

# Performing Arts in Andhra : Dance, Drama and Yakshagana (1324 A.D. – 1724 A.D.)

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After the fall of the Kakatiya empire, the Padmanayaka Velamas of Rachakonda and Devarakonda, the Reddis of Kondaveedu and Rajamahendravaram, the Musunuri Nayakas, the Manchikonda Nayakas in Korukonda, the Koppula dynasty in Pithapuram and Hariharadeva Raya in Vijayanagar came to power in different parts of Andhra. During the 400 years from the fall of the Kakatiyas to the fall of the Qutub Shahis, Performing Arts – especially the arts of Dance, Drama, Music and the Yakshagana – witnessed an unprecedented patronage by the kings, ministers and even by the local lords. It was not the poets and the performers alone that were credited with success; the kings themselves revelled in writing *kavyas*, *prabandhas*, critical commentaries, musical and dance treatises and texts for performance.

Among the kings who credited themselves in the arts, Pratapa Veeraganga Raju of the Surabhi dynasty (14<sup>th</sup> c.) was one who was hailed as a scholar in six arts and was called “a *sangeetajna*” (S.I.I., Vol. VI, No. 725). Chalukya Visweswara of the 15<sup>th</sup> c., to whom Vinnakota Peddana’s *Kavyalankara Chudamani* was dedicated, was known for his expertise in *sahitya* and *sangita* (*Kavyalankara Chudamani*, I-9). Veerabhadra Reddi, the ruler of Rajamahendravaram, was extolled by Srinatha as an authority on the principles and practices of *sahitya*, *kala* and *sangita* (*Kasikhandam*, V, 338). Rulers and chiefs like Naganatha, Singaya Nayaka, Nanduri Gundayamatya and many others were hailed for their expert knowledge in literature and the arts.

Singa Bhupala, of the Padmanayaka dynasty, whose title ‘Sarvajna’ denotes his assiduous scholarship, is not only a great patron of poets, but also a playwright and commentator on dance and *alankaras*. His *Rasarnava Sudhakaram*, a book on aesthetics, contains, among others, three *Vilasas*, devoted to *rasa*, *bhava* and *natya* respectively and gives detailed precepts (*lakshana*) and examples (*lakshya*) from several poetic texts and plays. Like Abhinava Gupta’s commentary on *Natyasastra*, *Rasarnava Sudhakaram* discusses all matters concerning dramatic structure, theatrical presentation

and the *rasa* elements. Singa Bhupala is also said to be the author of a commentary on Saranga Deva's *Sangeeta Ratnakaram*, called *Sangita Sudhakaram*. He also authored *Kandarpa Sambhavam*, a *bhāna* (one of the ten types of drama as enumerated by Bharata) and *Kuvalayavali*, a *natika*, also known as *Ratna Pancalika*.

Besides being scholars and commentators, most of the Reddi kings were also known for their patronage of the arts and literature. (Mallampalli Somasekhara Sarma, *History of the Reddi Kingdoms*, 1948, ch. VII). Prolaya Vema Reddi, who established the Reddi kingdom, patronised Erra Peggada, who dedicated his works to Vema Reddi. Pedda Komati Vema of the same dynasty was an expert in music and literature. Besides writing standard commentaries like *Sringara Deepika* on *Amaruka Satakam*, *Saptasatee Saara teeka* on *Salivahana Sapta Sati*, he was also the author of *Sahitya Chintamani*, a book on literary norms and aesthetics. He is also the author of a *bhāna*, *Veeranarayana Caritra*. That all these books were written in Sanskrit proves his mastery over the language and the ancient texts.

It is mentioned that Anavema Reddi's court was adorned by three eminent dancers - Kanchi, Ranni and Ponni and the courtiers along with the king enjoyed their performances. (Vavilala Somayajulu, 1958, p.266).

During the reign of Komaragiri Reddy (1386-1402) dance and drama received unprecedented patronage. It was said that he used to celebrate and revel in dance and music during the *Vasantotsavas* (spring festivals), leaving the administrative responsibilities to his brother-in-law, Kataya Vema. He was popularly known as "Vasantha Rayalu" and due to the elaborate use and distribution of *karpura* (camphor) during the festivals, he was also called "Karpooora Vasantha Rayalu" (*Hara Vilasam*, II,7 ; II-144). He was a great scholar and after thoroughly studying the ancient dramaturgical texts of Bharata along with commentaries by Bhoja and others, he wrote a *Natya Sastra* treatise called "Vasantahrajeeyam". His minister and brother-in-law, Kataya Vema, closely following this treatise, wrote a commentary, *Kumaragiri Rajeeyam* on the three plays of Kalidasa. This commentary received laurels as a standard one, though the treatise that inspired this commentary, "Vasantharajeeyam" is not available. Lakuma, who enjoyed the love and patronage of Kumaragiri Reddy, was praised as a superb dancer, for she could express a single *bhava* in a thousand ways. ("Jayati Mahima Lokateetha..." : Kataya Vema's *Sakuntala Vyakhyanam* ).

As kings were great Sanskrit scholars and commentators of Sanskrit texts, many of the poets and scholars followed suit by writing commendable poetic texts and commentaries in Telugu with sanskritized diction and style. However, the writings of both the kings and the writers of the day reflected contemporary social life abundantly.

Ravipati Tripuranthakudu, said to have lived during Anavema Reddy's reign, wrote a play, *Premabhiramam* in Sanskrit which was translated into Telugu as *Kreedabhiramam*, by Vallbharaya and belongs to a dramatic genre called *veedhi*. The Telugu text is edited and published, but its original Sanskrit play is not available. As the Telugu text indicates, the original reflected the social and artistic life in Orugallu during the period.

Pasupati Naganadha Kavi who was a court poet of Anapotha Nayaka of the Padmanayaka dynasty, was the author of *Veerabhadra Vijrumbhanam*, another *bhana*. Though among the ten types of drama ("Dasarupaka") enumerated by Bharata, these two forms – the *Bhana* and the *Veedhi* seemed to have attracted the attention of several writers in Andhra and are believed to denote an early state of theatrical practice. Their prevalence might be construed as demonstrative of a "dramatic sense" in the Telugu writers in an age which regaled in writing poetry of all kinds. Since a theatrical culture had not yet developed in Telugu, they must have written these plays in Sanskrit – a psychological soul-fulfilment!

Vinnakota Peddana patronized by Visweswara Bhupati, a king of the later Chalukya dynasty, wrote *Kavyalankara Chudamani*, a book on *alankara sastra*, which dealt in a detailed manner, not only of *alankaras*, prosody and grammar, but also of *rasa* and *bhava*, a combination of which was hitherto dealt with separately, treated here together suggesting their interrelationship.

By the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> c., Srinatha's multi-faceted poetic genius started blossoming. He was honoured first at Chandavolu where Peda Komati Vema was the ruler, in whose court Srinatha was the education officer. It was while at this court, he wrote *Palanati Veera Caritra*, a historical poem in the *desi* metre, *dwipada*, which was sung by balladeers and attained reputation.

Srinatha's poems abound in their references to contemporary performing art practices. Claiming that he has fine abilities (*caturata*) in "*sangita*, *sahitya* and in composing poetry" (*Palanati Veera Caritra*, Invocatory Part), he praises Singanamatyā's

court since it contained “Kalavanthulu who were knowledgeable about the science of music as it is found in the treatises of Bharata, Matanga, Dattila, Kohala and Anjaneya” (*Sringara Naishadham*, I-11). Srinatha made numerous references to *pravesika dhruvaganas* (entry songs when a character comes on to the stage for the first time introducing himself or herself) which denote that he was familiar with stage practices of the day. This idea is further strengthened by his use of the compound word “Yakshagana” for the first time (*Bhimeswara Puranam*, III-65), which until then was used as two separate words ‘yaksha’ and “gana”, and was regarded as a musical narrative.

This also indicates the evolution of yakshagana – firstly as a singing tradition by people disguising themselves as yakshas and then, as we later find in *Kreedabhiramam*, a single person’s dramatic narrative and later still, as a fullfledged dramatic form with songs in native metres, poems and prose passages involving music, dance and speech. References to dances and dancers and to dance festivals also are commonly found in Srinatha’s poetry. He describes the “Siva Pooja Nrityam in *Kasi Khandam*”(I-56) ; the “*Pramoda Nritya-s*” twice, both in *Kasi Khandam* (II-37) and *Sivaratri Mahatmyam* (I-64), and the “Festivals in honour of Sani” (“*Sani Varotsavam*”) during which time “gandharavas and apsaras dance in the *desi* and *marga* styles” (*Kasi Khandam*, III-19). While temple dances are described at the time of Valmiki’s worship of Virupaksha (*Kasi Khandam*, VI-40), court dances are vividly described in *Palanati Veera Caritra* (pp.17-19). Srinatha also gave a long list of different artistic entertainments presented before Bhimeswara during the *Mahotsavas* celebrated on specially erected *mandapas*, which were got constructed by Bendapudi Annayamatya, his benefactor. The list contains several varieties of *desi nrityas* including *kundali*, *dandalasaka*, *prerani*, *Prenkhana*, *sindhu*, *kanduka*, *chela*, *matalli*, *hallisaka*, etc. (*Bhimeswara Puranam*, I-118). In the same breath, Srinatha also described other types of *prabandhas* read before the god accompanied by music and several percussion instruments. His description of the three different kinds of dances – the temple, the court and the common people’s entertainments of *desi nrityas* reveals that in his time all the three types existed side by side and all of them received the same kind of royal patronage and of the people at large. Srinatha’s references to dance and music are innumerable. For example, in his *Sivarathri Mahatmyam*, Srinatha describes vividly the dances of fourteen damsels belonging to fourteen *jaatis* who danced and sang the *dhavala prabandha geeta-s*.



In *Palanati Veera Caritra* Srinatha gave a vivid description of a dance performance : how a *natya mantapa* must be decorated for a *kelika* (lines 657-658), how the king Nalagama Raju got ready to attend a dance performance (679-711), how the king and his courtiers were seated (712-728), in what way the dancers and the instrumentalists placed themselves on the stage (739-750) and finally how the dancer, Kanja Lochana danced. (751-770). It looks as though Srinatha authored these lines reflecting the dance practices of his day. He even mentions how the six *angas*, six *pratyangas*, and the six *upangas* are to be made use of in a dance performance. He also makes a mention of the *bhuchari*-s and *akasa chari*-s and the *sapta tandavas* (771-800).

Perhaps Srinatha's account about the entire performance including its *Poorvaranga* in *Palanati Veera Caritra* is the most detailed description of a dance performance in its totality in Telugu literature. He is talking about a solo dancer's preparations for dancing before the king and the placement of the orchestral accompanists on the stage (this is *Poorvaranga*) followed by the actual performance of the dancer and how finally the king honoured them with gifts. But the term he used there is "Natya Melam". According to the dance terminology we use today what the dancer presented is a "Nattuva Melam", for a "Natya Melam" would indicate a group of male dancers performing a play – natya. Perhaps in Srinatha's days the word 'Natya Mela' must have been a 'blanket' term for any dance performance. This description of the actual stage performance is worth quoting in full :

The members of the *Natya Melam* came onto the stage, respectfully greeted the king and stood on a side, when the king gave them permission to start their performance. The mridangist stood on the right while the *tala* people stayed on the left. The mukhaveena player and two women to follow in chorus stood behind the dancer (751-800). From behind them came Kanja Lochana, a renowned and beautiful lady, one who is sweet in her voice and learnt all the *ragas* according to Bharata Sastra. She came forward, knelt before the teacher in obeissance and taking the ankle bells which she tied to her feet with great devotion and stood in front of the *maddela* and *talam* (the people who are playing them).

