi
Sami Ninne	Navaragamalika	Rupakam
Mohamana	Bhairavi	Rupakam
Sakiye	Anandabhairavi	Adi
Athi moham	Sankarabharanam	Adi
Mohalahiri Konden	Todi	Adi
Sarasudu	Vachaspathi	Adi
Intha Kopamelara	Todi	Adi
Sarojakshiro Vibhuni	Kambhoji	Adi
Neeye Arulayo Thaaye	Bhairavi	Adi
Sami Unnai	Reethigowlai	Adi
Sarasasijakshudu	Kalyani	Rupakam
Samiyai Azhaithu	Kalyani	Adi

THANA VARNAMS USED IN DANCE

Calamela	Sankarabharanam	Kanda Ada
Sarasija	Kambodhi	Kanda Ada
Nivanti Samini	Kamalamanohari	Adi
Pantamela Na Sami	Anandabhairavi	Adi

COMPOSERS OF TANJAVUR NATYAM

It is well known that of all the Indian Natya styles, what is known today as Bharatanatyam with its roots in Tanjavur has had an incomparable and

significant content of Abhinayam in its performance. Already the core idea of a Padam, broadly meaning a love poem was well understood and well known in the art of the Tamils and in their literature, namely the *AHAM* poetry of the Sangam and pre Sangam eras. The voice of the protagonists, namely the hero, heroine, the Friend and the Mother of the heroine all speak of love in poetic language. The poet's who wrote these verses knew the *Ainthinai* or the Landscapes which inspired and induced love among men and women. Some of the Sangam poets were ordinary minstrels, some were women, and some were even kings.

A prince among poets Ilango Adigal wrote the epic love poem the *Silappadikaram*. The seaside, moonlit nights, love in union, love in separation all form part of the story. Perhaps a performative padam or love song is first observed by us in the character of *Madhavi* in the *Silappadikaram*. She is a dancer, well trained, etc. But her plaintive love song is sung by her, playing the *yaal* (*ancient Veena*) addressed to her lover Kovalan. Centuries later, this moving picture is recreated by a young Dancer, seated in front of her king, playing a veena or a tampura and singing a love song or Padam addressed directly to her beloved king. The focus shifted to a personal God as envisaged by the Composer or Vaggeyakara. From the ancient Tamil of the *Silappadikaram* we move to the contemporary court language -Telugu to bring out the essential and elaborate Nayika Bhava in 16th century Tanjavur. Prabhandam was the name given first to all such compositions. The ancient precursors of court musicians were Saint-singers like the Vaishnavite Alvars who became the Nayika or heroine addressing the only hero - their beloved deity.

The legacy of Padams of the Tanjavur court and kingdom is largely lost because as we understand, thousands of songs were composed by innumerable composers, among whom there were also the kings of Tanjavur. The oral tradition was interrupted many times due to historic, political and social upheavals. We did not have the distinct advantage that Tamil language

and literature had in a scholar like U.V. Swaminatha Iyer, who played the pioneering role, searching for the great poems and literary treasures of Tamil hidden as paper and palm leaf manuscripts in remote collections of homes and palaces. With a monumental effort he had them all published. We know of certain individuals who published lost Padams in the Telugu language. But we are handicapped because unlike Tyagaraja or Muthuswamy Dikshitar or Syama Sastry and a few other Carnatic music composers who had distinct **SISHYA PARAMPARAS**, to pass on the authentic notations, as well as methodology of singing their compositions, Padam composers did not have a SISHYA parampara of known lineage.

The Renaissance of Natyam changing from being known as *Sadir* to *Bharatanatyam* was guided, shaped and conducted by the Gurus known as Nattuvanars from different villages of Tanjavur. All of them had several generations of Nattuvanars and musicians in their lineage. Some had old family notebooks. Most only retained Padams in their memory and knew that in the new order of performance a Padam or two should be part of an evening's repertoire performed on an urban proscenium stage. These Gurus knew that the mood of the Padam had to be re-invented because their urban students were not Court dancers, and they were not dancing in front of a king, and also that the idea of eroticism expressed in a Padam had to be approached with great restraint and subtlety. Understanding a Padam was not the problem. Performing a Padam was a challenge not so much for the student but for the teacher who had to do justice to the Nayika Bhava with subdued emotions, restrained mudras and underplayed erotica while teaching largely ignorant students.

It is appropriate here for me to quote from my 2008 book:

“Women of Pride: the devadasi heritage” —Introduction, p 5

“I was taught one of the first Telugu *padams*, a slow lyrical dance in the Raga Sahana, based on a love poem composed by Sarangapani in the early

eighteenth century. It was addressed to Venugopala or Krishna playing the flute. In the *padam* the Dancer addresses the deity to whom she is attached:
My husband beckons me.
I must go, my beloved.
Forget you, I never shall.
Beautiful benevolent Venugopala,
When I was an unknowing child
He tied a *pottu* around my neck.
Like a lotus that blooms at sunrise
The distance between us matters not.
I place my devotion at your feet.

END

Guru Heramabhanatha master classes in Kalakshetra



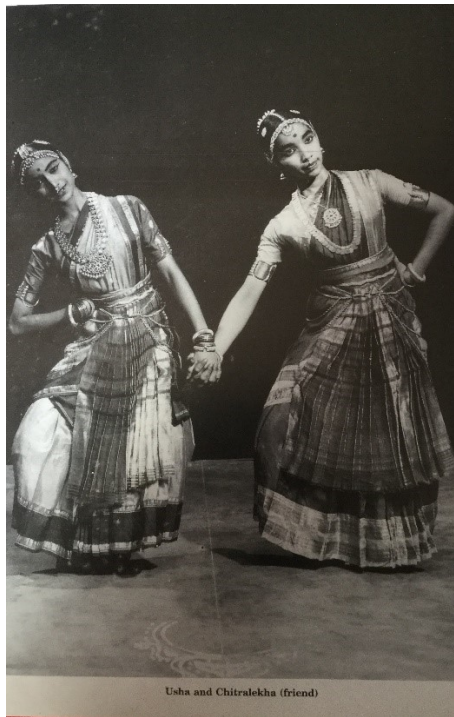
Master class of MANDUKA SHABDAM with Guru Shanmugam





Bhagavatamela dance dramas of Rukmini Devi





TANJORE DEVADASIS IN KURAVANJI NATAKAM



THANJAVUR PALACE DURBAR HALL SETTING FOR NATYAM



TANJORE QUARTET BROTHERS CHINNIAH AND PONNIAH



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“Thanjavur Natyam—a thousand years old history”

with special reference to DANCE, in particular Bharatanatyam, and allied subjects -
MUSIC and LITERATURE

By

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