

## INTRODUCTION

# Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry : His Life, Times and Achievement

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M. NAGABHUSHANA SARMA

Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry, the doyen of today's Kuchipudi dance, was a legend in his own life time. People of Kuchipudi, including his own disciples, were evasive, slippery and inconsistent when his personal life was referred to because they knew very little about it. He moved in and out constantly even in his youthful days, and in the old age hardly came back to the village. Young boys desirous of learning from him went to him, wherever he was. If he were visiting a place, at the invitation of some patron or disciple, local Gurus, dance students and even enthusiasts who would like to be initiated into dance, saw to it that he prolonged his stay for a longer time so that they could learn from him or see him perform. He ungrudgingly shared his expertise with them, performed where connoisseurs gathered and imparted training without any class and caste discrimination.

### **Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry and the Kuchipudi Scenario :**

The first decades of twentieth century were trying days, especially for arts and letters. Traditional literary genres were looked at grudgingly; traditional arts were going out of public patronage. The reasons were obvious: new education, new awareness, alien influence - all aided by the Indian 'bravado' attitude - to embrace anything novel. Many more factors joined forces against existing traditions. If these were extraneous factors challenging traditional modes of creative expression, there was a conflict within the tradition of performing arts. Hitherto, since artistic manifestations (each artistic form served a particular socio-religious role in a given milieu), had appeared with established goals, audience patronage had been

in set modes of parametres with a marginal variability. Thus each one of the classical/folk forms had definite time-space cognition within a given context. In such a deep-rooted, ritual-based, model-fixed expressional situation, performances as a whole were regarded as a contextual necessity; and individual efforts submerged into group activities. The group or the form became important; individuals gained recognition only through the group or the form.

When things changed during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, there started intra-artistic problems. The group was no more sacrosanct, because its public image was dwindling due to public apathy. So the role of a talented individual performer came to the fore. A recognized artist could still muster enough invitations within the now limited offers. Other artists had to seek their fortunes elsewhere.

This artistic necessity to survive the onslaught of the newly-emerging cultural modes directed the destinies of all performing artists. This necessity was much more in the case of classical arts.



In the case of the rural arts, however, it would take a long time to erode the broad socio-cultural base. It is in this context that we have to understand and analyse the new expressional modes. Further, any artistic expression is geared up partly to artistic freedom and satisfaction and partly to material gains and advantages. Many of the creative manifestations were a result of these two forces – the intrinsic and extrinsic exigencies of human nature. This manifested itself when the artist is in a socio-cultural turmoil, groping for new avenues for survival, both artistic and materialistic. All creative endeavours at the dawn of the New Era are to be understood from these performative conditions, demanding the best from the artist either individually or as a team leader. The situation of the Kuchipudi art is no different.

In the changing conditions of dwindling audience support, the five Kuchipudi *melams* came together under the able guidance of Chinta Venkataramaiah, who established the Venkatarama Natya Mandali. This was done with a great vision which was a result of carefully assessing the existing demand and supply and had done well both artistically and financially. Group activity not only needed performance orientation but artistic leadership as well. This was ably provided by Chinta, with the support of a band of dedicated actors.

The case of *Bhamkalapam* was more precarious. It was, more or less, a one man presentation of an in-depth character study to connoisseurs of high aesthetic quality. With the old religious base slowly eroding, the most efficient was the most sought-after. While *Bhamkalapam* was the acme of artistic excellence in Kuchipudi art, everybody learnt it to a degree. But social and audience needs made the supply much more than the demand. So much so, very few artists survived, the most important among them was Vempati Venkatanarayana, the 'Kaliyuga Satyabhama'.

There was no third artistic mode prevalent in Kuchipudi. Some of them who could not fit into the demands of the *Yakshaganam* and *Bhamakalapam* found *Pagati Veshalu* an alternative. *Pagati Veshalu* ('Vesham' is role playing; 'pagati' means daytime) was structurally akin to *Yakshaganam* than to *Bhamakalapam*. There were characters and character interaction, there was an episode and there were costumes, make-up and music. All the assemblage was a simplified version of *Yakshaganam*.

So all those that had to come out of the *Yakshagana* group naturally fitted into *Pagati Vesham* group as it was found to be an alternative to *Yakshaganam*.

