

Bharata Natya under the Nayaks of Madura

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The place of Bharata Natya in the court of Madurai Nayaks, is not well documented. In the Meenakshi temple, Madurai, the front mandapa, at the entrance to the Sundareswara temple, belongs to the reign of Viswanatha. On the base of this mandapa, series of panel figuring with men and women dancing are portrayed. The women are slender and their poses are far more attractive than the panels carved 100 years later. The main Indravimana of Sundareswara was built by Viswanatha Nayak. It carries beneath cornice bracket figures of dancing figures which still retain elegance.

The next stage is the age of 1000 *pillared mandapa*, in the same temple, built under orders of *Virappa Nayak*. (1575-1600) and supervised by *Arlyanayaka Mudaliyar*. Among impressive sculptures are found in the mandapa, the *Pavini* carrying Vina, *Kuravan and Kurathi* sculptures, the *pedi dance*, and a few other sculptures and panels showing dancers. These are illustrations of dancers and their costumes, that were prevalent around 1600 A.D. Though these are huge monolithic sculptures, and the artist has tried to recapture the bends and turns of the body, their appeal is far less captivating than of the earlier ages. However, comparatively superior to what came to be represented 50 years later in the reign of Thirumalai Nayak, we notice a *progressive deterioration* in form, expression and quality. A point of interest is the recurrence of Kuravan and Kurathi figures, indicating that Kurathi and Kurava, playing important dance role, has come to vogue, by 1600 A.D. It is generally held, that *Kutralakuravanji*, by *Trikuta Rayappa Kavirayar* is the earliest Kuravanji to have been composed and all the later Kuravanjis followed his footsteps. It was composed by about 1725. There is also an opinion, that Tyagesar Kura-

vanji, composed in the reign of Tanjore Maratta ruler Shivaji, around 1710, might be earlier to Kutralakuravanji. But it seems to us that the Kuravanji form should have been introduced even earlier than 1600 A.D.

In the palace complex of Thirumalai Nayak, a contemporary account locates, a *Natakasala*, to the North of Swarga Vilasa, which is identical with the most impressive hall that has survived to this day. Thirumalai Nayak is said to have witnessed dance in this hall, with his queens, relatives and visitors. Undoubtedly it is the most outstanding and beautiful *Natakasala* that survives anywhere in South India. Among Thirumalai Nayak's other structural activities, the *Pudu mandapa*, originally used for *Vasanta festival* is impressive. There are many sculptural representations, but qualitatively, they are poor and indicate further deterioration. The *Kilikuttu* mandapa, in front of the Meenakshi Amman shrine, is also of the age of Thirumalai Nayak, and is ascribed to one *Abhisheka Pandaram*. Some of the sculptures, show the ornate head gear—the *Vasikai* which are found used in *Kathakali* and *Yakshaganas*, and also in *Terukkuttus*. In fact they appear even before 1600 A.D. in 1000 pillared hall.

The front mandapa in the *Nellaiyappar temple-Thirunelveli* was built during this period, probably by the *Thirunelveli Pandyas*, who ruled as the feudatories of the Madurai Nayaks. Sculptural quality though in the same Nayak tradition, is superior, the lines of the body and *bhavas* are treated with some understanding, and it seems to us the contemporary dance traditions in *Tirunelveli* area, should have been of greater quality. The literature of the age also seem to suggest, a strong base and fine school, in the hands of *Annavis* in this area.

One of the most interesting Tamil poems, Muvaraiyan Virali Vidu Dutu, was composed around 1650, on Muvaraiyan Thiruvengkathanan, of Visvanallur, in Thirunelveli district. The poet, was Mallaiyur, Thiruccitrambalakavirayar, a contemporary of Thirumalai Nayak of Madurai and other famous chieftains. The Virali vidu dutus are centred around the life of dancing girls, and thus furnish valuable data on this art. Muvaraiyan Vidu dutu besides giving the name Bharatam, to solo dance, by the girl, also gives the order of her performance.

புஷ்பாஞ்சலி முதலாய் — வாண நெடிப்பாம்
வைணவத்தே நின்று பதாகை பிடிப்பால் கடவுள்
அடிபேணி — நடிக்கும் பதயுகம் சற்றெல்க இதம்
பத்தும் கமலக்கை இதய கமலம் அடைந்தென
பதமுறை போய் மிக்க மிடற்று ஒல்க உத்தி
வெட்ட துள்ள கடைக்கண் நோக்க மலைக்கும்
தொழிலுக்குள் மலைந்தென்ன.