The dancer looked at the king with a slant eye, stood in *samapada*, prayed to all the gods and offered *pushapanjali*. And she commenced her dance performance, displaying the nine kinds of *bhu charis* and sixteen types of *akasa charis* and performed the nine varieties of *angaharas* and along with *gati chari* variations showed all the *hasta bhedas*, all the *sthanakas* in her wonderful display of several dance types such as *Prerani*, *Desini*, *Prenkhana*, *Suddha Dandika* and *Kundali* and with several *charis* danced the seven types of *tandavas* to the astonishment of the assembly. She then proceeded to show *samyuta* and *asamyuta hastas* and through movement and gesture she danced using all the six *angas*, six *upangas* and six *pratyangas* and with all the eighteen types of *anga chalanas* danced to the songs in Telugu and Sanskrit in praise of Lord Chennakeswara. Her dance was so perfect, complete, thrilling that such divine dancers like Rambha would feel shy.

(*Palanati Veera Carita*, pp.18-19)

One very important practice that could be noticed in the entire passage is that the dances were addressed to Macherla Chennakesava and there is no mention of the dancer singing a *kaivara* in honour of the king. What she danced was to the texts in Sanskrit and Telugu in honour of the God and such songs belonged to the temple dance conventions. Perhaps this shows a transition stage of temple dancers dancing in the courts, but still in honour of the gods.

Srinatha's contemporary and perhaps a close acquaintance and benefactor, Vinukonda Vallabharaya is the author of a translated play, *Kreedabhiramam* the only Telugu play available from that period. The authorship of this play is a much debated issue in Telugu literary circles. The authorship is credited to Srinatha, as Veturi Prabhakara Sastry and many other critics down to Arudra so forcibly argued out. However, one must reasonably accept the author's own avowal in the *gadya* of the play that it was authored by Vallabharaya himself, (the *gadya* bears Vallabharaya's name as the author) though one could concede Srinatha's direct participation or indirect influence in authoring the play. It belongs to a type of *rupaka* called *veedhi* and is a translation of Ravipati Tripuranthaka's *Premabhiramam*. A *veedhi*, according to Bharata, is a play of a single person's exposition

of his personal responses to men, matters and the materials around. The play, though erotic in sentiment, stands as a living testimony to the several social and performing art traditions that existed in Andhra during the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries.

*Kreedabhiramam* throws light on the *desi* dance traditions, besides social customs and the festivities that were prevalent in 13<sup>th</sup> c. The story is thin and centres round one Manchana Sarma, who was returning to Orugallu on a *Kamotsava* (festival in honour of Manmadha) day along with a friend, Tittibha Setti, to whom he describes the people engaged in diverse professions, performances and preoccupations, especially the celebrations of Ekavira festival and the dance and narrative forms presented during the time. He especially talks about a famous 'vesya' by name Machaladevi about whom a play was composed and was being staged. Besides Machaladevi, *Kreedabhiramam* also mentions other *Vesyas*, her daughter Madanarekha, Kamamanjari, Madhumathi and her sister Madalasa and Chinna Pothi. The text gives a vivid description of a woman, decked with flowers and with the accompaniment of an *ektara*, narrates heroic stories of warriors; of a *jakkula purandhri's* (a woman performer belonging to Jakkula community), narrating the stories of 'Akka devathas', the Gondli dance of 'Mylarubhatas' who were Veera Saiva propagators; the singing of "Viddikachi Ramayanam", the 'Pushpa-gandhika' dances and 'lasya abhinaya' of the 'vaaranganas'. *Kreedabhiramam*, the first Telugu play available, thus, is a store house of several artistic preoccupations of a large variety of people during the Kakatiya dynasty, and also throws light on the nature and function of the performing arts in the lives of the people of the time. Historically speaking, the description of the 'jakkula purandhri' engaged in the narration of the story of Akka Mahadevi, supplies a link between the narrative traditions prevalent until then and the suggested the emergence of 'yakshagana' as a one-person's enactment of a story.

Vallabharaya must also be remembered for two more of his several important observations: one is his poem about the actors from 'Dwarasamudram' who came to give performances during the Orugallu festival, which is indicative of touring theatre teams. ("Natuladi Dorasamudramu vituladi Yorgallu Kavidi Vinukonda..." *Kreedabhiramam*, 147). The second one concerns about the famous dictum that Telugu is the best among the languages of the country ("Desa bhashalandu Telugu lessa": *Kreedabhiramam*, 37), which was later mentioned by Srikrishnadeva Raya.

*Kreedabhiramam* also contains several references to the then existing singing and dance practices, such as a singer playing on a “veera gumbhitaka” and singing *dwipada prabandha* (116-117) while young men roared and danced. The “Mylaru Bhatulu” were engaged in doing “Veera Natyam” (116-117), while young men roared in applause. A Goraga woman was doing a “Gondli” nrityam, (143) while Bhavaneedulu and aasaadulu performed “Veera Nrityam” (130,148). It also describes two other communities engaged in dance—the Matanga Kanyas (131-132) and Yakkula Sani-s (136). Manchana Sarma, the lone speaking character in the play, was describing the dances during the Kamotsav in Orugallu. Since the protagonist was describing the dances as they were performed in late 13<sup>th</sup> c. during festival time, it can safely be presumed that they must have been in vogue at least a century prior to that period.

Among the Korukonda kings Singama Nayaka, son of Mummadi Nayaka had earned a name for his expertise in music. In a contemporary inscription, he is praised as an expert in playing veena (“veena vadana kovida”) as well as in dance and literature. (Vavilala Somayajulu, p.584).

The reign of the Gajapati kings who ruled a large part of Andhra during 1434-1538 A.D. was also known for the rulers’ patronage of arts and Telugu literature. Though their major emphasis was on promoting Oriya language and arts, Sanskrit treatises on art by Telugu commentators written during this period received their patronage. Mahamahopdhyaya Mahadevacharya, a contemporary of Erra Peggada and who, along with him, adorned the court of Prolaya Vema, wrote a commentary on Bhatta Lollata’s *Natyasastra*. His grandson, Virinchi Misra was the author of “Bharatarnavakosam”. Both of them received patronage from the Gajapatis. Purushothama Gajapati and Prataparudra Gajapati are said to be reputed scholars. Ramananda Raya, who ruled Rajamahendravaram as a representative of Prataparudra authored a play “Jagannadha Vallabha Natakam”.

Prataparudra Gajapati must be specially remembered for an inscription that he got installed on the left side of the Puri Jagannatha temple’s Jaya Vijaya doorway, in which he ordered that only Jayadeva’s *Geeta Govinda* must be sung in the temple and that only the Nattuva Mela dancers of Telangana have the right to sing and dance there. The inscription in Oriya when translated into English runs thus:

On Wednesday the tenth lunar year of Kakada, bright half in the ninth mark of the warrior, the elephant-lord, the mighty Prataparudradeva Maharaja, king over Gauda and the ninety millions of Karnata and Kalabaraga, orders as follows: “Dancing will be performed thus at the

time of food-offerings (bhoga) to the Elder Lord (Balarama) and the Lord of the Gitagovinda (Jagannatha). This dancing will continue from the end of the deities' evening meal to their bedtime meal. The dancing group of the Elder Lord, the female dancers of Lord Kapilesvara, and *the ancient dancing group of Telangana* (italics mine) will all learn no song other than the Gitagovinda from the Elder Lord. *Aum*. They will sing no other song. No other dance should be performed before the great God. In addition to the dancing, there will be four singers who will sing only the Gitagovinda. Those who are not versed in singing the Gitagovinda will follow in chorus - they should learn no other song. Any temple official who knowingly allows any other song or dance to be performed is hostile to Jagannatha. (Barbara Stoller Miller (ed.), "Introduction", *Jayadeva's Geeta Govinda* (First Indian edition, Varanasi : Motilal Banarsidass, 1984, p.6).

This inscription, ascribed to the year 1499, underlines two important factors regarding the Telugu-Oriya relations: firstly that the Telangana Nattuva Mela artists along with Kapilesvara Devara's dancing girls must dance and sing only *Geeta Govinda* in the Puri temple and secondly and more importantly, the Telangana Nattuva Melam people, who were to do similar activities, were referred to as 'ancient'. How 'ancient' they could be? Kapilesvara Gajapati had waged wars and brought the major parts of Telangana including Orugallu under his sovereignty even before 1459. He must have taken several poets, scholars and dancers with him back to Katakam and this Nattuva Melam must have been one such.

The Gajapati's influence on Andhra culture and especially on the dance traditions of Andhra have been chronicled by different scholars and historians. The very importance given to the Krishna-Radha legends and the subsequent dance traditions based on Jayadeva's *Geeta Govinda* are standing testimony to the importance of that rule. As several critics, pointed out the *Madhura Bhakti* tradition, though introduced to Andhra with the translation of *Maha Bhagavatam* by Potana, got consolidated and helped its wide-spread sway over Telugu literature with the advent of the Gajapati rule.

Gaurana, whose father and father's elder brother served the Padmanayaka kings as ministers, wrote *Harischandropakhyanam* and *Sarangadhara Caritra* in *dwipada*

metre. Both the poems were popular with the ballad singers of Andhra. The two narratives are written in such a dramatic manner that anyone who reads them can identify, through the appropriate dialects used, who the speaker is. So vivid is his characterization. Gaurana also influenced the later dramatists of these plays by creating characters like Kalahakanthi, Subuddhi and Nakshatraka. Telugu dramatic literature is indebted to this poet who provided the story lines and character sketches for two of its most well-known plays!

From the introduction to *Sivayoga Saram*, a Saivite text written by Kolanu Ganapati Deva, we come to know that he wrote several dramas based on Saiva stories. Unfortunately no play of his is extant today though he claims in his introduction to the poetical text that he wrote such dramas that people acclaimed as excellent. This is perhaps the earliest reference of a Telugu writer writing a play in Telugu, though we find vague references to “patu natakamulaadedu varu” in *Panditaradhya Caritra* and “Natuladi Dora Samudramu” in *Kreedabhiramam*. That he wrote these plays in *desi* Telugu adds to their importance.

Annamacharya well-known as “Sankeertanacharya and Pada Kavita Pitamaha”, wrote 32000 *padas*, all of them in praise of Lord Venkateswara and lent to an existing mode of devotional singing a literary slant. His *padas* offer a plethora of sub-types in Sankeertan writing, many of which are later used by writers of yakshaganas.

Many of Annamayya’s songs have gone into the day-to-day use of the Telugu people. Besides giving a literary status to the devotional *Sankeertanas* his songs are popular in “Bhajana Kutams” as well. Similarly five of the *Sankeertans* of Tallapaka Chinnanna formed a part of the invocatory Bhajans of Saint Tyagaraja and later Bhajan Kutams and now, of the invocatory songs of Bhagavatha Mela Natakams, which are together called “todaya mangalam” and are, even today, reverentially sung. These songs are :

1.	Jaya Janki Ramana	Nata	Jampe
2.	Saranu Saranu	Arabhi	Misra chapu
3.	Murahara Nagadhara	Madhyamavati	Adi
4.	Devesa Ganaradhita	Saveri	Rupakam
5.	Madhava Bhavathute	Pantuvarali	Adi

Two books on genre criticism gained importance due to their qualitative and analytical methods of approach. Annamayya’s *Sankeertana Lakshanam* in Sanskrit is the first musicological work that defined the musico-literary genre, “Sankeertana”, which he mastered, practised and immortalized. Ananthamatya (c.1465), who belonged to the same



period and who hailed from Krishna district, wrote the famous *Chando Darpanam*, a book on prosody, besides *Bhojarajeeyam*, a poetic text of ethical stories. He is the author of *Rasaabharanam*, a treatise on the various types of Nayakas and Nayikas.

