

THE VEETHI BHAGAVATAM OF ANDHRA

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Karnatak music and dance still have their strong bonds with Andhra. In traditional dance-drama, the Bhagavata Mela Nataka of some of the villages near Tanjore in Tamilnad form an offshoot or a graft of the Kuchupudi Bhagavata plays in Telugu country. Many of the technical terms of Bharata Natya and a considerable part of the compositions figuring in it, — *sabdas*, *varnas* and *padas* — are in Telugu. The Kuchupudi tradition is the best known of the Telugu dance-drama forms but this is not the only one. In drama and dance, from most ancient times, as the history of the Dasarupaka¹ and Uparupaka² traditions of Sanskrit Natya Sastra show, small forms grow into big ones and from more complete forms, lesser ones, concentrating on some select aspects, are secreted and perfected into compact art-forms. In Karnataka, where we have the Yakshagana, we have also the form taken out of it called *Tala-maddale* in which without parts and make-up, the participants sit down and sing and go through the play orally.

When Kuchupudi Bhagavata attained its high water-mark, it gave birth to a derivative solo performance called the *Veethi Bhagavata* or *Gollakalapa*. The masters of Kuchupudi themselves thought of this new form and evolved it through women-artistes of courtesan families (*Kalavantula*) who were proficient in the solo dance-art of *Nautch*. The Kuchupudi tradition did not permit women taking the female roles in its Bhagavata

1. See V. Raghavan, a note on Dasarupaka, *Journal of Oriental Research*, Madras Vol. VII. pp.277-90

2. Uparupakas and Natya Prabandhas, *Sangeet Natak-2*.

stories and the *Nautch* had its own repertoire of detached pieces and love-songs. By a crossing of the features of these two, the form named *Veethi Bhagavata* or *Gollakalapa* was developed and a line of capable teachers and accomplished exponents refined it to a degree acceptable to the connoisseurs. In fact, the form became for a time very popular over a greater part of Andhra.

The credit of discovering the art in its last lingering condition goes to All-India Radio, Vijayawada, and with the help of the late Sri Y. Satyanarayana, who was at that Station for some time, and later through the Music Academy, Madras and the Madras State Sangita Nataka Sangam, the present writer had the opportunity of bringing it to a wider public and the students and lovers of the dance in Madras. The artiste who expounded the art in Madras was Smt. Annabathula Venkataratnam of Mummidivaram, an image of ripe and masterly exposition, who, after some decades of retirement due to lack of public appreciation and support, had been persuaded to recapture this accomplishment of her younger years.

As already said, it is the *bhagavatas*, Brahman scholars learned in Sanskrit and *Natya Sastra*, who were responsible for originating this form and giving it a shape; and instead of the young boys, the courtesans versed in Bharata Natya were taken, and instead of disconnected lyrics, a sustained Bhagavata-theme or episode was given. These women-artistes (*Kalavantulu*) had already a heritage of music and dance and some knowledge of Sanskrit, *puranic* myths and the rhetoric of love and *nayika-nayaka-bhava*. It was now necessary only to strengthen their Sanskrit knowledge and widen their general acquaintance with the tenets of our religion and philosophy. In fact, if as evolved, this form would shed its dances and gesticulation, and follow more strictly the trend of a single *puranic* devotional story, it would result in the other form, still popular, active and effective, at least in Tamilnad, the *Hari-katha* or *Katha-kalakshepa*. In this, as in *Veethi Bhagavata* only one main exponent, a male *Bhagavata* generally but not unknown a female *Bhagavata* too, with music accompaniment and oral exposition supported by thematic songs and verses, presents a devotional doctrine with its illustrative story of Prahlada, Dhruva etc.

The *Veethi Bhagavata* has one female-artiste, the main dancer; she is supported by a secondary female-artiste. For entertainment and for putting across the ideas more effectively, humour (*hasya rasa*) is pressed into service and for this a Brahman, in more or less the *Vidhushaka's* role, is also taken as an interlocutor. It is this dialogue or argument which the chief lady as representing a cow girl (*golla*) carries on with the Brahman that is meant by the word *Kalapam*. The *golla* always scores, she cross-examines

1. At its 35th Conference; see the Journal of the Music Academy, Madras, XXXIII. Pp.94-99.

the Brahman as to his real brahmanhood and expatiates on what a real Brahman is according to the *sastras* and in the torrent of her questions and Sanskrit quotations on several Sastraic matters, the poor Brahman becomes breathless.

The *Vidhushaka*-Brahman is used also in the other way, where he comes off in his role of a comedian and vehicle of wisdom. Wherever there is a song introducing a character, setting forth the sublime aspects, the *Vidushaka*, starts off with a parody of the song, mentioning ridiculous things, a comic technique which is found in a more sustained manner in the Kerala theatre, where in the traditional *Kootiyattam* presentations of Sanskrit plays, the *Vidushaka* indulges in such verses parodying the *nayaka* and *nayika*. It can easily be imagined how all this acts as a powerful medium of popular education.

The *Vidushaka* does not bring in any new person; the player who was the *Sutradhara* at the beginning of the performance and introduced it, himself takes on the *Vidushaka's* role. He is a versatile multi-purpose hand, the constant companion of the lady and also her chorist. The performance begins like any traditional dance-drama with a curtain being held by two stage-hands and the main character performing from behind the curtain her dance to the entrance-song being sung by the chorist. Classic *ragas* of Karnatak music are used in the songs. The *mridangam* supplies the rhythmic accompaniment. *Jatis* are also orally recited and intricate rhythm patterns give the dances and footwork sufficient scope for artistry. These songs are same as the *darus* found in the dance-drama compositions and to each of these the *gollabhama* dances. The theme in the songs she interprets closely through *abhinaya*. The art of *abhinaya* is in full evidence, and by the very nature of the theme, the range of the ideas is large here, and greater scope is afforded for improvisation and interpretation (*kalpana*). By reason therefore of this elaborate display of *nrtta* and *nrtiya*, the Gollakalapam takes its place among authentic forms of the Bharata Natya arts possessed of adequate potentiality for bringing out an accomplished artiste', skill and beauty of exposition.

The *Veethi Bhagavatam* when it became popular, was requisitioned in temple festivals and occasions of marriage and other happy celebrations in the houses of rich patrons.

Among the authors of compositions on *Bhagavata*-stories for this art, and among those who, as *gurus*, trained courtesan dancers as media for presenting this art-form may be mentioned Ravuri Kamayya and his brothers Noorayya, Venkayya and Satyamgaru, Vempati, Venkatanarayanagaru, Vedantam Lakshminarayana Sastri, and Bhagavatulula Dasarathi Ramiah. The first mentioned brothers trained the Chittazallu family of courtesans and other *Kalavantulus* of note. Over a dozen talented

dancers of this class who spread and maintained the vogue for this art are remembered.

The *Veethi Bhagavatam* had to face the same fate as other traditional forms of dance and dance-drama, in the present age. It used to be performed for the greater part of the night and spread over three nights. This duration could no longer be given to it and the same neglect and unhelpful conditions which led to the decay of other traditional dance and dance-drama arts affected this art also. Kuchupudi dance-drama and Bharata Natya have been rehabilitated and it is hoped that lovers of art and institutions which have been established in Andhra, as elsewhere, for reviving the local art-forms, will devote their attention and resources to the *Veethi Bhagavata*, or *Bhamakalapa* also.