But there was a long-drawn tradition in Kuchipudi that the fittest among them would choose *Bhamakalapam* as their major vocation, assisted by *Gollakalapam*, *Dadinamma*, *Balinta* and if need be the “Radha Vesham” as well, as *Bhamakalapam* served always as the litmus-test of excellence. The case of those who were not trained well in *Yakshagana* and concentrated on the *Kalapams* had to make a major decision in seeking their fortunes. The one way left to the best of them was to find something new to garner their talents towards creating a new area of artistic expression. Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry stood at the threshold of this predicament when he accompanied his Guru, Vempati Venkatanarayana to perform in all parts of the state. While his two seniors became the leaders of the existing areas of performance in Kuchipudi, *Yakshaganam* and *Bhamakalapam*, it was left to Sastry to create a niche for himself and, in the process, became the creator of a new tradition, which was responsible for the quick rejuvenation of the Kuchipudi art itself, paving the way for many of his disciples to engage themselves, like he did, in artistic pursuits as well as to make furrows in materialistic gains as no one ever did in Kuchipudi earlier. He was a genius with a vision, who would plod on to find a new way so that others follow the path:

*Yadyata Charati sreshtah  
Tatta devetaro charaha*



Guru Sri Chinta Venkatramaiah

## The Kuchipudi Trio :

That the three stalwarts – Chinta Venkataramaiah, Vempati Venkatanarayana and Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry – had emerged as the leading spirits of the destiny of Kuchipudi speaks of their pre-eminence in their respective areas of specialization.

The eldest among the three was Chinta who had found a viable alternative to the *Kalapam* tradition, by expanding its structural potentialities into a multi-character *Yakshaganam*, which was itself a new entrant into the classical framework. With different models before him, he could easily mould a classical structure for it which had since become the *sine-quo-non* of Kuchipudi artistic excellence.

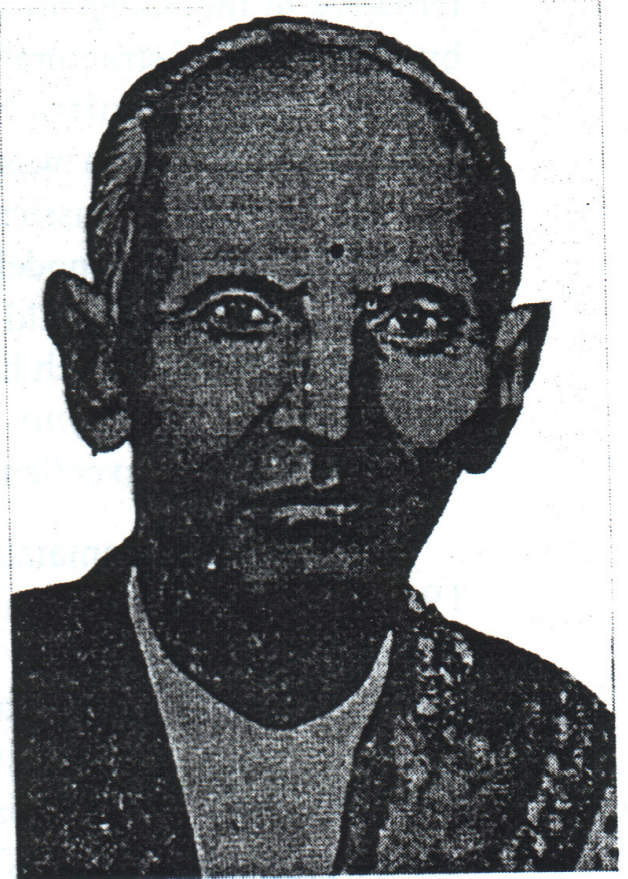
Chinta Venkataramaiah (1860-1949), born to Arundhati and Sivaramaiah, had his early training from his brother Venkataratnam and later from Yeleswarapu Narayanappa. Though basically trained in the traditions of *Kalapam*, he soon found that *Bhamakalapam*, being an elitist form, was exclusively meant for the educated and initiated *sahridaya*. With growing public education, a more popular form was needed. He found *Yakshaganam* quite handy to propel his abilities as those of his fellow-Kuchipudi actors. His experiment was a success since he carefully modelled it on the classical framework of *Bhamakalapam* but geared it up to gain favourable response from the newly emerging populace. He not only took up *Yakshaganas* of mythical importance but also obtained the assistance of actor-disciples like Hari Chalapati, Vedantam Chalapati, Vedantam Janardanaiah, Vedantam Ramaiah, Vedantam Ramakrishnaiah, Vedantam Raghavaiah, P.V.G. Krishna Sarma – names to reckon with.



Guru Sri Vempati Venkata Narayana

Venkatarama Natya Mandali founded in 1875 (?) was a true Repertoire of the best type.

The second one was Vempati Venkatanarayana (1871-1935), who became established as a *Kalapam* specialist, gaining such titles as "Kaliyuga Satyabhama" for his excellence in *Bhamakalapam*, which emphasized *sattvikabhinaya*. Born in 1871 he had his training from his father Kodandaramaiah. As records show, he was a 'complete' actor, equally proficient in *vachika*, *angika* and *sattvika*. He was an expert in *jati* presentation and had taken a 'laya-lion' like Adibhatla Narayana Dass of Vizianagaram court, by surprise. As story goes Narayana Dass was so enamoured of Vempati's whole performance that he requested him to perform when he himself would take the *tala*! The eminent performer was also known as 'Laya Brahma'. The *Laya* compositions and the *jatis* he made out of them must have been in Kuchipudi tradition for long. The personal documents of Vempati Peda Satyam contained a manuscript in which Venkatanarayana taught Subbarao, Peda Satyam's father, the *laya* tradition. This tradition came down from Venkatanarayana to Laxminarayana Sastry, his ardent pupil and to