### The Beginnings of Yakshagana

Eversince Palkuriki Somanatha mentioned about the practice of people singing in the guise of Gandharvas, Yakshas and Vidyadharas, Yaksha-gana seemed to have existed in one form or the other in Andhra desa even during the 13<sup>th</sup> c. If we accept an alternate reading provided by the veteran researcher, Veturi Prabhakara Sastry, the line would read: “yakshagana Vidyadharadulai paatralla nadinchu vaaru”, the lines lead us to believe that yakshagana, at its earlier stage, was a puppet play. This reading is possible because in most cases the texts for yakshagana are the same for Bommalata as well. It is commonly believed that it could be a kind of singing specialized by a community called “Jakku-s”, (the vivid description of the singing of a “Jakkula purandhri” in *Kreedabhiramam* testifies this) which became yaksha-gana later on. Though earlier treatise-writers like Chitrakavi Peddana (1330 A.D.) described the characteristics of a *yakshagana*, the earliest reference to a *yakshagana* text is available only in the early 16<sup>th</sup> c. It is a “jakkula katha” called *Saubhari Caritra*, a story dramatized from *Vishnu Purana*, written by Proluganti Chenna Sauri. He belonged to the period of Saluva Narasimha Raya (1485-1512). Hailed as a poet in eight languages, Chenna Sauri wrote *Narasimhapuranam* as a *dwipada kavyam*, *Bala Bharatam* as a *vacana kavyam* and *Saubhari Caritra* as a *Yakshaganam*. Though none of these texts is available, the details of his parentage and his works are given in the dedicatory verses of *Narasimha Puranam* by Hari Bhattu in which it was said that he was the author of a *Jakkula Katha*, *Saubhari Caritra* written gracefully and embedded in the *nava rasas*. He was honoured by Saluva Narasimha Raya for his poetic acumen. It is unfortunate that the text of this *yakshagana* is not available.

To the same period belongs an episode narrated in “Machupalli Kaifiyat” about the Kuchipudi Brahmin Bhagavathulu who presented an impromptu episode before Saluva Narasimha Raya about the misdeeds of a local lord, called Sambeta Gurava Raju. The Raya, after witnessing the episode, ordered that Guruva Raju be beheaded and sent his Sardar, Isamul (Ismail) Khan, to punish the local chieftain, which the latter successfully did.

This *Kaifiyat* is the first known document which mentions the Kuchipudi Bhagavathulu and which mentions the Kuchipudi Bhagavathulu and describes, not a cultural event as such, but an important social event which is a result of their artistic avocation. This document, (L.R.56 - pp.65 ff.) which has historical importance, needs to be reproduced in detail :

When Vira Sri Bukka Rayalu's son, Sriman Maharajadhiraja Parameswara Sri Veerapratapa Deva Raya was on the diamond throne at Vidyanagar, firmly ruling the country, Srimanmahamandaleswara Sambeta Gurava Raju, having got the permission from the king to be in charge of some villages near Machupalle and nearby places, inspected the villages which are surrounded by the Pinankini river in east and north and on west and south are mountains. Thinking that it is a safe place, constructed a fort near Gundlakatta and Bandlammakonda south of Machupalle.

In addition there is a "gandi" – two mountains in a row on the South-East side in between which river Pinakini flows. Near the Gandi on a mountain Gurava Raju kept a 'Chowki' and another 'Chowki' on "Bandi Kanuma", a mile-s distance ('ara parugu dooram' = 'Praugu' being two miles) away on the west and having engaged a sizeable army, ruled the area, living in the fort. The life-episodes of Gurava Raju are popularly talked about by people of the area, though no inscriptional evidence is available.

As he lived and ruled for a long time Gurava Raju was known as 'Tata' (grand father) Gurava Raju. In his regime people used to be punished very severely. In cases where money was to be extracted from people and they did not pay that amount, their women were ordered to be captured and clips fixed on the teats of their breasts. At this time came Brahmin Bhagavathulu, who put on 'veshas', from Kuchipudi village from the side of Vinukonda and Bellamkonda to this place for *keertan*. Seeing the atrocious rule of Sambeta Gurava Raju, they went away from here to Vidyanagar where Veera Narasimha Rayalu was ruling. They sought the king's presence and that being granted, requested him for a *Kelika* (show) and the king permitted them. Since it was said that the Kuchipudi *Melam* people were knowledgeable in their profession, the king wanted even the

royal women to see and so gave permission for a *keertan* in the royal palace (divaanam). When the *keertan* started, one man took the role of Sambeta Gurava Raju, two men were servants, and another took the role of a woman. In the very presence of Raya, the man acting as Gurava Raju ordered that clips were to be fixed to the woman and demanded the revenue be paid forthwith.

The Raya saw this and asked what did this mean. The courtiers (the people that were with him), having known the facts from the Bhagavathulu, told the king that, in Siddavatam one Sambeta Gurava Raju, was taking away the women and by force treating them like this to collect money from people. So, in order to make this known clearly to your Highness they took up the roles and narrated it like this". They said, When they narrated this to the king this way, he became very angry and ordered his courtiers that he be reminded of this next morning when he was holding a court. The *Keertan* was completed that night. The next morning, when the king finished his morning ablutions and was holding his court, his courtiers came and reminded him about Sambeta Gurava Raju. The king then called his army chiefs and asked them to get the army ready when the parrot in the cage uttered the word "Jayam" (victory) thrice. The king said this was a good omen, called the army in *Peswahān*, distributed the wages and appointed the Muslim Saradar Ismail Khan, thought to be the King's inheritor. He called the Sardar into his presence, told him of the good tidings expected of him and gave him a "taamboolam" (betel leaves in honour of the appointment). The Sardar took the *taamboolam* and took an oath that he was getting the severed head of Gurava Raju. He went away with his army and attacked the Chowki on Bandla Kanuma and destroyed it. He rested for the night and the next morning attacked the fort on Gundla Katta, a narrow mountain. The people in the fort waged the battle as long as they could and at last gave way the fort, having failed to retain and protect it. Then Gurava Raju was caught, his head severed and carried away. All the women in the fort sacrificed their lives...."

This is the earliest available reference to Kuchipudi and the Brahmin Bhagavathulu and the social functions of the artists. Though Arudra, critic and poet and literary historian has put forward a strong plea that the Kuchipudi mentioned in the *Kaifiyat* is not the one in Krishna district, but Kuchipudi in Guntur district near Tenali and he presumed that in later years the families might have migrated to the present day Kuchipudi village (Samgra Andhra Sahityam, Vol.II, p.751), this is yet to be debated and carefully scrutinized. But the fact remains that the Kuchipudi performers made use of their performance occasion to bring to the notice of the king the atrocities of a subordinate ruler and see that he was punished.

The *Kaifiyat* does not specify what the 'kelika' was about. It is presumed by some that this is *Bhama Kalapam* which is attributed, by common belief and tradition, to Siddhendra Yogi. Siddhendra's antecedents and the date of his writing the *kalapam* are embedded in uncertainties. It is unfortunate that the architect of Kuchipudi fortunes and his *magnum opus*, *Bhama Kalapam* are shrouded by cloudy legends. There are no historical records concerning Siddhendra. Some people believe that he was Narayanateertha himself based on references in *Sri Krishna Leela Tarangini* (B. Natarajan, *Sri Krishna Leela Tarangini*, P.121). Some others believe that he migrated from another place and settled down at Kuchipudi to teach the art of dance to the Brahmin boys of Kuchipudi (Nataraja Ramakrishna : *Andhrula Nritya Kala*, P.29 f.n.). The natives of Kuchipudi believe that Siddhendra took *sanyasam* on the brink of his being drowned and when he was saved, came to Kuchipudi, his in-law's place and taught the art, to the Brahmin boys.

All are conjectures or at best traditional beliefs and no record is available. So is the case with *Bhama Kalapam*. No internal evidences either. On the basis of the first recognizable reference to Veera Narasimha Rayalu (1506-1509). However, on the basis of the performance traditions, it can be safely deduced that the literary genre, *kalapam* stands midway between two stages in the development yakshagana. In the beginning it was a single person's narrative as is described in *Kreedabhiramam* ('Jakkula Purandhri' narrating the story of Akka Mahadevi). This was in the early 15<sup>th</sup> c. Then, at the other end, is Kandukuri Rudra Kavi's *Sugriva Vijayam* (mid-16<sup>th</sup> c.), the first yakshaganam available today. *Kalapam* is a two character dramatic narrative in contrast with the single character narrative of 15<sup>th</sup> c. and the multi-character drama of 16<sup>th</sup> c., showing a steady progression

in dramatic construction and stylistic modalities. This is enough evidence to place Siddhendra, the author of the earliest *Kalapam* available to us today, in the early part of 16<sup>th</sup> century.

In fact, it looked as though the 'dramatic form' was slowly getting consolidated in Andhra as is evident in the adaptation of a Sanskrit play into Telugu as in *Kreedabhiramam*, the development of a native theatrical form in *Saubhari Charitam* as Yakshaganam and the use of an art form for social purposes as the *kelika* of the Kuchipudi performers. However, this sense of the dramatic format did not yield positive results. Instead, these attempts ultimately led to the development of a new poetic form during this period. Instead of a logical development of a well-knit drama, there arose a tendency of moulding well-known Sanskrit plays into the poetic form of a *prabandha*, a form that was popular during the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. Pillalamrri Pina Veerabhadru's *Sringara Sakuntalam* paved the way for the new trend. Following partly Nannaya's *Mahabharatam* and partly Kalidasa's *Abhijnana Sakuntalam*, the poet wrote a *sringara kavya* in the same way Srinatha did in his *Sringara Naishadham*. This tendency of translating Sanskrit dramas into Telugu poetic texts paved the way for other similar attempts. Nandi Mallaya and Ghanta Singana's (C.1480) adaptation of Krishna Misra's *Prabodha Chandraodayam* is yet another example of this genre.

### **The Vijayanagara Kings**

The Vijayanagar empire, under the Sangama and Saluva dynasties, flourished in all fields of human endeavour and is specially remembered for its patronage of poets and artists. And even among the several kings that ruled the empire, Srikrishnadeva Raya is the most accomplished poet-king whose court, "Bhuvana Vijayam", was adorned by the "ashta diggajas" – (the eight elephant-statured poets). Besides offering diverse literary feasts to succeeding generations of lovers of poetry, through the several court poets, the Raya is himself a meritorious poet and as the author of *Amuktamalyada*, he remains as one of the most celebrated poets of the era. A special feature of many of these poets is that each one of the poets is also an expert in one other art which is reflected in their poetic works as, for example, Bhattumuthi's *Vasu Caritra* which reveals his expertise both in poetry as well as in music.

Vidyaranya, the Raya's minister authored a standard treatise on music called "Sangeeta Saram". Nachana Somana who received the Penchukaladinne village as "agraharam" from Bukka Raya mentioned several dance forms like *Peranam*, *kolatam*, *gondili* and *prenkhanam* in his *Uttara Harivamsam* (IV, 215).

