

## MĀRGAM OF DANCE CONTRIBUTION OF THE DĀSI-S OF THE TEMPLES AND THE COURTS

-- METHIL DEVIKA

‘Only Jagannathji saw my performances on a daily basis although I performed for processions once a while. It was a private moment for us when I was ushered into the sanctum sanctorum to offer my dance to him. He smiled. And I knew I had performed well.’

---Sasimani Debi (last surviving devadāsi of Puri)



### Introduction

My meeting with Sasimani Debi, the last surviving devadāsi of Puri and perhaps India, put to perspective the psychological impact that the deity infused into the lives of the devadāsi-s. The dāsi cult was a pan Indian phenomenon with the Āgamaśāstra-s prescribing dance and music as one of the upacāra-s for worship. The upacāra-s are now more symbolic than actual with the traditions being reduced to a mere nṛttam samarpayāmi and a gītam samarpayāmi ; the dance and music rendered through the mind of the tantri or the priest. With the socio-political onslaughts, the temple dancers and their dance became debased. But there was a pristine past where they brought in good omen (being never-widowed), prophesied calamities, donated lands and were respected.

The following essay traces the evolution of the present repertoire called mārḡam in the hands of the dancers who performed in the temples and the courts.

The dāsi-s themselves were segregated into different classes of dancers. There were those who performed only in the sanctum sanctorum, those who performed within the temple but outside the sanctum sanctorum, those who performed in the dance theatres like the nangiār-s, and those who performed in processions, for the kings and the public. The ones who performed in the sanctum sanctorum were under the veil and never seen by the public. Deepti Omchery Bhalla in her 'Vanishing Temple Arts, mentions this class of dancers as the devāngana-s who were considered equal to the Lord's consort and only to be seen by the Lord.<sup>1</sup> They were pious and not approached by anyone. They performed rites in the sanctum similar to the tantrī priests and performed gestures of esoteric value and not particularly communicative. A similar ritual called the kaikāttummurai is mentioned by Saskia Kersenboom in her celebrated work on the dāsi -s.<sup>2</sup> One finds that as one goes down the ladder from sanctum to the more public spaces, the dances became more stylized to elicit appreciation and fortune, and the dancers, more approachable.

### Traces of Repertoire in the Early Texts

The repertoire of Indian Classical Dance can be traced to the Uparūpaka-s and the Nṛtyaprabandha-s mentioned in the early works of Dance and Music like the Abhinavabhāratī, Avaloka, Sṛṅgāra Prakāśa and Bhāva Prakāśa. From the Nāṭyaśāstra and to the regional texts the dance aspect in drama-s took new dimensions. From the Uparūpaka-s and the Nṛtyaprabandha-s, nṛtta develops into a separate stream with specific identities and which was ekāhārya. In its course, one finds many aspects of the caturvidhābhīnaya<sup>3</sup> of nāṭya missing, thus making it more stylized like the nāṭyadharmi mode of representation. The vācīkābhīnaya hardly existed and it is replaced by accompanying singers, and songs are particularly written for the dance. If in the rūpaka, a whole story was enacted and dance and music formed part of the drama, in uparūpaka or nṛtya -prabandha, only a part of the theme

was represented and music and dance was a major part. The present day content of the repertoire of temple dances can be traced to the sṛīgadita, dombika, bhānika and citra-kāvya of the Nṛtyaprabandha-s. Thus we see how nr̥tta which was a part of drama in Bharata's Nāṭyaśāstra evolved into a full-fledged music-dance recital with its own characteristics.

### **Lāsyā**

Although the term lāsyā has always been associated with graceful dance or dance of women, it is in the medieval texts that it included repertoire of the dancers of temples and courts. Bharata, after his mention of the Daśarūpaka, mentions the word lāsyā, soon after he describes the rūpaka-s, bhāna and vīthi. He states that lāsyā is ekāhārya like the bhāna. It has its origin in the vīthi means it can have the nine rasa-s and various ways of representing love through music and dance. It is one aspect that can apply to the drama-s or be derived from it. It is to be danced by a single danseuse and the performance comprises a series of emotional pieces which may be interlinked into a continuous theme (ekārtha) or stand each separately (pṛthagārtha) just as in a Bharatanatyam recital. Here Bharata mentions it like being a sequential way of performing a recital. <sup>4</sup>

Apart from these lāsyāngas, there are deśī lāsyānga-s mentioned in Saṅgītaratnākara and Jayappa's Nṛttaratnāvali. Sarangadeva and Jayappa mentions dances like the gondāli, perani, prenkhana and the jakkini. Most of these are found in the repertoire of the dāśiāttam. Sarangadeva also mentions the mārgi or the śuddhapaddhati which is ritualistic and to which the puṣpāñjali and the todayamangalam can be traced.