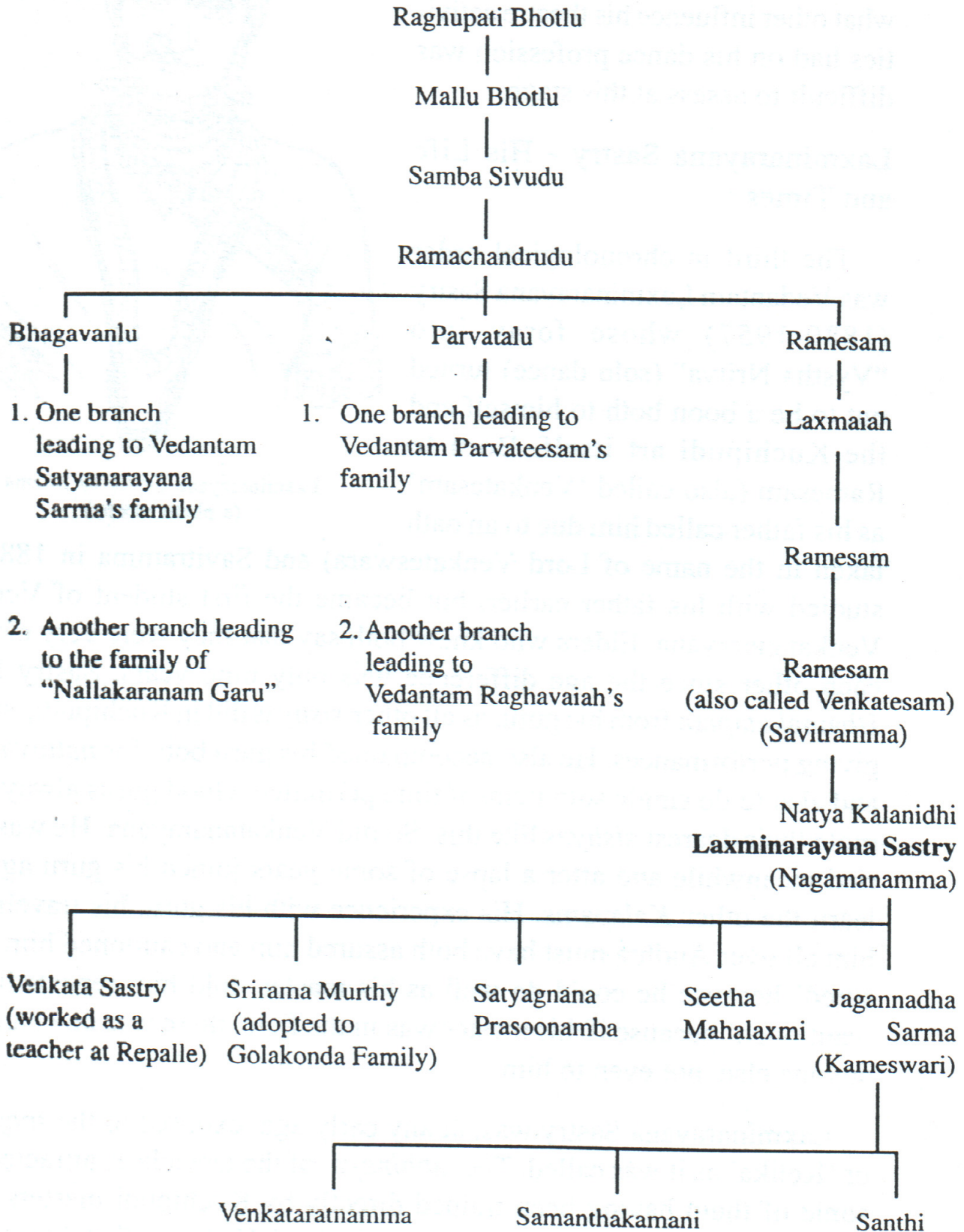
Guru Sri Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry

Subbarao, both of them being disciples of this guru. The rare *tala* system that Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry taught to his students was a part of this legacy, emanating from the greatest masters of yore, and might perhaps be traced back to Siddhendra Yogi himself.

Venkatanarayana was also a playwright and wrote two plays - Gopichandana Natakam (1914) and Stree Sahasam (1917) for the Hindu Nataka Samajam of Vijayawada. It was during this time that they must have seen the performances of the Dharwada company when they visited

**VEDANTAM'S FAMILY \***

(Family tree of Sri Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry)



\* Prepared by Sri Pasumarthi Kesava Prasad, Kuchipudi

Vijayawada in their second tour because the stories of both the place came from their repertoire. However, what other influence his theatre activities had on his dance profession was difficult to assess at this stage.