She started with Pushpanjali, and standing in Vaishnavasthana, and adored the deity with Pataka Mudra. The legs slightly moved, she held both the hands in Padma Kosika, near her heart, then she performed many enchanting dances. It is seen that in between she also played on Vina and recited a vocal song. (a tradition that has gone out of vogue now). We shall see, that more details are available in 1725, about the sequence of solo dance. It is necessary to point out, that solo dance was performed in the Andai temple of Srivilliputhur.

One more point of interest at this stage is the sojourn of the famous padam composer, Kshetrajna in the court of Thirumalai Nayak (1650 A.D.) The erotic contents of Kshetrajna are mentioned by scholars. The poet Thiruccitrambala Kavirayar who composed Muvaraiyan Virali Vidu Dutu, is also an author of several poems of erotic nature, like Kovai, Vannam, Ula, Dutu etc. A Vannam on Muvaraiyan, describes Sambhoga Sringara in such a naked tone, that it reflects the level of appreciation of the age. These compositions, obviously intended for dance by dancers, fill

to further lower level, that what we get in 18th century, the padams and varnans-would be spurned by men of cultivated taste.

At the same time, it must also be said that, some poets of piety, like Saint Kumara-guruparar, did sing the glory of God, and maintained higher level of thinking. Their poems like Meenakshi Amman Pillai Tamil, Maduraikkalambakam, Kasikkalambakam, Chidambara Mummanikkovai were used for temple dances.

In the evolution of dance forms, under the Mudurai Nayaks, the next important stage, is that of Vijayaranga Chokkanatha Nayak, of Madurai, in whose time, the interesting work, 'Kulappa Nayakkan Virali Vidu Dutu, was composed. Vijayaranga Chokkanatha was a contemporary of Sahaji and his brothers of Tanjore. The period requires a comparative study. More material is however available from Tanjore than Madurai. However, the information available in this Tamil text may be briefly noticed before the Tanjore Tradition is taken up. In Kulappa Nayakkan Virali Vidu Dutu, the Virali accomplishment of music and dance come in for special praise. The poet, Supradipa Kavirayar, was obviously a great lover of music and dance and cleverly introduces his mastery only of these arts in his verses. Describing the Virali introduces the name of one raga in each verse, and thus gives the names of Todi, Kantha, Suruthi, Gandhara, Megharanji and Kambodhi. The dancing girl Madan abhishekhan is said to belong to the Taliyilal family, who had the privilege of dancing with Tattu, to Lord Chokkanatha of Madurai Temple. She had to depend upon for dance and therefore yield to Nattuvanar, Kutasaikkarar, Patakan, Srutikkarar, Kaittalakkarar and Ekkalakkarar. This girl performed dance, in the 1000 pillared hall of the Meenakshi Temple. The following accompanying instruments are mentioned when she danced-Kaittalam, Kaivienai, Palakai Titti, Venu (flute), these accompanied Sruti, Raga, and Sangita.

1. She started with Pushpanjali-followed by
2. Pillaiyar Kavuttuvam
3. Ilaya Nayanar Kavuttuvam
(Subrahmanya)
4. Eduppu
5. Alari (as mentioned by Nandi) Toduttal
6. Kaie calain .
7. 8, 9. Daru, Jate, Surulmadittal
10. Sanggitam
11. Prabandham
12. Padacari
13. Abhinaya
14. Koppu eduttal (Korvi)
15. Perani
16. Jaggani
17. Sailakuvidyai
18. Kuttu
19. Desikam
20. Nayamangalam

It may be seen that the number of items are many and probably it would have required a minimum of four hours for the total performance, and it would have required great stamina for the dancer to give such long

performances. The order of performance may be noted. In the time of Serfoji II, the following order is seen, around 1825, hundred years later.

| | |
|--------------|---------------|
| Jaya Stuti | |
| Saran Saranu | Abhinayapadam |
| Alaru | Tilana |
| Sollu | Abhinayapadam |
| Sabdam | Taggini |
| Varnam | Gitam |
| Padam | Prabandam |
| Svarajate | Tripata |
| | Slokavarnam |
| | Kauttam |
| | Mangale |

In 1725, the dance form Perani is seen but it is not found in 1825. The form Tillana is not found in 1725 but has become a part of the recital in 1825. It is interesting to mention at this stage, that the Tamil work 'Poyyamozi Isai Kuravanji, assigned to middle 18th century, 50 years earlier to Sujoji, uses the word 'Tillana' not as an item of dance, but as a Jati, when the Kuratti appears on the stage.

“தாச்செனும் தகதகந்த
தீச்செனும் தகத்த நிலத்த
தில்லாது திரிநா தில்லாந்”