### **In this regard, V. Raghavan discusses;**

Of this lāsyā, we have a continuous view all through history and all over the country. Literature and epigraphy, sculpture and painting show that this art of the nati flourished in two main venues where it was patronized, the court and the temple. In between these two, were the social and festive occasions when this was enjoyed by people in domestic and public places? The Kāmasūtra, the works of Kālidasa,

Śūdraka, Bāṇa and Daṇḍin, the Kuttanimata, the Rājatarangiṇī, the Kathāsaritsāgara, the Bhanas, all these give us a full picture of the richness, beauty, appeal and popularity of this art.<sup>5</sup>

### The Repertoire and its Ancestral Names

The common names found in the present dance repertoire is todayamangalam, ganeśa stuti/kautvam, alārippu, jātiswaram, śabdham, varṇam, padam, jāvali, tillāna, śloka and mangalam. Although developed by the Tanjore quartets for the court dance sadir, this repertoire has origins in the dāsiāttam practiced in various temples in Southern India.

The term lāsya in the period between 16th and 19th centuries not only meant grace but was a synonym for the dance repertoire that one calls the mārgam today. Treatises extolling lāsya like the Sangītamuktāvali of Devanacarya Vijaynagar Sangīta Darpanam of Chatura Damodara, Rājagopālavilāsamu written by Cengalavakala Kavi and the Raghunātha Nāyakābhyudayam by King Vijayaraghava extol lāsya and the repertoire, many of which are from the dāsiāttam.

The formal repertoire of solo Indian Classical Dance forms is an outcome of the codification that happened in the hands of the Maratha kings. The names of the pieces in the mārgam may be different but the content and philosophy is inspired by the nirupana format of the mārgam designed by the Raja Tulaji in Tanjavore.<sup>6</sup> The 18 items of the nirupana were jaya jaya, śaraṇu śaraṇu, alaru, sollu, sabda, varṇam, pada, svarajati, abhinaya pada, tillāna, abhinaya pada, jakkini, gīta, prabandha, tṛputa, śloka varṇa, kautta, mangala or mangaje.<sup>7</sup> One can further trace these items in other treatises. The Sangītamuktāvali of Devanacarya Vijaynagar of the 15th century mentions puṣpāñjali, mukhacāli, yatinṛtta, rāgānga yatinṛtta, śabda yatinṛtta, rūpa yatinṛtta, dhvāda, śabdacāli, sudasabda, and sudagita.<sup>8</sup> The sollukkettu, puṣpāñjali are adapted from dāsiāttam. Sollukkettu is akin to yatinṛtta, and jatiswaram to rāgānga yatinṛtta. Just as the śabda yatinṛtta lead to the śabdham, the rūpa yatinṛtta lead to the varṇam. It is this systematic format of the Nirupana that inspired the Tanjore quartets to codify the mārgam into

the concert-based repertoire of the court dances called sadir. The first varnum for dance was composed by Muttuswamy Deekshitar for the dāsi of Tiruvarur called Kamala. It was called rūpamu jūci and is still widely performed.

Lāsyā also included dances done during the time of processions with the dāsi-s performing frontmost in the line of the procession. The Rathotsava of Tiruvarur is famous for the propitiation and entertainment performances of the devadasi-s who play compositions like the nalanku, ūñjal, lāli(lullaby), ottam and the pallaki seva prabandham-s.<sup>9</sup> Names like puṣpāñjali, jakkini, perani, prenkhana, kavittam, and kanduka nṛttam (ball dance) also come in great measure in texts on dance written during the 16th to 19th century. Rājagopālavilāsamu written by Cengalavakala Kavi and the Raghunātha Nāyakābhyudayam by King Vijayaraghava both written during the Nayak period AD 1532 to AD 1675 discusses the deśi lāsyā pieces. Rājagopālavilāsamu discusses dances such as caupada, śabdacintāmaṇi, jakkini, perani, darupadam, deśinavapadam, koravu.<sup>10</sup> Raghunātha Nāyakābhyudayam mentions perani, jakkini, durupada kelika, durasaina koppu, kuravañji, śivalīla and gujarāti deśi.<sup>11</sup> Mention of some of these is made in Bālarāmabharatam of Kartika Tirunal Maharaja where he mentions stances adopted by dancers who did jakkini nṛtya, perani and vakrāṅgi.<sup>12</sup>