True to his title – "Vidwat Sabha Raya" – Krishnadeva Raya patronized all the arts and honoured the best artists, as he did in the case of poets. Inscriptions of his times mention (Rangacharya – Top list, II-1222; quoted by P.S.R. Appa Rao, *Telugu Nataka Vikasam*, 1967, p.117) that the Raya gave a munificent land gift to a *natyacharya* (inscription at the Brahmeswara Alayam dated 25-1-1518; quoted in P.S.R. Appa Rao, p.118). It is also said that on the happy occasion of his ascendancy to the throne, the Raya got a "ranga mantapa" constructed in the Virupaksha temple. (Vedam Venkataraya Sastry, "Peethikanubandham," *Amuktamalyada* (ed), p.147). Allasani Peddana (*Manu Caritra*, V-63), Ramaraja Bhushana (*Vasu Caritra*, I-103), and Tallapaka Tirumalaiah (*Vairagya Vacana Geetalu*, p.108), mentioned the excellence of the "natakasala".

During all his long and nerve-breaking expeditions, Krishnadeva Raya seemed to have been accompanied by an entourage of poets, singers and scholars. He also continued the annual Vasantotsavas – the spring festivals during which time several performing teams put up their shows. One such popular play was "Tayikonda Natakam". The producer of this play, Nattuva Nagaiah, was honoured by the king, according to a contemporary inscription (Madras Epigraphical Reports, No.556 of 1916; cited by P.S.R. Appa Rao, p.133). A popular star of the days was the daughter of Pothavarapu Nattuva Timmayya, called 'Ranjitham' Kuppai. A contemporary inscription dated 1514 A.D. on one of the pillars in Kesava Swami temple in Vidyanagar mentions that some land is donated to Nattuva Nagaiah and 'Patri' (female dancer) for having performed the "Tayikonda Natakam". The inscription also contained names of the actors that participated in the play (P.S.R. Appa Rao, *Telugu Nataka Vikasam*, p.116). Raya himself wrote plays to be performed during these festivals. *Jambavati Parinayam* in Sanskrit written by the king was perhaps one such play. He seemed to have written another play, "Usha Parinayam", also in Sanskrit, but this text is not available.

The *nartanasala* (dance hall) situated beside the royal palace was described with minute details by a visiting French traveller, Paes during the reign of Krishnadeva Raya :



This hall is where the king sends his women to be taught to dance. It is a long hall and not very wide, all of stone sculpture on pillars.... Between these images and pillars runs a design of foliage, like plats (*a maneyra de lamine*s), all gilt, with the reverses of the leaves in red and blue, the images that are on the pillars are stags and other animals ... but the other images seated on the elephants, as well as those on the panels, are all dancing women having little drums (tom-toms).

The designs of these panels show the positions at the ends of dances in such a way that on each panel there is a dancer in the proper position at the end of the dance ....

(Robert Sewell : *A Forgotten Empire*, pp.288-89)

This eye-witness account of a royal dance hall with all the panels of sculptures and dancers reveals the interest the Kings showed in making elaborate arrangements for their children to learn dance.

Descriptions of other travellers also bear testimony to the popular Maharnavami Festivals during the reign of the Raya kings. A Persian ambassador at the royal court, Abdul Razak, gave a detailed account of the week-long festivals celebrated on a grand scale during Immadi Deva Raya's rule (1421-45) as he saw them in the year 1444 A.D., in the 'Razas' year on a full-moon day. The celebrations included, according to him, stunning dance recitals, besides ballad singing and exhibition of artistic pursuits by talented artists of the country. After describing the wonder of the paintings hung in specially constructed five-storeyed building and the high dias built specially for the king to witness the performances and a domed storey for the women, Razak gave an account of the songs and ballads sung by extremely good looking young maidens :

Meanwhile, all of a sudden, the curtain was drawn to both the sides and the damsels entered singing and dancing. Oh! What grace and dancing! Even sages who left off all wordly pleasures would be drawn by their dances, hand gestures, their expressions and their slanting glances. Oh! Our souls are satiated by these dances and our hearts pleased.

(See Bhavaraju Venkata Krishna Rao, *Videsa Yatrikulu – Pracheena Andhra Desamu*, pp.188-90)

The Raya courts were adorned by several writers of treatises on dance and music. The court poet of Immadi Deva Raya (1446-65), Chatura Kallinatha, wrote a commentary “Kalanidhi” on Saranga Deva’s *Sangita Ratnakaram*. Kallinatha’s titles – ‘Abhinava Bharatacharya’ and ‘Raya Bayakara’ – denote his mastery over the arts. Similarly, Bhandaru Vittala, Bhandaru Laxminarayana’s father, translated Saranga Deva’s *Sangita Ratnakaram* into Telugu. That he was gifted a handsome amount of 3000 tolas of gold coins by Sultan Ghiasuddin of Mandya in Gujarat (as accounted by his son, Laxminarayana) would exemplify his expertise in the field of arts.

Another commentator that deserved mention is Cherukuru Laxmidharudu, who was under the patronage of Araveeti Rama Raya’s brother, Tirumala Raya. He wrote a treatise on dance – *Bharata Sastra* – which also contained chapters on music (cf. Bhandarkar Institute’s Manuscript Library – No.40 of 1916-18). He is also the author of *Sruti Ranjani*, a commentary on Jayadeva’s *Gita Govinda*.

Bhandaru Laxminarayana, who adorned the court of Prataparudra Gajapati earlier, was in the court of Krishnadeva Raya. A musicologist, besides being an expert on dance, he authored a book called *Sangeeta Suryodayam*, a treatise on music. Hailing from a family of musicians and dancers, Laxminarayana himself was honoured by the Raya, who also made him the dance teacher of the royal women. He was honoured with a title, “Abhinava Bharatacharya”. Though he followed mainly Bharata, both in his treatise and his teaching, he was also an expert in the texts of Dattila and Kohala. A contemporary poet, Bhanu Kavi dedicated his *prabandham*, named *Panchatantram* to Bhandaru Laxminarayana and gave the details about the musicologist in his dedicatory poems.

Nadendla Gopa Manthri, a nephew of Timmarusu, the Minister of Krishnadeva Raya, besides writing *Krishnarajuna Samvadam*, a long poem, also wrote a commentary in Sanskrit on Krishana Misra’s *Prabodhachandrodayam*. *Krishnarajuna Samvadam* has become a source book for later yakshaganas, ballads and dramatical works with the name Gayopakhyanam. That the dramatic potential of a large number of poets of this era though lost in the wave of *Prabandha* poetry, is evident in poets like Gaurana and Gopa Mantri.

Among the several poets belonging to the illustrious Tallapaka family, two people stand out for their contribution to the arts of dance and music during this period. One is

China Tirumalaiah, son of Peda Tirumalaih and grandson of Annamayya, who wrote *Telugu Sankeertana Lakshanam*, a treatise on Sankeeratana as a genre of music, and also as a literary genre, following his grandfather's maiden work on the subject in Sanskrit. His brother Peda Tiru Vengalanatha is said to be a great singer and dancer, who specialized in rendering the *sankeertanas* of his grandfather and father. China Tirumalaiah's son Tiruvengalappa wrote a commentary called *Sudhanidhi* on Bhoja's *Kavya Prakasa*.

Kandukuri Rudrakavi, believed to be one of the eight prominent court poets of Krishnadeva Raya, wrote a yakshagana, *Sugriva Vijayam*, one of the earliest yakshaganams now available. Rudra Kavi's *Sugriva Vijayam* must have been preceded by or followed by Chakrapuri Raghavacharya's *Vipranarayana Caritra*. On the basis of a comparative assessment of Raghavacharya's other works and the fact that all the three works written by him refer to one Doddacharya as the guru, not only of Raghavacharya but also his grandfather and both their names are found together in an inscription dated 3-7-1545 (Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanam Inscriptions, No.47A, P.115), it is presumed (S. V. Joga Rao, 1961, pp.4-12) that it is possible that Raghavacharya precedes Rudra Kavi by a few years. Rudra Kavi is said to have written this work in about 1568 (Veturi Prabhakara Sastry, "Introduction to *Sugriva Vijayam*") and Chaganti Sesaiah puts him as a poet belonging to 16<sup>th</sup> c. (Chaganti Sesaiah, *Andhra Kavi Tarangini*, vol.10, pp.155-160). However, as the earliest known practitioners of the yakshagana, both of them showed a thorough understanding of the needs of writing in the new dramatic medium of a hitherto narrative genre. And between the two Kanduri Rudra Kavi stands above Raghavacharya for having displayed exemplary skill and stylistic perfection. Written in chaste Telugu, Rudrakavi dramatized much of the "Kishkindha kanda" of the *Ramayana*. A typical *yakshaganam* it contains a vast variety of different talas like *triputa*, *jampe*, *kurucha*, *jmpe*, *ata talam* and *eka talam* and is rich in different types of *desi* metres such as *ardha chandrika*, *ela*, *dhavala* and *dwipada*. True to the poet's words, this "kuruna-bhasura" *yakshaganam*, with *karuna* as the chief *rasa*.

Though Rudra Kavi took a popular story from *Ramayana* as his theme, the way in which the story is developed shows his mastery in characterization. Similarly, the unfolding of several incidents like Srirama's *viraham*, the heated conversation Vali had with Rama after he fell, Tara's expression of agony are captivating.



As the yakshagana does not specify each character's dialogue separately as in a dramatic text and as there are no prose, interlinking passages and as the narrative, descriptive and dramatic passages are found in a single poem, it is likely that this is intended both as a narrative text and a performance text. The narrative text is used, again, both for a *sravya* rendering for listeners and also a narrative text used for puppet performances. However, the yakshagana is made up more of dramatic dialogue and less of pure narration.

On the other hand, *Vipranarayana Caritra*, though stylistically more simplistic than *Sugriva Vijayam*, is the first Yakshagana on a saint, Vipranarayana, one of the twelve alvars, well known in Vaishnava history of South India. It contains short, linking passages in prose, though they are not called "*Sandhi Vacanas*". As this is an improvement on the narrative methods used in *Sugriva Vijayam*, we may deduce that *Sugriva Vijayam* is an earlier work than *Vipranarayana Caritra*. But for this one stylistic improvement, this text also contains the same metres like *ela*, *artha chandrika*, *dwipada*, *jampe*, *triputa* and so on, besides a few *padyams*.

Other performing art forms also received the Raya's patronage. According to a poetic text written by Vallabhaiah, one Bommalata (Puppet play) Kalaiah, son of Virupakshayya, was close to the king himself. Bommalata Kalaiah is also remembered because he encouraged Koduri Vallabhaiah to translate *Leelavati Ganitam* into Telugu, which the poet did and dedicated it to Bommalata Kalaiah. It is also said by the poet that Kalaiah pleased Krishnadeva Raya and his brother Achyutadeva Raya by his art of puppetry and was rewarded profusely by them. Several others with the family name "Bommalata" attained fame. For example, Bommalata Amrita kavi and Bommalata Chandraiah donated a whole village—Chidipirala—to another puppeteer, Peda Chittaiah, to continue to perform puppet plays. Another Bommalata poet, Sambaiah wrote a *yakshaganam* called "Kiratarjuneeyam".

Natya received special impetus during the Raya dynasty. The very fact that Krishnadeva Raya mentioned "Bhrukunsu-s" (men who take up female roles) is indicative of such a tradition in vogue in the old days. Pingali Surana, a versatile poet of the period, described in his *prabandham*, *Prabhavati Pradyumanam* how performances in the royal court were held.

According to this vivid description, plays were being performed in the "Maha Mantapa". The king with his relatives and friends came to witness these performances.