### Laxminarayana Sastry - His Life and Times :

The third in chronological order was Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry (1880-1957) whose foray into "Vystha Nritya" (solo dance) turned out to be a boon both to himself and the Kuchipudi art itself. Born to Ramesam (also called 'Venkatesam' as his father called him due to an oath taken in the name of Lord Venkateswara) and Savitramma in 1880, he studied with his father earlier, but became the first student of Vempati Venkatanarayana. Elders who knew both say that they were very close to each other since the age difference was only nine years. Sastry learnt *Bhamakalapam* from his guru, as all other *sishyas* did in Kuchipudi, started giving performances. He also accompanied his guru both for *nattuvangam* and also to do single solo items if time permitted. Good gurus always promote their dearest *sishyas* like this. So did Venkatanarayana. He was married meanwhile and after a lapse of some years joined his guru again to learn the other *Kalapams*. His experience with his guru, his travels with him all over Andhra must have both assured him and cautioned him – 'assured' because he could do well as his master told him repeatedly and 'cautioned' because if his master was in the field, there was no chance for anyone else, not even to him.

Laxminarayana Sastry was, at any early age, exposed to the *mejuvani*, or 'Kelika' as it was called. The *abhinaya* of the Devadasis attracted him, some of them having been trained directly by Kuchipudi masters themselves or by their disciples spread over the land. He found that their 'styles'



Laxminarayana Sastry as Bhama  
(a photo recopy)



were akin except that *abhinaya* of expert Devadasi performers was always in favour of a little *hastabhinaya* and more of *sattvikabhinaya*, more specially *netrabhinaya*. In a more romantic atmosphere, they went into performing *javalis* and experts among them had also specialized in doing *abhinaya* for *slokas*. The kuchipudi and devadasi traditions, though apparently looked diverse had common sources of influence – the *Natya Sastra* and the *Abhinaya Darpana*. It is commonly believed that the Kuchipudi Art belonged to the Bhagavatha tradition and the Devadasi Art to ‘Karnatakam’ or court style. In one way, one catered to the general public and the other to the discriminating few. Laxminarayana Sastry, having specialized in *Bhamakalapam*, was more akin, performatively, to the *lasya* style.

He was also exposed to the Thanjavur style of *Bharatanatyam*, having toured the South early in life. It was said that he went, after his marriage, in search of fortunes to the South and was greatly disappointed for not being able to study under a guru in Thanjavur. Details are not known, but his disappointment turned out to be a boon to Andhra and to Kuchipudi art. Dance - anthropology suggests that group activity in creative expression was a rural preoccupation and the more individualistic it became, it became classic and catered to sophisticated or educated classes. In South India the Devadasi classical tradition was for long considered to be serving the selective



Pedda Satyam as Bhama

few. He saw quite a number of *Bharatanatyam* dancers and was impressed. Their repertoire was different having had a fixed system and orderly presentation of the compositions. He also must have found soon that both ‘Karnatakam’ and *Bharatanatyam* were both female-oriented dances, the former’s repertoire depended on the clientele, whereas *Bharatanatyam*, which came out of the ‘sadir’ dance recently was creating its own model of a fixed repertoire. The difference was not qualitative; it was contextual. There was yet another difference: while *Bharatanatyam* developed a large

repertoire of *varnams* which demanded more of *jati* transposition, the 'Karnatakam' had limited *jati* inclusions. His trips other parts of Andhra and the South must have brought into Laxminarayana Sastry's mind all the possibilities of *abhinaya* and *tala* in the South Indian dance traditions. When he came back to Kuchipudi after the soul-searching experiences, Laxminarayana Sastry started learning *Gollakalapam* and other forms. He also started teaching some Devadasis. This was not merely "teaching". One should say it was more an "interaction" between two traditions and both were beneficiaries.

In his sojourn to *samsthanams* (small native states under the British Government) to perform, he was also asked to teach the devadasis of the *samsthanams*. Along with them, their teachers also wanted to learn from Laxminarayana Sastry. It was C.R.Acharyulu, who came from the temple dance tradition who heard of Vedantam's expertise in *abhinaya* and wanted to be his disciple. The year was 1937 and the *samsthanam*, Nuzvid. When Vedantam returned to Kuchipudi after a few months, Vempati Peda Satyam, by then an accomplished 'Bhama' actor, joined him to study under him – the 'items' as they were called.