### **The Transition of Content and Emotion from Temples to Proscenium:**

The repertoire and its undercurrents have altered with the changing sociological background of the dancers. In dāsiāttam and sadirāttam, the nāyika-s spoke of their longing for the lord. This longing was in a way the pining of the dāsi-s who were not only the dancers but the protagonists too. Their pieces spoke of eternal love but unrequited most of the time. For the dāsi, her audience was the deity in the sanctum sanctorum. For the sadir dancer, it was the king and the members in his court. If the lord in the former was in stone (which is believed to be bestowed with more life than the living), the lord in the latter was human. The psychological involvement of the dancers in both was different. The need to stylize and add finesse necessitated pieces like the jāvali and the śabdham in praise of the ruling king. Thus from the temple precincts, to

the palace courts and finally to the proscenium stage, the dance and the dancers evolved. The protagonists of today reflect the social uprising of today's dancer. They love, they question, they react and they revolt. Conventions are not broken but they are adhered to with bold reflections and personal experiences.

It is the powerful who make history. The fruit of what has been nurtured in the hands of the devadāsi-s that were once powerful but slumped to helplessness are savored by the present dancers who make a living literally selling the art to spectators as well as students in India and abroad. Tradition has become 'fad' and the original repertoire of the dāsi-s is of great intrinsic 'financial' value for the new generation gurus while the actual repositories of the art have struggled to make ends meet post independence.

**A Parting Word Not to be Missed:**



Reverting to the interview with Sasimani Debi, the last surviving wife of Jaganathji of Puri, the septuagenarian was asked to retire when the temple authorities found her unfit. She joined the temple at the age of eight when her parents donated her. Today, with no pension or maintenance, her frail body occupies a few feet in a small verandah in the gali-s of Puri where a better Samaritan takes care of her. The big red saffron on her fore-head, loose bangles ready to fall off her hands, and a veil on her hairless head is the reminders of her association with the Lord. Her only belongings are a sack of clothes and a photo of Jaganathji which she looks at with the coyness of a bride at one instant and with tears at the next. She whispered into my ears and confided that she missed the physical closeness of the deity. She called herself Mahari

which she interpreted as mohalla ki nāri. The expansion means 'lady of the town', but she immediately corrected saying that mohalla means 'the world', and she was married to Jaganathji, her world. As I left, she asked me if I was a dancer too. I said 'yes'. With a look of empathy, she asked me who I was married to. I exclaimed 'Nārāyaṇa!.

### References

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2. Saskia C. Kersenboom, *Nityasumangali* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1987), 61, 119.
3. The four different kinds of representation, which are, gestural, speech, décor and involuntary reaction to sentiment.
4. Dr. V.Raghavan, *Splendours of Indian Dance* (Adyar: Dr. V. Raghavan Centre for Performing Arts, 2004), 12.
5. V. Raghavan, *Splendours of Indian Dance* (Adyar: Dr. V. Raghavan Centre for Performing Arts, 2004), 15.
6. V.S. Radhika, "Development of Sadir in the Court of Raja Serfoji(1798-1832) of Tanjore"(PhD diss., University of Hyderabad, 1996), Chapter III, 66.
7. Radhika, Chapter III, 20.
8. V. Raghavan, "Bharatanatyā", *The Journal of the Music Academy, Madras*, vol. XLV, 245.
9. Kersenboom, 43.
10. N. Venkata Rao, ed., *Rājagopālavilāsamu of Cengalvakalakavi* (Tanjavore: Saraswati Mahal Library, Series no 33, 1951), 9. verse 23.
11. N. Venkataramanayya, *Raghunāthanāyakābhyudhayamu and Raghunāthabhyudhayamu* (Tanjavore: Saraswati Mahal Series No. 32), 9.
12. Karthika Tirunal Balarama Varma Maharaja, *Bālarāmabharatam* Saraswathi, trans. V. S. Sharma, (Kottayam: National Book Stall, 1982)

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