Special seating arrangements were made for the royal women folk. There was a curtain that separated them from the men and their privacy was maintained. The play started with the Sutradhara conducting the *poorva ranga*. This was followed by the music of the instrumentalists - mainly the mridangam and flute. Singing of *prabandhams* like *ela-s* followed. After *naandi* and *prastavana*, well-knit plays with all the five *sandhi-s* were performed. *Aharya* was appropriate. Rivers, mountains and other scenery were shown on the stage. Necessary properties were used. Everyone in the audience wondered how real the props and the scenery looked. The plays were so perfect that, at the end of the play, the audience used to give away whatever they had to the actors as gifts. (*Prabhavati Pradyumnam*, IV-101-102).

Pingali Surana mentioned "Gangavataranam" as a play performed on the occasion and made his hero, Pradyumna, take the hero's role in the play. "Gangavataranam" seems to be a popular play of the period, since another poet, Tarigoppula Mallana also described its performance in his *Chandrabhanu Caritra* (II-99).

It looked as though that, however popular the plays were, the actors were not treated with respect. A "melam" (the actors, ensemble) was always looked down upon. The youngsters of the village waited for an opportunity to steal the costumes and ornaments of the actors. When the actors accused them of theft, the youngsters would retort vehemently. Their encounter was described by Surana in his *Prabhavati Pradyumnam* (I-108). A similar denunciation can be seen in another poem, *Panchatantram*, translated by Bycharaju Venkatanatha when he equated actors with women of easy character, rogues and buffoons (2-138).

Poetry and music seemed to have been practised side by side in the Raya period as is evidenced by the writings of not only Pingali Surana (*Kalapoorodayam*, in which the hero himself is a musician), but also of Allasani Peddana and Tenali Ramakrishna and above all, Ramaraja Bhushana. The latter poet was patronized by Aliya Rama Raya, and was given the title "Sangeeta Kala Rahasya Nidhi" and his musical expertise is evident in his *Vasu Caritra*. Others whose knowledge of music is clearly seen in their works include Chintalapudi Ellana (*Radha Madhavam*) and Bycharaju Venkatanathudu (*Panchatantram*). There were also musicologists who wrote treatises on music during the period. Besides Bhandaru Laxminarayana, Ramayamatya, who was under the patronage of Aliya Rama Raya and was in-charge of the Kondaveedu fort, wrote *Swaramela*



*Kalanidhi*, a standard treatise on music. Among all these poetical texts, Ramaraja Bhushana's *Vasucharitra* stands as a compendium of contemporary musical practices.

Ayyalaraju Ramabhadru, another poet of the period described a show in which dancers performed in the 'veshas' of (disguising themselves as) jakkini and koravanji and they competed in this art with the divine actors or dancers.

Along with treatises on music, treatises on drama have also emerged during this time. Chitrakavi Peddana is the first critic who enumerated the characteristics of drama in Telugu in his *Lakshana Sara Samgraham*. In addition to prosody and other elements of poetry, he dealt with drama and enlisted its essential qualities. He was also conscious that no one until his time so far dealt with this subject in Telugu. In 49 poems he elaborately dealt with this subject. He finally gave a judgement that those who were knowledgeable of the *lakshya* and *lakshana* should write dramas and they alone would be hailed as golden; if people ignorant of these two qualities wrote plays, such plays were 'pathways to hell'.

A valuable treatise on dance, written by Damaraju Somayya, is unfortunately lost to us except five poems from it that were anthologized by Pedapati Jaggana in his anthology, *Prabandha Ratnakaram*. One of the poems describes the process of learning dance and how a dancer should be initiated into dance. The dancer must first learn "Pushpanjali", then "Karabali" and "Mogabali", the way of *hasta* and *pada* movements, then the movements of the waist. Among the accompanying lyrics, the dancer must start to learn *sabdam* first, then the *daruvus* followed by *geeta prabandhas*. He must also be abreast with different *desi* forms of dance like *kundali*, *bahurupam*, *dandalasyan*. He must also learn the posture and the standing positions (*sthanakas*) correctly and it is only an actor who projects his character properly (not himself) is a true actor. (*Prabandha Ratnakaram*, 487). These excerpts throw light on the form of drama written and performed during the time. It clearly enunciates that the play which is being danced has characters in it and so what Somayya referred to might be to the performances of yakshaganas which contained dance, song and characterization.

It is unfortunate that several names of plays were mentioned in early Telugu literature by prosodists and aestheticians extensively but no play as such is not available. The only play that existed is *Kreedabhiramam*. Kolani Ganapathi Deva's name was associated with plays written in the *desi* style. And yakshaganas took centre stage later. The trend of writing or translating a play according to the norms of a classical play seemed to have started and ended with *Kreedabhiramam*, for later poets translated Sanskrit dramas into

Telugu as *prabandhas*. The classical form was not attempted until the early 17<sup>th</sup> c., when Bodducharla Timmana translated Jayadeva's *Prasanna Raghavam* into Telugu as *Prasanna Raghava Natya Prabandham*. The word "Natya Prabandham", though mentioned in the Sanskrit original as the genre of the play, is self-expressive for it suggests a combination of *natya* (drama) and *prabandham* (poem). However, it has had other connotations in Telugu. As the name suggests, it stands midway between *prabandham*, a poetic text (several earlier poets translated Sanskrit dramas as *prabandhas*) and dramatic text for presentation (*natya*). Secondly, this must have certainly paved the way for such later theatrical exercises in which dramatic elements are rendered through dance, speech and music, as can be seen in the "Natya-Nataka-Prabandhas" of Melattur Venkatarama Sastry or the "Natakas" of Vijaya Ragava Nayaka.

Timmana translated the play *Prasanna Raghava Natya Prabandham* as in the original, but added the entrances and exits, the *aharya* details, stage directions – all as in a poem, and the play is divided into "aswasa-s" and not into "anka-s" as in a play. This is termed as a seven-act poetic text (B. Rama Raju, (ed.) *Prasanna Raghava Natya Prabandham*, "Introduction", pp.12-14). As in *Prabandhas*, it has a description of the patron's genealogy and descriptions of scenes where dramatic action is situated. Except these descriptions, made in the fashion of the *prabandhas* of the day (a contemporary practice, which Timmana could not perhaps avoid), the play-part is translated as it is. It is unfortunate that more such attempts have not survived to prove the genius of Andhras in the field of drama. As the play stands midway between a poetic text and a play, it certainly marks an advancement in the writing of plays in Telugu.

During the same period came Bijjala Timmaraju's translation of Murari's *Anargha Raghavam* as a *prabandha* of five *aswasa-s*. This *prabandham* has not been published so far.

Several excerpts of yakshaganas or their mention in ancient texts are available now, among which "Ganga-Gowri Vilasam" by Peda Kempa Raya, the founder of the city of Bangalore and Padmanayaka Bhupala's "Sarangadhara" must be prominently mentioned. Similarly, Chokkanatha of Madhura and Tondaiman Raghunatha Raju also competed with Vijayaraghava in patronizing poets and artists. Tirumala, a court poet of Chokkanatha wrote *Chitrakutachala Mahatmyam* as a yakshaganam and a poem, *Chikkadevaraya Vilasam* on the Mysore king Chikkadeva Raya.

An important work in which social and cultural elements of 15<sup>th</sup> c. Andhra are reflected is Koravi Goparaju's *Simhasana Dwatrimika* (c.1480 A.D.). It gives a chronological sequence of a dance performance. He vividly describes how eight maidens – who were experts in using the *anga*, *upanga* and *pratyangas* came to Trayambikeswara temple to dance. They worshipped the lord and one of the ladies blew a *kahala* and proper *sruti* and *tana* were adjusted. Three women followed the dancer with their song. Another woman played on the flute, yet another on the tala and a third one on the mridanga. The dancer came to the centre of the stage and danced, expressing herself in sixty four types of *hasta abhyinaya* synchronizing the ankle bells with the beats of the mridanga. (8,166-172).

The same poetic text includes a pleasant description of a dance competition between Urvasi and Rambha, king Vikaramarka presiding over the session to judge their merits. Goparaju's poetic and imaginative genius excels when he describes the relative merits and demerits of the two divine dancers. Indirectly, Goparaju is giving a lesson on artistic propriety when he says it is as necessary for a dancer to have all the positive qualities as to avoid the fourteen kinds of *dosha-s* (faults), which he enumerated.

Though, even by 1475 A.D., the Padmanayaka kingdom ceased to exist, some later descendents of the dynasty continued to rule over small areas in "Umachalam" in the eastern parts of Srisailam. One 'Sarvajna' Padmanayaka Bhupala, after nearly about a century later, wrote a yakshaganam called *Sarangadhara Charitra*. Earlier, Gaurana wrote a *prabandham* on the same subject, but that story is not related to Raja Raja and his Rajamahendravaram kingship. This yakshaganam, interestingly, narrates the story of Sarangadhara as it is popular today in Andhra and is the first yakshaganam to nativize the story. The scene of action is Rajamahendravaram and the characters are those that are popular today in plays and ballads 'Ratnagi', 'Chitrangi', 'Subuddhi', etc.

Another poet who belonged to the times was Edapati Errana whose *Sringara Malhana Caritra* which gives several instances of how a dancer participates in her first stage performance. This first stage presentation, which we call 'arangetram' today was known as '*Ranga pravesam*'. The poet calls it "*tolu viniki*" which is a word used even today for the first entry song. Pushpagandhi, daughter of Madanasena, came to the temple at "Sambhu nagari" with her *melam*. Her dance was accompanied by several instruments – muraja, kahala, mardala and dindima and she danced several varieties of important

Besides music, dance and opera found remarkable favour and patronage both from the Nayaka rulers as well as the Maratha rulers who succeeded them. The operatic forms such as Yakshagana and Kuravanji and the dance-music forms like *alarippu*, *swarajati*, *padavarna*, *jatisvara*, and *sabda* received extensive usage by the writers which is a testimony to the distinct contribution of the period to dance and dance drama.

It was during the reign of Achyutappa Nayaka that royal patronage to music, dance and literature had its bearings and it reached its acme during the times of his son Raghunatha Nayaka and grandson Vijayaraghava Nayaka. Achyutappa was a great patron of arts, but also a man grounded in courtly behaviour. There was a legend that he, after taking his food on a full-moon night ate the betel leaf with his left hand. This was considered inappropriate and unmannerly since the betel leaf would be offered by a great warrior, called 'adapa-a' warrior whom the king liked most. In order to cleanse his sin, he gave away, as a gift, an entire village to a group of 500 Brahmin artists who came to see him and seek his patronage for their art. The village thus gifted is Melattur, also called Achyutapuram, to commemorate the king and his liberal patronage. Each family was given a house, a well and a certain portion of land. At the centre of the village is Varadarajaswami temple, in front of which, even today Telugu plays written by Melattur Venkatarama Sastry are performed. Since the Bhagavathulu, hailing from Nellore district received the royal stamp (called 'Anakkonda' in Tamil) they were hence known with that family name 'Anakkonda'. Other villages soon followed to perform these Bhagavatha Mela Natakams and at Muvvanallur, Tepperumanallur, Soolamangalam, Uttukadu and Saliamangalam the art of Bhagavatha Mela Natakas had soon spread. The performances of eight Telugu Plays starting from the Narasimha Jayanthi day each year are still popular and the annual festival receives national attention even today.