It was at this point of time that Vedantam decided to plunge into the untrodden field of 'solo' dances. He slowly gathered materials for building up a solo repertoire to teach his students. Thanks to his guru and his own inquisitiveness Laxminarayana Sastry acquired a mastery of Telugu classics, the *Pada* literature, the *keertans* of Tyagaraju, the Sakuntalam *slokas* and the Adhyatma Ramayana songs. He already knew how *padas*, *javalis* and *slokas* from *Amarukam*, *Pushpa Bana Vilasam*, *Krishna Karnamritam* were used for *abhinaya* in the native traditions by temple and court dancers. The *Yakshagana* tradition itself had some solos incorporated in their plays, partly to fill in the time and partly to initiate new dancers. The Dasavatharam and "Damera Timmendra Sabdam" were part of the plays. In addition, they used *tillana*, the most important one being in *Prahlada*, sung by Prahlada, the boy (Daanambu, Saadhanambu neevenani.....) between one punishment and the other. Similarly, the Matangakanyas in *Harischandra* were doing either a *jati swaram* or a *javali*.

Peda Satyam was joined by Ayyanki Thandava Krishna, and a little later by Vedantam Raghavaiah. Thandava Krishna was an enthusiastic

amateur. Both he and Peda Satyam literally made their master build up a rich repertoire consisting of not less than 100 different compositions. The accumulation of these compositions as a repertoire was another great achievement of Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry's scholarship and wide cultural and classical bias.

It was not enough for Laxminarayana Sastry to develop the repertoire; he should develop a 'style' of his own. Meanwhile his third son, Jagannadha Sarma became his student. He and Thandava Krishna made a good pair. New compositions were needed. With his Telugu literature background, Thandava Krishna was also helpful. With a full twenty to twenty five items, Thandava Krishna and Jagannadha Sarma started on a tour to Hyderabad, Pune, Bombay and other towns under the direction of Sri Sastry. It needed – besides solo items, duets as well. So he remembered the last episode of *Bhamakalapam* after Krishna entered. He completed two duets – “Radha-Krishna” and “Siva-Parvati”, both of them great hits during their northern tour. It was also an improvement of the compositions, structurally. Both *Radha-krishna* and *Siva-parvathi* started with a *padam* or a song and incorporated a *sloka* in Sanskrit, a *dandakam* or a *chulika* and then came back to the *Pallavi* in Telugu. This 'composite' structure, with different varieties of compositions was made more popular by his disciples later. This suggested that Laxminarayana Sastry had specific artistic goals to achieve. On another side, Peda Satyam and Vedantam Raghavaiah, paired and started giving performances in Madras and all over the South, later on adding some of their own.

At what point time Laxminarayana Sastry was interested in the *padas* of Kshetrappa we do not know. This he must have acquired during his acquaintance with the devadasis or during his exposure to *Bharatanatyam*. Bharatanatyam dancers in those days knew quite a few Telugu padams and *javalis* and employed Telugu pada singers to teach them. Balasaraswathi learnt them from Balakrishnan. Gauri Ammal learnt them from Padam Ponnuswamy. The Telugu Devadasi Kelika tradition contained rich *pada* literature. Even by 1944, Vedantam was considered to be a specialist in the *abhinaya* of *padams*. Subsequent incidents proved his interest right. He developed love for demonstrations. He supplied commentaries on their performance method to Prof. Vissa Apparao and was specially honoured

for his proven expertise in *pada abhinaya*. During all these days of groping in the dark and finding flashes of hope, he was on the move, visiting various places in Andhra and outside Andhra and taking new students both from Kuchipudi and outside - all of them only men, until 1944.

Due to the long and successful tours of Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry, Thandava Krishna and Jagannadha Sarma on one side and Peda Satyam and Vedantam Raghavaiah on the other, young people in Kuchipudi found *abhinaya* attractive. Many of them studied from established gurus like Chinta Venkataramaiah, Bhagavathula Vissayya, Tadepalli Peraiah Sastry or even Yeleswarapu Seetaramanjaneyulu who taught music, but they also wanted to study 'solo' dance items from Sri Laxminarayana Sastry because they would like to be equipped in both the areas. Hemadri Chidambara Deekshitulu, Prahlada Sarma, Chinna Satyam, P.V.G. Krishna Sarma and scores of others now joined him either for a short while or on a long term learning process.

While teaching them in Kuchipudi and moving out for performances quite frequently (he used to stay for three to ten months at a place, giving performances in all the neighbouring villages and towns with headquarters at a hospitable place, as he found one at Tenali), Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry was offered a job in the newly started Azad School at Machilipatnam, started on nationalist lines (it later became Jaihind School and then National College) as a dance teacher. A dance teacher's job in a school is a new phenomenon in Andhra and he was the first such teacher in Andhra.

When young male disciples joined him to learn *pada abhinaya* Vedantam was to deal with a delicate issue of teaching *lasya* compositions predominantly to males, whose style of presentation would be different. He was already toying with the idea of enrolling some girls into learning dance. There were a couple of abortive experiments in this direction both at Nuzvid and Muktyala. His first female student was from Nuzvid, a daughter Sri Mrutyunjaya Sarma. But she did not continue for long. At last a willing teacher and not so unwilling a student joined together – Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry and Kanchanamala. The year was 1944.

