

Vilasini Natyam *

AN ANALYSIS OF ITS TENETS, QUALITIES AND HISTORICITY

Dr. Arudra

The basic duty of dance students is to understand how scholars define and explain various terms, approaching dance in much the same manner as a science student would approach science, because the 'art' of dance is essentially a 'science'. Therefore the very first treatise written on the art of Andhra's dancing should be understood clearly before one tries to understand Vilasini Natyam.

Nrittha Ratnavali, written by Jayappa Nayaka in 1253-54 AD, which contains chapters on the Andhra Desi Natya traditions is the very first definitive work for understanding the Telugu people's dance. The creator of this work is the quintessential analyst. The Chebrolu inscriptions made in his lifetime refer to him as the "Sakala Natya Vaidika Gramani" and "Kavi Sabha Shiromani".

According to the Nrittha Ratnavali, the ways of the world are essentially a mix of pleasant and painful experiences. To follow these ways through four types of expressive dance (chaturvidha abhinaya) is called "Natyam" (1:25). Jayappa writes - "Natyam, Thannatakaadikam" (1:52): dance is such a play. By this definition, the Veysha Kathas, Veedhi Natakas, Aata Bhagavathams, Paarijatams, Kalaapams and other forms played by the Andhras of yore, fall under the category of Natya. The Telugu Vilasinis have been involved in

performing all these forms since ancient times. Therefore their dance can be called Natyam with justification.

Jayappa Nayaka discusses Nrittha and Nrithya in his definitive work and describes their form, nature and usage:

"Geetha vaadhyaadi militham, laya maathra samaasrayam, Anga viksheypanam nrittham. Bhavedabhi-nayoggitam".

— That which combines foot and body movements and employs the combination effectively, relating to 'laya' only is called 'Nrittha'.

The items Pallavi, Thillana and elements such as the Gapthu performed by the Telugu Vilasinis clearly demonstrate Nrittha and therefore qualify for this category.

Jayappa defines Nrithya as follows:

"Bhaveyth Bhaavashrayam Nrithyam Padaarthaabhinayaathmakam"

— Relating to Bhaava (expression) and interpreting the meanings of the words (in a song) is called Nrithyam (1:50)

The Vilasinis of Andhra give elaborate expressive delineations to their own songs. In Sabdam, Pada Varnam, Javali, Shlokam and other items, the myriad variations of Bhaavas delineated by them qualify as wonderful examples of Rasabhinaya. The expressive dances of the Vilasin is

* Translated from the Telugu by Swapnasundari

therefore fall under the category Nritthya.

Jayappa further clarifies that Nritthya and Nritthya contain two divisions :

*"Laasya Taandava Bhedeyna
Dwayameytatdwidapuna
Sukumaaram thayoraadayam bhavedy-
daparamuddhatam"*

— Within Nritthya and Nritthya there are two divisions each, called Laasya and Tandava. Laasya is delicate whereas Tandava is vigorous.

There are more definitions for Laasya. The mutual feelings of erotic love between man and woman is referred to as Laasa. (Bhaavahsthree pumsayor laasah).

That which intends to express this mutual feelings, or inspires it, must be called "laasyam" (1:57). Jayappa Nayaka further clarifies "Laasya" in the following words :

*"Laasyam manasijollaasaheythu
mridwangahaaravath
Deyvyai Deyvopadishtathwaath
praayah sthreebhih prayujyathey"*

— In Laasya there is delicate usage of various limbs employed for causing pleasure to the senses. As the lord propounded this aspect of laasya to his consort, it is generally women who exhibit this laasya.

The Vilasinis are famed for their prowess in exhibiting laasya. Their dance fully illustrates this aspect.

Laasya is essentially based on the erotic sentiment. This fact is underlined in an initial invocatory verse of Nritthya Ratnavali addressed to Parvati. It reads:

"Leela lalitha Madhura Laasyam"

Leela and Lalitham are connected terms. To follow the lover with the appropriate gesture, word and dress is called leela. Lalitham is a nritthya karana.

The Shringara exhibited secretly in this manner (that is, combining Leela with Lalitham) and expressed by Devi to her consort is filled with attractive laasya according to Jayappa Nayaka as per the initial shlokas of his work :

*"Deyvyaa leela lalitha madhura
laasyamullaasyamthyaa, yah srinagaaro
rahasi purathah pathyura vishkathastham"*

As the dance of the Vilasinis qualifies in all these aspects, the permeating quality of Shringara is present in all their dance items, and is also an accepted classical feat of a tradition which has evolved from the times of the Kakatiya Empire.

Though Jayappa Nayaka has called the dance of the women of his times as "Laasyas" he points out that only one in a thousand danseuses possesses this laasika quality :

*"Roopa yovana yuktanaam
Sahasreypi mrygeedrisaam Kala gunda
sameythaanam narthakee naiva
labhyathey."*

— It is difficult to find even one who is beautiful, fit, skilled and meritorious from amongst a thousand danseuses. (7:161)

Even if such a woman can be found, it is rarer still to find one who sings her own songs. Jayappa gives different names to a danseuse who can sing and one who cannot :

"Nartaki gaayaneesyaccheyth bhogini, paathramanyatha"

— A singing dancer is called bhogini, and all others paathra. (7:161)

As such, from the Kakateeya times till yesteryears, the Laasya Vilasinis were all bhoginis. General usage rendered this name as bhogam varu (the bhogam people). The performance of the bhogam varu were typically referred to as Mezuvaani subsequently. Today, the term Mezuvaani may carry dubious connotations. But about 150 years ago, it was considered a respectful term. Sir C.P. Brown writing in his Telugu-English Dictionary, defined it as Mezuvaani - an entertainment, Chaduru. Brown further defined Chaduru as meaning an assembly, a dance, a court of a prince, and so on.