Achyutappa's son Raghunatha Nayaka was at once a meritorious warrior and an equally meritorious poet and patron. Hailed as "Abhinava Bhoja" (Chemakura Venkata Kavi, *Vijaya Vilasam*, p.9, verse 21), he was an accomplished scholar of dance and music and an expert veena player, besides being an able poet. Venkatamakhi, the celebrated scholar and musicologist spoke of him in very high terms, as "the illustrious author of splendid kavyas..." (Caturdandiprakasika, I-151). Yaginararyana Deekshita, son of Govinda Deekshita and a disciple of Raghunatha Nayaka, acknowledged the king's mastery

over *kavya*, *nataka*, *alankara* and *sahitya* which were taught to him by the king himself (*Sangeeta Sudha*, p.5, sl.62-63). Govinda Deekshita pays tribute to Raghunatha's scholarship as the illustrious author of the splendid *kavyas* like *Sri Parijatapaharana Prabandham*, *Valmiki Caritra*, *Achyutendrabyudayam*, *Gajendra Moksham*, *Sri Rukmini Krishna Vivaha Yakshaganam*. (*Caturdandiprakasika*, ch.I; sl.153-154). Similarly, Rajachudamani Deekshita, in the *parastavana* written to his *nataka*, *Ananda Raghava Nataka*, extolled Ragunatha as 'Prabandha Parameswara'. His court, was called 'Vijaya Vilasam', as Srikrishna Deva Raya's was called "Bhuvana Vijayam" and was adorned by eminent poets like Chemakura Venkata Kavi and Krishnadhvari, illustrious scholars like Yajnanarayana Deekshita and Venkatamakhi, celebrated women poets like Ramabhadramba and Madhuravani, the former being a consort of the king.

Raghunatha Nayaka wrote two yakshaganas : *Sri Rukmini Krishna Vivaham* and *Janaki Kalyanam*. Both the texts are not available, but the former one was mentioned by Govinda Deekshita in his *Sangeeta Sudha*. The second one, mentioned by his son Vijaya Raghava Nayaka in *Raghunatha Nayakabhyudayam*, is categorized as a '*Catu Kavyam*'. As we know Vijayaraghava called some of his own Yakshaganams as *Natakas* and some others as *Catu Kavyas* (e.g., *Kaliyamardanam*, *Putanaharanam*) and it may be construed that he called his father's yakshagana also a *Catu Kavya*. Looking at the internal evidence one may make a distinction between the two : where dramatic dialogues in prose are more and the poetic ones are less, it may be taken as a *natakam* and where the poetic passages are more and descriptions overweigh action sequences, it may be called a *Catu Kavyam*. The *Catu Kavyam* seems to be close to today's *nritya natika* or *sangita natika*.

Raghunatha's treatise on music, *Sangita Sudha*, is rich in dealing with all aspects of music. But the dance chapters in it are missing. However, his poetic work, *Valmiki Caritra*, stands as an ample testimony to his mastery over *tala* and dance. In the third *aswasa* of the poem, Raghunatha describes the challenging competition between two divine dancers - Urvashi and Rambha. Besides mentioning the *talas* to which Urvashi danced (he enumerates 23 such *talas*), he describes that Rambha danced in the four types of *udara nritya* (best dances) – *Perani*, *dandalasya*, *pekkani* or *bekhani* and *kundali* and rich in *bhava*.

Further, he deals with dance with such an authority that he refers to the 13 *samyuta hastas* and 24 *asamyuta hastas*, 30 *nritta hastas*, 5 chest movements, 9 neck movements, 7 leg movements, 7 slide movements, 19 head movements, 10 hand movements and 6 foot movements. Interestingly, the *dristis* (glances) have been categorized as 8 *sthayi/bhava dristis*, 8 *rasa/bhava dristis* and 20 *sanchri/bhava dristis*. And the dancing duel between Rambha and Urvashi also mentions 81 *sthanas*, 10 *madalas* and 8 *karanas* and *jatis* which exemplify these various stances. (S. Seetha, *Tanjore as a Seat of Music*, p.38). He also made a mention of the details of Rambha's accompanying orchestra and Urvashi's *veena* playing. For his great expertise in the art of dance Raghunatha was called 'Bharatavidya durandhara' and his proficiency in the art of dancing had been compared with that of Arjuna in the poem *Vijaya Vilasamu* (Chemakura Venkata Kavi, *Vijaya Vilasamu*, p.9, Verse 21).

There are also many references to "Natakasala" in Raghunatha's *Raghunatha Ramayanam*. The detailed descriptions of dancers and their performances vividly portray the nature and extent of royal patronage to the enrichment of the arts. Names of several dancers find their mention in the context of king Romapada's visit to Rishyasringa to bring the latter to Angadesa. At least some of the names among these - Mandanasanjivini, Manjuvani, Aparangi, Voyyari, Nagari, Kanneladi, Mitari, Kanakasekha, Vegatali, Manichamubomma, Mullula Chiluka, etc. might be the names of the court dancers, as scholars thought. The colophone of this work refers to Raghunatha as "*Sarasa Sahitya Kala Bhoja*" (*Raghunatha Ramayanam*, 1937; 23<sup>rd</sup> Aswasa, Verse 33).

The *natakasala*, under the direct supervision of Raghunatha, was the meeting place of experts in dance, music and drama, where performances of high quality were witnessed regularly by the august company, as is evidenced by Ramabhadramba in her poem, *Raghunathabhyudayam*. She describes how beautifully decorated the auditorium was with gems of various colours and laced cloth. The author also describes the beautiful dancing girls expressing *bhava* through exquisite *abhinaya* (Ramabhadramba, *Raghunathabhyudayam*, University of Madras, 1934, 12<sup>th</sup> Sarga, Sloka 23). She speaks of their perfection in *tandava*, *lasya* and *natana*. Speaking of a particular dancer, she extols her exquisite *karana* display, her toe touching her forehead to the dismay and wonder of all spectators. These dances were followed by the singing of *Koravanji Sivalila*, *Gujerati* and *Desi* (Aswasa-I, Verse 24). All the performers were amply rewarded by



the king. Thus the king's court was a place of continuous poetic recitals and musical, dance and dramatic performances. It is this *natakasala* that was later named as the 'Sangita Mahal' famous for popular dramatic and dance-drama performances during the Maratha period.

Writing of Sanskrit plays and perhaps staging them were encouraged by the Thanjavur Kings. Ratnakheta Sreenivasa Deekshitulu who enjoyed the patronage of Chevvappa Nayaka wrote 18 *rupakas* in Sanskrit among which "Bhainee Parinayam" and "Bhavana Purushottam" gained respectful acceptance from the king. His son Raja Chudamani Deekshita, in Raghunatha's time, wrote *Sringara Sarvasvam*, a *bhana* and *Ananda Raghavam*, a play in five acts. It is mentioned in the 'Prasthavana' of *Ananda Raghavam* that he wrote a *natika*, *Kamalini Kalahamsa* (now published) in his seventh year. From the same 'Prasthavana' we come to know that his plays were performed before king Raghunatha when he visited Chidambaram.

Govinda Deekshita's son, Yagjnanarayana Deekshita who extolled king Raghunatha as his own guru, wrote a five-act play, *Raghunatha Vilasam*. Perusuri, another scholar-poet dramatized *Vasucaritra* as *Vasumangala Natakam*, a five-act play. This was said to have been performed during Meenakshi Devi's Temple festival at Madhura. Krishnadhari, another court-poet dedicated his play *Kalyana Kaumudi Kandarapam* to Raghunatha Nayaka.

Raghunatha Nayaka's son, Vijayaraghava Nayaka stands unique among the rulers during whose reign there was a rich and continuous literary and dramatic output. As Govinda Deekshita provided inspiring leadership to Raghunatha, so did his son Venkatamakhi his minister, to Vijayaraghava. The genres of *pada kavita* (especially love songs written to be set to dance) and yakshaganas flourished during his reign. A contemporary saying that those who sing *padas* and dance to their tunes are so many that not doing so was considered a sin during that time. ("Nadu gajje katti padamu padani varidi papamu").

It was during Vijayaraghava's time that Kshetravaya came to the court of the Nayaka kings a second time. He earlier came to Raghunatha's court and composed an extempore *padyam* that the court of Raghunatha was so open-hearted and courteous that one need not seek permission to come in and exhibit his genius. He sang four thousand *padas* in praise of (or in the presence of) Vijayaraghava who then honoured him profusely. Kshetravaya

extols the king's scholarship in literature and music and his achievements as a composer. Kshetrappa whose mastery in composing the *padas* was most creative in Vijayaraghava Nayaka's court where he was said to have sung 4000 *padas*. No other poet could excel Kshetrappa in the variety of *padas* he had composed, in clear-cut character delineation in a short lyric and his expression of emotional intensity and Vijaya Raghava's court had allowed such an unhindered creativity to express itself.

Vijayaraghava Nayaka is said to have written 23 Yakshaganas, besides several *padams*, *prabandhas* and *ragadas*, among which six yakshaganas are extant : *Vipranarayana Caritramu*, *Raghunathabhyudayamu*, *Kaliya Mardanam*, *Putanaharanamu*, *Sri Krishna Vilasamu* and *Prahlada Caritra*. Among the non-available yakshaganams "Rajagopala Vilasam, Usha Parinayam, Mohini Vilasam, Samudra Mathanam and Janaki Kalyanam" were written on popular themes.

Each of his yakshaganas has almost an identical format. It starts with "Ishta devata stuti" (Invocation to the chosen God), followed by a "Kaivaram" (praise of a deity or king). Then the story goes on through *daruvus* (in several *ragas*) and *dwipadas*. His *Raghunathabhyudayam* is a 'Oola prabandham' which is a 'sringara kalapam' – a love episode told from a single person's perspective. The first half of this yakshagana deals with Raghunatha's love for Chitrarekha and the latter part describes the king going through the main highways of Thanjavur in a procession and the young women of the town expressing their love for him.

In Yakshaganas like *Prahlada Caritra* Vijayaraghava used dialects appropriate to the characters such as the pamula jogi (the snake charmer), the jetti vullu (the fighters), the purohitulu (the priests) and so on. These plays must have been performed in the royal auditorium, looking at the stage directions and instructions to actors incorporated in the texts from time to time. The fact that *jatis* form a part of the *raga* elaboration of a *daruvu* indicates that such *jatis* are intended for *nritta*, pure dance.

Several other poets of the period, either honoured by Vijayaraghava or appointed court poets wrote yakshaganas in the same way the king did. The first one to be mentioned is Kamarasu Venkatapati Somayaji, Vijayaraghava's "Pattampu Kavi" (the first-chosen poet or the premier poet) who wrote a yakshaganam on the king himself called *Vijayaraghava Chandrika Vilasam*. The poet called it, like his king, "Nataka Catu

Kavyam” which contains the usual components of invocation, kaivaram (the poet called it only a ‘vacanam’) the story told in *daruvus*, *dwipadas*, *padyams*, *sandhi vacanas* and *Sobhanam*. The yakshaganam is in the *Oola prabandha* style and contains the story of Leelavati falling in love with Vijayaraghava and feeling a sense of separation. One special characteristic is the introduction of Rambha as Kuravanji who blesses Leelavati.

Rangajamma’s *Mannarudasa Vilasam* is based on her own *prabandha* of the same name. Honoured by Vijayaraghava with ‘kanakabhishekam’, her poem has Vijayaraghava himself as the hero and praises him as the very incarnation of the king’s family deity, Mannarudasa. The yakshaganam contains several interesting details about the court, its manners and life, the royal marriage ceremonies and so on. The text also describes several types of literary excellence that would form a part of a yakshagana like *daru*, *padam*, *dhavalam*, *sobhanam*, *jhoola*, etc.