Rangamani, who become a professional doctor later and Kanchanamala who was a Bharatanatyam teacher at Tirupati were the younger daughters

of Dr. Maringanti Seshacharyulu, a practising doctor with a liberal mind and Smt. Seetamma, who was endowed with an artistic temperament. Both of the girls became Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry's disciples. He went on teaching the girls for several years with intermittent and long gaps.

Sri Sastry was fond of travelling. His performances and, later, his demonstrations became frequent. He would go to Gudivada, for example, and stay there for several months. Connoisseurs awaiting such an opportunity arranged performances. Josyula Seetarama Sastry, a long-standing disciple and an able singer would be summoned to sing. His uncle Bhagavathula Subbarao played on the mridangam. In those days violin was not yet in use. Harmonium used to be the accompanying instrument and Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry's second son, Srirama Murthy played on the harmonium.

Events followed quickly. There were more women learning *pada abhinaya* or 'solo' dance than men. Laxminarayana Sastry went to all the places in Andhra – to Eluru, Gudivada, Rajahmundry and Tenali keeping his base at Machilipatnam. By now Jagannadha Sarma occupied his place in the school. Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry was consolidating all his findings into 'course work' and taught to Kanchanamala and then to Akhileswari, to Sakuntala at Gudivada, to Andhra sisters at Machilipatnam, to SRY Rajyalaxmi at the same place and Manorama and others at Rajahmundry.

Meanwhile honours came his way. The Andhra Nataka Kalaparishad honoured him in 1945 for his artistic contributions. The Madras Government and the citizens of Madras honoured him with a Simha Talatam and title "Kuchipudi Natya Kalanidhi" in 1948. He was honoured at Vijayawada, at Visakhapatnam and at Movva and at each town in Andhra. The Kshetranya Festival at Movva in April 1951 was a memorable event because very distinguished scholars, poets, researchers and performers saw his demonstration of *pada abhinaya* with awe-struck veneration. So did Rajamannar, E.Krishna Iyer, Prof. P. Samba Murthy, Balasaraswathi and others at Madras in 1948. The attempts of the visionary were bearing fruit.

Laxminarayana Sastry, at the invitation of Prof. Vissa Apparao, went to Visakhapatnam to demonstrate *pada abhinaya* and explain the intricacies

in them, when Nataraja Ramakrishna and his disciples Uma and Sumathy (later Uma Ramarao and Sumathy Kaushal) took advantage of his staying there to sharpen their artistic acquisitions. In one of his visits to Eluru, Korada Narasimharao learnt a few items from him.

The last days of Laxminarayana Sastry were not altogether happy. He continued to stay at Machilipatnam and to teach Akhileswari, daughter of C.V.R. Prasad, a man with a fine artistic sensibility with an envious background of Shantiniketan, Bombay, Almora and Trichur. In his search for the best Kuchipudi teacher for his teen-aged girl found Vedantam Laxminaranayana Sastry. The family understood his idiosyncracies, accepted his small demands and looked after him as their own 'innocent old man' of the household, as was done earlier by Dr. Maringanti Seshacharyulu and Cheruvu Sreeramulu.

Akhila was to be his last student. He started teaching her at Machilipatnam. He moved to Madras when Akhila went to her parents at Madras. While in Madras for almost two years, several luminaries in the field of dance learnt from him. Balasaraswathi openly acknowledged her indebtedness to him. Ramaiah Pillai, Gauri Ammal, Ramaiah Pillai's son Chamaraj and many others were benefited by the expertise of Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry. He joined Akhila in Hyderabad when the family shifted. But fate had willed it otherwise; within fifteen days of his arrival at Hyderabad, Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry breathed his last, on July 13, 1957.

### Solo Repertoire :

The most fascinating part of Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry's artistic sojourn was his astonishing consolidation of different compositions, quite dissimilar from each other. It had *Puja nrityam*, *Padavarnam*, *Varnam*, *Swara Pallavi*, *Jati Swaram*, *Javali* into a repertoire that could be followed by himself and his students for generations. And *sloka* and Tyagaraja *keertana* and Adhyatma Ramayana *keertana*, *Tarangam* and *astapadi*. There are Sanskrit, Telugu, Tamil, Hindi and even Marathi songs. The invocatory song, for a long time, was a Marathi song ! The variety would astonish even Pundits ! To lay hands on such a large number of compositions, based on their dance-worthiness must be a Herculean task. In addition,

look at the amazing variety !! Padams, not only of Kshetranya, but also of a number of others dominate the list, and understandably so. The consolidation of the texts of compositions, their choreography (of over 150 different items), building appropriate *jatis* to each one based upon their emotional and rhythmic components is the work of a genius and giant. Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry was both. Further, he was a visionary. All these qualities were happily assimilated in him because, as an ideal teacher, he combined in him the qualities of precept and example, theory and practice, conceptualization and execution. This could nowhere be better seen in two important aspects that engaged his attention in his life - *abhinaya* and writing 'Performance Manuals' for *abhinaya* - the practice and the theory.