Prior to this period, Mezuvaani was called Chaduraata, which assumed the form Sadirattam in Tamil. It is this Sadirattam which gradually changed to Karnatakam, Kacheyri and finally Bharata Natyam.

Telugu Vilasinis were adepts in this Karnatakam, which they rendered in their characteristic style in Mezuvaani concerts.

As for Abhinaya, normally the Vilasinis render it in seated postures, be it in the presence of the Patron King or a Sabha. This practice also qualifies as being fully classical. Amongst the Desi Sthaanakas enumerated by Jayappa Nayaka, three sthaanakas are suited for expressing Laasya while seated :

— While one leg is kept bent

backwards with the shank touching the ground, the other leg is folded with the knee forwards in koormasanam (6:12)

— Keeping both knees bent and together or apart, sitting gracefully in this posture is vrishabhaasanam (6:19).

— If one leg is bent with its foot and shin resting on the thigh of the other, it is called nagabandham (6:20)

Therefore the practice of rendering abhinaya while seated is an ancient Andhra sampradayam, defined even in the Kakateeya times, and must on no account be viewed as a feature borrowed from the "mehfil" practice which flourished under the later Muslim rulers. This feature was already an important part of Andhra dance traditions well before that.

Jayappa Nayaka enumerated 46 Desi Laasyangas in Nrittha Ratnavali. Prominent 'among them are: Sowsh-tavam, Sthapana, Daalam, Chaali, Chalaavali, Sukalaasam, Uroanganam, Geethavaadyatha, Oyyaram, Manodharmam, Anga anangam, Jhanka, Theyva, Pramanam.

In Mezuvaani, the artist moves forwards and backwards while singing and dancing. This may be correlated to Sukalaasam as described in Nrittha Ratnavali (6:131)

Gradually accelerating and retarding the speed of the song is a prominent feature of Vilasini Natyam. This may be correlated to the features chaali and chalaavali mentioned in the Nrittha Ratnavali. A notable point is the employment of Mridu Madhya Laya (soft medium tempo) rising to Dhruta Laya (fast tempo) in Vilasini Natyam (6: 125, 126).

The Desi Natya features Kundali, Perani, Preynahanam, Dandalaasakam, Chindu, Kandukam and other similar sequences which are mentioned in the Nrittha Ratnavali, have been practiced by Telugu Vilasini since Kakateeya times. During the Rayala, Araveeti and Nayaka rules, Vilasini Natyam was called Chaduru and Karnatakam, and exhibited mainly for the aesthetic pleasure of the learned cognoscenti and the royal patrons. During the rule of later kings, the dance acquired popular features and moulded itself to the tastes of the general populace. This transformation of traditions continued. Through the Kumfinee times and later, the dance absorbed more common place influences. It was at this stage that the dances with lighted oil-lamps, swords, tambourines, snake dances, peacock dance and finally the battle dance of rival wives (savathula kayyam) occupied a substantial place in the Mezuvaani repertoire.

As the above dances offer hardly any scope for true abhinaya, and as the superior standards of abhinaya could still be performed by the very same artists favoured by the cognoscenti, an inevitable class division appeared in Mezuvaani at this juncture. Connoisseurs still supported the higher aesthetics, while people from the lower strata of society responded to popular feats.

It is interesting to note the observations on abhinaya made by the Zamindar of Venkatagiri, Velugoti Sarvagna Kumara Yaachendra about 150 years ago. He states in his work Sabha Ranjani (1890) that natya is of six varieties and abhinaya of three

varieties. The superior amongst these is the Rasaabhinaya, secondary is the Padaarthaabhinaya and the third is the abhinaya which is used in Natakas (plays) and Bhagavathams employing vachika as a part of it. Curiously, the very feature Bhagavatham that found least favour with the royals brought to the common people education, entertainment, as well as cultural enlightenment. This is the reason why Vilasini Natyam places special importance on Ata Bhagavathams, namely, Bhama Kalapam and Golla Kalapam.

Dance and theatre, the performing arts, were primarily traditional occupations, followed by successive generations, being taught orally by the Guru to the Shishya. The changes ushered in by the efforts of the social reformers brought in their wake, legislations which negatively affected the continuance of this pattern, as far as Vilasini Natyam is concerned.

Fortunately, however, a few artists of Vilasini Natyam are still living today. With the commendable objective of saving their art from complete disappearance, they have determined to hand it down to the present generation by reviving their memories of it, codifying it and teaching it. The main aim of this revival is to earn for Vilasini Natyam a place in the mainstream of Indian Classical dance, as it is distinct from the presently established Southern styles such as Bharata Natyam and Kuchipudi.

Through direct study of the nearly-obsolete stylistic variations from the temple dancers themselves, an

authentic and time-tested foundation is being re-discovered and the edifice effectively reconstructed. The distinct repertoire, technique and presentational format are being codified systematically. It is of vital importance that these efforts be preserved for posterity by means of audio and video recordings.

With the concern and encouragement of art-lovers, Vilasini Natyam, practised right from Kakateeya times, can still be saved from extinction and suitably revived for the aesthetic pleasure of contemporary audiences.

Courtesy — Vidya Vilasini

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