Other notable works from the Thanjavur court include Purushothama Deekshita’s *Tanjapurannadana Maha Natakam*, almost a *prahasana* type of yakshaganam on the frivolous meanderings of the officers and servants of Thanjavur chowtries and a sly comment on how unworthily, low people misuse facilities provided to them by the kings. Koneti Deekshita Chandra, another court poet wrote *Vijayaraghava Kalyanam*, another love story containing the love of Madanamanjari for the king. Like Vijayaraghava’s *Prahlada*, this Yakshaganam makes use of several dialects as a part of characterization.

The way arts flourished in Vijayaraghava’s court and his patronage to them are detailed in a popular poetic text *Rajagopala Vilasam* (other than the yakshaganam written by Vijayaraghava Nayaka) by a court poet, Chengalva Kalakavi. According to the text, Vijayaraghava’s court, renowned as “Vijayaraghava Vilasam” became an artistic beehive for poets, dancers and musicians who received the king’s and the court’s appreciation and has a unique banner called “Sarada Dhvajam”, a symbol of the Goddess of Learning.

*Rajagopala Vilasam* also describes how the art of dance found favour with the king. It mentions a dancer, Chandrarekha, who received a number of titles from the king. The same dancer was said to have received similar honours earlier from Vira Venkatapathi, the Vijayanagar king (A.D. 1584-1616) for her achievements as a dancer. It is said in the poem that she would initiate any dance programme in the court, having to perform the first

item in any dance recital in the court. A list of the court dancers and their specialization in various *desi* forms of dances prevalent in 17<sup>th</sup> c. are mentioned in *Rajagopala Vilasam*:

<i>Dancer</i>	<i>Form of Dance</i>
1. Rupavati	Caupada
2. Campakavalli	Sabdacintamani
3. Murti	Jakkini
4. Komalavalli	Korvai
5. Lokanayaki	Navapada
6. Ratnagiri	Darupada
7. Bhagirathi	Perani

The text also exemplifies some popular dance styles in the court such as *sringara padas*, *dutya padas* and *desi padas* – all of a high standard.

Vijayaragava's yakshagana works, praised, performed and imitated, reveal the extent of their popularity both as *sravya kavyas* and *drisya kavyas*. They also reveal the essential features of a yakshagana of the times, both in terms of structure and performance. The *ragas* and *talas* used, the nature of the stories and their treatment, the metres used and their nativity along with the *pravesa* and *nishkramana daruvus* indicate the importance of yakshaganas during the time. Vijayaraghava's son Mannarudeva, also is a poet of merit and wrote a *yakshagana* in the tradition of those written during the periods of his grandfather and father. The yakshagana, *Hemabjanayika Swayamvaram* depicts the marriage of Rajagopala and Hemabjanayika and is a musical play of lyrical beauty.

Three royal poets outside Thanjavur enriched the yakshagana genre. Peda Kempa Raya of the late 17<sup>th</sup> C, and the founder of the city of Bangalore wrote *Ganga-Gauri Vilasam* and set the tone for such works both among the poets of the royal family and the court poets. An unknown poet in the court of the Mysore king, Chikkadeva Raya, wrote *Chikkadeva Raya Vilasam*, following similar other 'Vilasams' of Thanjavur. Imitating the court poets of Vijayaraghava this poet also writes this as a *Oola Prabandham* dealing with Chitrarekha's love for Chikkadeva Raya.

Chikkadeva Raya's son, Kantheerava Narasa Raju (a born-dumb person) wrote about 8 yakshaganas. Looking at his yakshaganas, one would surmise that he made several experiments keeping the general format of the yakshagana in tact. The first two yakshaganas

are “Koravanji Katle” and “Panchayudha Katle”. Writing of a Koravanji is his first contribution. Though there are Koravanji sooth-saying women in some of the yakshaganas of Vijayaraghava, he did not call them *Kuravanjis*. This is perhaps the first yakshagana belonging to that genre. The second experiment is writing a Katle – “Which is said to mean ‘the way’ or ‘construction method’”. This anthology of *Koravanji Katle* contains “Katle-s” in 4 languages – Telugu, Kannada, Tamil and Prakrit. Kantheerava Raju’s other yakshaganas include *Laxmi Vilasam*, *Kalavanee Vilasam*, *Natya Vidya Vilasam*, *Vasantotsava Vilasam*, *Vibhakti Kanta Vilasam* and *Ashta Dikpalaka Vilasam* - all of them containing *daruvus* in popular *ragas*, *slokas*, *churnikas* and all types of *padhyams*.

When we compare the rich crop of yakshagana literature of the Nayaka period and the few sporadic attempts at writing such musical plays earlier, we can understand the progress achieved by the Nayaka kings and their court poets. The first extant yakshagana, *Sugriva Vijayam*, contains more descriptive and narrative elements, whereas the yakshaganas of the later Nayaka period, especially those written during Vijayaraghava Nayaka’s reign are dramatic, both in content and form. For example, *Sugriva Vijayam* contains 1 *utpala mala*, 2 *seesa padhyams*, 2 *geeta padhyams*, 1 *kanda padyam*, several *dwipada* passages and varieties of *ragada* that are in various *talas* like *triputa*, *jampe*, *kurucha jhampe*, etc. Some *artha chandrikas*, *dhavalas*, and *elas* are also used. But in the later yakshaganas of Vijayaraghava Nayaka’s period the *artha chandrikas*, *dhavalas* and *ragadas* disappeared, giving place to *daruvus*, which are ‘action songs’. Occasionally there are *sobhanams* always ending with a ‘Bharata Vakyam’. This slow and steady transformation moved the yakshagana from being a narrative and lyrical form to a more dramatic form. Occasional *vacanas* served as stage directions in both the types of yakshaganas. To distinguish them from such lyrical works Vijayaraghava called the other, dramatic works as *Nataka Catu Kavyas*. These yakshaganas of the Nayaka period, stand midway between the narrative form of the yakshagana genre of the early 15<sup>th</sup> c. and its dramatic form of the later Marathi period.

### **The Maratha Kings of Thanjavur**

After Vijayaraghava, the Thanjavur kingdom came under the Maratha rule and Ekoji I became the ruler in 1676. He was succeeded by Shahaji (1684-1712), who was

popularly called 'Abhinava Bhoja'. A musicologist, composer and above all a patron of arts, Shahaji is the most prolific writer among Telugu yakshagana poets.

A polyglot of languages (he knew Sanskrit, Telugu, Tamil, Marathi, Urdu and Persian), Shahaji developed Thanjavur as a seat of learning and a centre of creative activity. He was himself a much - applauded author, respected both by the court poets and scholars - a playwright, poet and writer of padas. A majority of his works are yakshaganas of exceptional sweetness, his poetry musical and lyrical, and padas of rare devotional beauty and love. His varied and rich contribution to the dramatic field can be known from the following list of his yakshaganas :

1. Bhakta Vatsala Vilasa Natakamu
2. Sacipurandara Natakamu
3. Sri Krsna Vilasa Natakamu
4. Parvati Parinayamu
5. Rati Kalyanam
6. Rama Pattabhisheka Natakamu
7. Rukmini Satyabhama Samvadham
8. Valli Kalyanam
9. Vighneswara Kalyanam
10. Vishnu Pallaki Seva Prabandhamu
11. Sankara Pallaki Seva Prabandhamu
12. Pancaratna Prabandhamu
13. Tyagaraja Vinoda Citra Prabandhamu
14. Santa Kalyanam
15. Sati Danasuramu
16. Saraswati Kalyanam
17. Sita Kalyanam
18. Kirata Vilasamu
19. Krishna Lila Vilasamu
20. Ganga Parvati Samvadhamu
21. Jala Kridalu
22. Draupadi Kalayanamu



Each of Shahaji's yakshaganas is an experiment in the sense that he employs dance, music and *sahitya* in different proportions in each of them and each one is endowed with special features of its own. *Sachipurandara Natakam* sets the tone of such yakshaganas and is a story that deals with Indra killing the demon Puloma to marry Sachi Devi. This is in the format of other Thanjavur yakshaganas with the usual components of *thodayam*, *saranu*, *mangalam*, along with *daru-s*, *vachana-s*, *matrikas* and *pada-s*. Shahaji mentioned the *raga-tala* specifications for all the non-*daruvu* compositions, indicating thereby that *daru-s* can be rendered as the Sutradhara intends to, thereby giving a lee-way for action - oriented dance compositions.

*Sati Dana Suramu* is an extremely different kind of yakshagana. This is the only one of its kind in dealing with a subject that was not treated thus far and can be said to be the first play with a social and ethical significance. The story runs around a married woman, whom a Brahmin desires. As the custom would have it, her husband, a man belonging to a low caste, gives her away as a gift to the Brahmin. But the woman counters both the Brahmin and her husband saying that she cannot be chattel which can so easily be 'given away'. The Brahmin feels ashamed of his desire and extols the woman for her boldness and intelligence.

As the subject is a deviation from the traditional ones, so is the music indicated. The invocation, *thodayam*, which is usually set in *Nata raga*, is set in *thodi* in this yakshaganam and the *mangalam* has Sri Thyagesa's *mudra*, dedicated to the Lord. The colophon calls it a "drama", and shows Shahaji's dramatic acumen. Unlike the other yakshaganas, which are equally divided between narrative and dramatic modes, this initiates a greater reliance on the dramatic mode, especially the arguments and counter – arguments and also contains a story with a sense of characterization and other dramatic elements like surprise and suspense.

Two more experiments reveal Shahaji's scholarship, his broader outlook and his versatility in several languages. The first one, *Chandrasekhara Vilasa Natakam*, composed on 16-2-1701 as indicated in the manuscript, is in Sanskrit, and contains the story of Siva, accepting the 'kalakuta visha' (deadly poison) to save the world. From the Sutradhara's words it is clear that the play was enacted as a dance-drama.

Shahaji has also authored a play called *Pancha Bhasha Vilasa Natakam*, a drama in five languages. The play reveals Sahaji's mastery of the languages – Sanskrit, Telugu, Tamil, Marathi and Hindi. The story line is simple and episodic. At the time of the

Rajasuya Yaga performed by Dharma Raja, Srikrishna came along with several other kings to attend the yaga. Four beautiful princes from Dakshinadesa, Andhra, Maharashtra and Uttaradesa see Krishna during the yaga and fall in love with him. They meet him individually and express their love in their own language and Krishna responds to each one in her language. The co-seekers of Krishna's love vie with each other and begin quarreling. Krishna comes in the end and accepts all the four as his consorts. But for the use of several languages cleverly manipulated to be part of a single play, the play is like any other 'Vilasa' yakshaganas written during the Nayaka period.

In fact there are other yakshaganas of Shahaji in which one or the other of the languages was used for character propriety. In *Pancharatna Prabandham*, we find *daruvu*-s in Marathi, used for Nava Siddhe Jogi and in *Tyagavinoda Chitra Prabandham*, Marathi is used. But no where else except in *Pancha Bhasha Vilasa Natakam*, Shahaji used five languages together befittingly. Sanskrit is used only for the Sutradhara for linking the episodes. That is what the Sutradhara does in any play. (See Bhimsen Nirmal, *Natya Kala*, Dec., 1968).