### **Abhinaya :**

Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry's attitude towards *abhinaya*, especially of *padams*, extendable to all other items, is basically to depend on a combination of *angika* and *sattvika*, with secondary importance to *vachika*. *Vachika* there is – and an important one at that. But in reality the performer must bring out the *bhava* through expression of emotions. When once the parameters of the *sthayibhava* are fixed, indicating the nature and type of the heroine (*sweeya*, *parakiya* or *ashtavidha nayikas*), now an elaboration of the *sattvika*-based *angika* follows. Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry was an adept in emoting a *bhava* and employing several *mudras* in quick succession to suit the *bhava*. A myriad *hasta mudras* to suggest a single idea, single person and to evoke a single impression.

*Pada-abhinaya* usually relates to a heroine pining for her lover. If this is enacted by a male performer, he can only create an imaginative reality. It is a mental and psychological identification with the *nayika*. The textual connotations evoke the *bhava*. The initial *sattvika bhavas* determine it and the multiple *angika* movements – in this case the gestures – vivify the *sattvika bhava*. The heroine is pining for Muvva Gopala ; her agony is narrated in the text. *Mukhjabhinaya* established it. *Hastabhinaya* elaborated textual minimization into maximization. 'Muvva Gopala' can be shown in thirty different *mudras*, each time evoking a different image, but each image relating to Gopala. The text is just two lines. The elaboration of the *abhinaya* in interpreting the two lines might take any amount of time.

In this case the performer is becoming the commentator – a commentator in “gestural cognition”. If Muvva Gopala stands for the lover Krishna and if his multifarious denotations become the base on which contextual references are built (Gopala is shepherd, plays on the flute, he is Govardhanodhari, etc.) the performer is creating multiple analogues for a single image. Through his encyclopaedic richness of the language, he interpreted and commented on the cultural models Indian tradition had upheld for centuries.

One can argue that since *Padams* are exceptionally suited for such type of creating expanded gestural language, but we should understand that Laxminarayana Sastry extended this strategy even for *keertans* and *slokas*. What he was trying to do, in other words, was to expand not merely the ‘sign base’ of dance language, but also the cultural base of the society since he dances the entire *Bhagavatham* in a Gopika Geeta or the entire *Ramayanam* in *Parsurama Garvabhangam*. This is not merely aesthetic enjoyment : it is aesthetic education as well.

### **Jaatakam :**

Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry is also to be credited with supplying a performance manual for each one of the compositions he set for choreography. He called this *jaatakam* (‘horoscope’) of the song. The *jaatakam* contains thorough description of the type of heroine chosen, the basic *rasas*, the *avasthas*, the *vibhavas* and *anubhavas* – all to be described through each one of the words. What type of emotion is signified by a word and concurrently what *hasta* to be used ? This is almost a word-to-word description of the imagined performance. He taught his students in this method. This helped all his disciples to become able teachers because it is the right way to teach how to choreograph a given text.

Not that it is entirely new. In our shastraic models, we have a *sloka* or a poem being commented upon : with a word-to-word meaning (*artham*) followed by a general *tatparya*, with the central theme and a comment on the *alankaras* and so on.

Even in dance the *sloka abinaya* is embedded in several layers of expression : *padabhinaya*, *arthabhinaya*, *vakyabhinaya*, *bhavabhinaya*,



*saareerabhinaya* and finally *sampurnabhinaya*. But at a time when these in-depth practices have died away, Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry has revoked them as a pointer towards learning to understand the text in terms of the performance, leading to choreographing.

In a note on Balasaraswathi learning *abhinaya* from Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry, N. Pattabhiraman quotes a conversation between Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry and Balasaraswathi : (*Sangeet Natak*, 72-73, April – September, 1974, P.27).

She (Balasaraswathi) studied later with Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry to gain new insights into *abhinaya*. Sastry was an expert in the interpretation of *padams*. He spoke his own idiom. He would ask Bala “Can you do this *varnam* ? How would you cast its horoscope?” Tiruppamburam Swaminatha Pillai wasn’t greatly impressed by Sastri’s musical abilities, but Bala was quick to appreciate his creative imagination. She tells us how Sastry commanded her to “cast the horoscope” of a *Todi varnam* one day. “I did it without any repetitions. He responded by asking me to give it up and stick to *padams* ! “They’re your family’s heritage,” he said and “with someone like your mother singing *padams*, you can have the whole world in your hands.”

Sastry would arrive early mornings, covered in a green shawl. he would spend hours teaching Bala. He taught her songs from *Bhamakalapam* and many other items.

Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry’s contribution to Kuchipudi art is both intensive and extensive. He not only introduced the practice of presenting individual items in a systematic way, but also built a huge repository of items for the use of the practitioners. One can write a whole thesis on the nature of these selections and their relevance to dance education and to cultural education as well. They are so rich in their *sahitya* and so varied in their emotional content. He introduced girls into dance and became the visionary leader of contemporary Kuchipudi dance world. He practised the classical mould and popularized the art through an artistic intuition shown in choosing what is dear to the Telugu psyche. He fixed the parameters of a performance by giving the practitioners a large variety to select from. He also designed the first ever costume a female Kuchipudi dancer

should wear : the spreading folds of a *pattu saree* with the traditional 'pallu' coming upside down and the jewellery, including the waist-belt, used in *Bhamakalapam*. What he got stitched for Kanchanamala is the dress today's female dancers of Kuchipudi wear, with minor variations !

As a man Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry was simple, innocent and not avaricious. His needs were few. In a situation where his health cautioned care, he took too few students. He was a good teacher, always desirous of a hopeful future for his disciples. As a performer he was excellent – to be placed in the ranks of the greatest dancers of his time. His performances, as contemporary reports indicate, were raving. His teaching, endowed with sympathy and care, looked for new methods. His *abhinaya* knew no comparison ! His *konagolu* and *jati* elaborations were embedded not only with *laya* but also with *bhava*.

Kuchipudi owes its national fame to him as it owes to Chinta Venkataramaiah's innovations earlier. By constantly touring, demonstrating, performing and teaching he kept the Kuchipudi flag high. He brought to himself laurels of established mastery of the art, but also brought laurels to Kuchipudi art by blazing a trail - new, innovative, and creative.

A rare kind of genius. Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry will be remembered as long as *vyastha nritya* (Solo Dance) tradition of Kuchipudi continues to be a prominent mode in dance recitals both in India and abroad.

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## Jaatakam

(Performance manual / Horoscope)

of a *Padam*

(Prepared by Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry and published in *Kshetranya Padamulu*, edited by Prof. Vissa Appa Rao and published by Andhra Gana Kala Parishad, Rajahmundry, 1950; pages 69-70. Prof. Rao called it 'abhinaya paddati' : Performance Method)

Padam : *Okka Saarika Ilagayite*

Ragam : *Mohna* : Adi talam.

Nayika : Saamanya, atrupta, Praudha desirous of conjugal union

Samyoga Sringara ; Hasya rasa

The nine *bhavas* to be acted all through the *padam* are :

Srama, Autsukya, Chapalata, Glani, Supti,

Jadata, Dainya, Vishada, Vitarka

The *vibhava*, *anubhava*, *sattvika bhavas* as occasion demands should be shown.

\*Okka Saarike Ilagayite - oho Idemiti ratira ?  
srama helana vitarkam autsukyam rati-s

\*\* Makkuva Deerchara Muvva Gopala \*\*\*  
autsukyam

Sokkiyunna Nee Sogasadi\*\*\*\* Yemira! ||Okka||  
glani, dainyam, chapalata vitarkam, dainyam

Nemmogamuna- Nee- badalikalemira-  
**dainyam srama vitarkam**

Neetukaada rommadire-demira?  
**sogasu srama vitarkam**

Kammani vaatera kandina demira?  
**Dhriti vitarkam**

Kaallunu chetulu tada ba du temira? ||Okka||  
**dainyam srama vitarkam**

Kannula niddura gammedemira –  
**supti vitarkam**

Galamuna chamatalugaare demira?  
**srama vitarkam**

Tinnani paluku baluka vademira?  
**gadgadam srama vitarkam**

Telisi teliyakunnavademira?  
**jadata vitarkam**

Inapuri muddula muvva gopala  
**autsukya**

Yepuna nanu galisitiveevela  
**harsham moham**

Manamuna ninne nammiti jaala  
**autsukyam**

Maaru balkakunna-vadi yela? ||Okka||  
**vishadam glani vitarkam**

**Samyoga Srigaram :** (The following, *hastabhinaya* to be shown at each point)

**\* “Okka saarike”**

1. gaja      2. dhenu      3. kukkuta      4. vrischika
5. hamsa      6. Naga-paasa      7. Gandabherunda      8. Chakravaka
9. dhanu      10. padmasana

**\*\* “makkuva”**

1. Upachaaramu      2. Paalu (milk)      3. Phalahara
4. Gandham      5. Tambulam      6. Attar      7. Panneer
8. Pushpam      9. Sayya      10. Alankaram

**\*\*\* “Muvva Gopala “**

1. Govardhanadhari      2. Seshasaayi      3. Vanamaladhari
4. Kalingamardana      5. Kamsamardana      6. Vatapatrasaayi
7. Laxmivallabha      8. Venu naadam      9. Kuchela Rakshana
10. Gaja rakshana

**\*\*\*\* “Sogasu”**

1. Aalingana (2)      2. Chumbana (5)      3. Kalalu (5)
4. Kachakarshana      5. Kuchakarshara      6. Pandhamuttu

These are to be shown as occasion demands.