In addition to writing "Kalyana natakas," Shahaji wrote plays on gods with temple rituals as the occasions for worship. Four such plays stand out as unique for, in them, the author made an amalgam of several existing ritualistic and performance traditions. They are *Vishnu Pallaki Seva Prabandham*, *Sankara Pallaki Seva Prabandham*, *Pancharatna Prabandham* and *Thyagaraja Vinoda Chitra Prabandham*. The word 'Prabandha' seems to have been used here as a poetic text in which several diverse traditions have been synthesized. Though 'Prabandha' originally meant a "well-knit text" (Prabandham), in the Raya period it lost this general usage of the term and, instead, became a referential term for a particular kind of poem – erotic, describing a love story with eighteen different kinds of descriptive poetic passages. Contrary to this specific connotation of the meaning, Sahaji seems to have restored the original meaning to the word. These four *Prabandhas* are texts that bring together traditions of ritual, poetry and drama, in which devotional and lyrical elements are dominant.

"Pallaki Seva" is a temple ritual during which the 'utsava murthi' of the god (the 'procession' God i.e., an idol of the god which alone should be used during processions) will be taken out in a procession to the accompaniment of music and dance. *Sankara Pallaki Seva Prabandham* is said to have had 200 years of uninterrupted performance

tradition in Tiruvarur temple (S. Seetha, 1981, p.74). The story line is thin. Parvati (her local name is Kamalamba), the presiding deity in Tiruvarur, prays for a union with Lord Parameswara. She sends her *sakhis* to beseech him. The Lord joins her and she is extremely joyous. Though the story is simple, two aspects of the dance drama attract attention. The expression of *viraha* and her later joy are revealed in extremely delicate and delicious lyrics in chaste Telugu. These are set to the 'Sangeeta Mela' that accompanies the procession, often resembling the rhythmic flow of the palanquin. This and the "*Vishnu Pallaki Seva Prabandham*" can be called *sringara bhakti drisya prabandham*.

In the third *Prabandha – Pancharatra Prabandham* also - there is not much of a story. Five members of a dancing team under the leadership of the *nattuvanar*, Nava Siddha Jogi go to the court of Parameswara and dance there. Shiva, pleased with their dance, blesses them and their patron, Shahaji. The compositions intended to be set to dance are unique. The *koravi*, *jati* and *Ganapati kautvam* are of special beauty and are endowed with musical and rhythmic excellence. Shahaji calls his fourth *Prabandha – Tyagaraja Vinoda Citra Prabandha* – a *nataka*, perhaps because it contains six acts. This belongs to *Chitra Kavita*, which involved several prosodic feats. A challenging dance competition between Bhadrakali and Lord Tyagesa gave Shahaji an opportunity to show his expert understanding of dance and music. Rare *ragas* and *talas* are employed in addition to a large variety of musical forms – especially the *daruvus* he employed therein make it a *chitra prabandha*.

True to his fame as "Sakala Bhasha Nirvahaka" Shahaji had written 20 yakshaganas in Telugu besides two yakshaganas in Hindi, *Radha Vamseedhara Vilasa Natakam* and *Viswateta Vilasa Natakam* and one in Marathi, *Lakshmi Narayana Kalyanam*. By writing yakshaganas in Hindi and Marathi he is singularly responsible in introducing a Telugu performance tradition to the northern and western readers and audiences. Similarly he also introduced Carnatik ragas in the non-Telugu yakshaganas. Since there has been no "Indian" performance tradition that developed during this period, they remained mere "archival pieces", though during Shahaji's own period these yakshaganas must have been read, and perhaps staged, and certainly enjoyed. Thus Shahaji had brought a cosmopolitan attitude in performing arts, which, even in his times, was a bold path to take.

Shahaji, an ardent devotee of Lord Tyagesa of Tiruvarur dedicated all his plays to Him, in addition to a number of *padas*. Shahaji lived always in the company of distinguished

dancers, musicians and scholars. Among his several court poets, mention must be made of Girija Kavi, Vasudeva Kavi, Rajagopala Kavi and Dhundi Raja and many who received the patronage of the king. Bodhendra Swami and Sridhara Ayyaval, two saint poets flourished in his kingdom and the latter's *Shahendra Vilasam* speaks volumes about the cultural and spiritual contribution made by Shahaji.

The kings that followed Shahaji - Sarabhoji I (1712-1728), Tulaja I (1728-1736), Ekoji II (1736-1739), Pratapasimha (1739-1763), Tulaji II (1763-1787), Amarasimha (1787-1798) and Sarabhoji II (1798-1832) - were all great patrons of the arts of music, dance and drama and several of them were endowed with commendable creative skills themselves.

Among contemporary writers of yakshagana, Girija Kavi stands supreme. He enjoyed the patronage of both Shahaji and Sarabhoji I. He wrote *padas*, with the signature 'Girirajanuta', which are mostly *sringara padas* in the manner of Kshetrappa's *Muvvagopala Padas*. He was also the author of five yakshaganas in Telugu: *Sarvanga Sundari Vilasam*, *Rajamohana Koravanji*, *Rajakanya Parinayam*, *Vada Jayamu* and *Lilavati Kalyanam*. The most striking among them is *Rajamohana Koravanji*, celebrating the heroine Rajamohini's love for Shahaji. The introduction of Singi and Singadu is customary in *Koravanjis* as also the "rendering of future predictions" of a heroine by the Koravanji woman. All the plays are embedded in songs indicative of dance and celebrate the monarch's cultural interests.

While the *natakasala* under the direct patronage of the king was the centre of the *rakti* yakshaganas written by the kings and the courtiers, those outside royal patronage produced *bhakti* yakshaganas in the temples of Thanjavur and several other places. Melattur Venkatarama Sastry is the most well-known among the latter practitioners whose Bhagavatha Mela Natakams were annually produced at five villages around Melattur near Thanjavur. In Thanjavur, and its surroundings, each temple produced a play annually. Fourteen such plays are recorded along with the temples in which they were performed:

1. Parijatapaharana	Melattur	Narayana Tirtha
2. Manmatha Natakam	Tanjore Brhadisvara temple	Tanjore Quartette
3. Sarabhendra Bhupala Kuravanji	-do-	Kottaiyur Siva Kolundu Desikar.
4. Kumbesara Kuravanji	Kumbhakonam, Sulamangalam	Papavinas Mudalier
5. Sikkil Navanite svara Kuravanji	Sikkil	Tiruvarur Cokka Lingam Pillai
6. Brihadisvarar Kuravanji	Tanjore Big Temple	Periyatirukunram Subbaramier
7. Tiruvarur Tyagesa Kuravanji	Tiruvarur	Author unknown but obviously a contemporary of Shahaji
8. Maveli Natakam	Vedaranyam Temple	Author not known
9. Pallkiseva Prabandham	Tiruvarur	Shahaji
10. Sivakamasundari Parinaya natakam	Mahadeva Patnam	Tulaja I (author of Sangita Saramritam)
11. Raja Rajesvara Natakam	Thanjavur	Rajaraja Cola's Time
12. Kantimati Parinaya Natakam	Tiruvidaima rudur	Cokkanatha
13. Sringara Manjari Shahajiyam	Tiruvaiyyaru	Periappa kavi
14. Tanjai Vellai Pillaiyar Kuravanji	Thanjavur	Unknown.

(Dr. S. Seetha : *Tanjore as a seat of Music* University of Madras, 1981, pp.518-519)

To the late 16<sup>th</sup> c. and early 17<sup>th</sup> c. belong Jagannatha Panditha (c.1590-1665), whose contribution to the *rasa* theory in his *Rasagangadharam* is of great importance. Similarly, Varanasi Dharma Suri's *Sahitya Ratnakaram* and Krishna Sarma's *Mandara Makaranda Champuvu* are valuable commentaries.

The Nawabs of Golconda who ruled the Deccan during this period are also great patrons of arts and literature. Specially to be mentioned in this context is Ibrahim Kutb Shah (1550-1580 A.D.) who was a poet of merit in Telugu and a patron of poets. Abul Hasan Tanishah (1672-1687) donated Kuchipudi agraharam to the Brahmin families, having been pleased with their performance.

The prevalence of several *Abhinaya Darpana* translations and allied works on dance during this period is indicative of the popularity of this art form. Lingamgunta Matrubbhutaiah Kavi wrote "Abhinaya Darpanam" as a *prabandha* in three aswasas. Chillara Divakara Kavi's *Bharata Sara Sangraham* is not only a translation of *Natya Sastra* of Bharata, but presents the essential features from ten *Natya Sastra* treatises. The brother of Giriraja Kavi, Shahaji's court poet, Venkata Giri translated *Abhinaya Darpanam* and dedicated it to a royal relative, Khandoji Raya. *Appa Kaviyam* (c.1656) famous text on prosody, also contains important chapters on *Kavya-Natya-Rasa-Bhava* and other aesthetic subjects.

Narayana Tirtha, the great Saint - poet and author of *Srikrishna Lila Tarangini* belonged to this period (c.1700 A.D.). hailing from Andhra, he settled in the South. A composer known for his intense devotion, his *tarangams* form a part of the *Bhajan Kutams* of South India. The *ashtapadis* of Jayadeva and the *tarangams* of Narayan Tirtha are an indispensable part of the devotional ensembles. Narayana Tirtha is also the author of *Parijatapaharana Nataka*, a yakshagana in Telugu, dedicated to Sri Varadaraja, the presiding deity of Melattur. The yakshagana is rich in *daruvus*, *padyams* and other *desi* metres.

The encouragement and patronage given by the Nayaka and Marathi kings made the age a memorable era for the development of dance, music and yakshaganas. Their patronage is so all-pervasive that it goes beyond language and genre barriers. Along with Telugu, which was the court language, Tamil, Marathi, Hindi and Sanskrit flourished during this period. Similarly dancers and vaggeyakaras were appointed in royal establishments and *natakasalas*. Their wide interests in the arts are nowhere better evident than in the establishment of *natakasalas*, and the Sangita Mahal and the Saraswati Mahal. Scholars were duly recognized and honoured by the kings as was evident from the facts that



To the late 16<sup>th</sup> c. and early 17<sup>th</sup> c. belong Jagannatha Panditha (c.1590-1665), whose contribution to the *rasa* theory in his *Rasagangadharam* is of great importance. Similarly, Varanasi Dharma Suri's *Sahitya Ratnakaram* and Krishna Sarma's *Mandara Makaranda Champuvu* are valuable commentaries.

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Raghunatha Nayaka shared *arthasimhasana* with his minister–teacher, Govinda Dikshita and later Tulaji II with the great musical maestro, Sonti Venkataramanayya. Their patronage knew no bounds. Gifting villages to performers was common as could be seen from the instances of Melattur and the other villages, given to Bhagavata Mela performers. Temples became repositories of arts, perpetuating the tradition of regular and annual festivals. Endowments to temples and religious masters encouraged devotional singing of Bhajans and Samkirtans. As the kings themselves were poets, musicians, musicologists and playwrights, all the arts flourished during this period as in no other era, except during the Raya period.

The art of yakshagana was the most celebrated branch that received utmost patronage. This was partly because the kings themselves were great writers of yakshagana. Besides, it was a form that combined drama, music and dance with a strong backing of poetry. In earlier periods these arts developed individually, but in the Nayaka and Marathi periods, these arts are happily synthesized, making the yakshagana a uniquely Telugu performing art form.

Even within the yakshagana one can see tremendous variation and a progressive development towards the dramatic. The themes, however, centre round the king and his real and imaginative love affairs, which brands several yakshaganas as stereo-types. Since the plays by the kings and the courtier-poets were performed in the royal court theatre, the theme and the structure were restricted to be lyrical and love-centred. The common people had to see towards the rural theatres in Melattur and the surrounding villages for devotional plays. Together, they formed the richest ensembles of royal love and divine love.

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