

# KSHETRAJNA AND OTHER PADA COMPOSERS

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T.S. Parthasarathy

Mystics the world over, Hindu, Sufi or Christian, have often employed the language of profane love to describe the rapture of the soul's communion with the Divine. Many outpourings of the Alvars and Nayanmars of Tamilnadu fall under this category. Barring the *Bhagavata Purana*, the '*Gita Govinda*' of Jayadeva was the first landmark which described the communion of the *Jivatma* with the *Paramatma* in the mode of profane love between Radha and Krishna.

The concept of this love found its echo in the songs composed by saint-singers in the various parts of India. In South India, the earliest composers of the *Sringara Sankirtanama* were Tallapakam Annamacharya (15th Century) and members of his family. Next in rank comes Kshetrajna (17th century) whose padams have not been surpassed so far for their musical excellence and beauty of diction.

A brief biography of Kshetrajna is found in the "*Sangita Sampradaya Pradarsini*" of Subbarama Dikshitar published in 1904. According to it, Kshetrajna was a Telugu Brahmin who hailed from Muvvapuri. A saint gave him initiation into the '*Gopala mula mantra*' after repeating which, he had a momentary vision of Lord Krishna. Inspired by the vision he composed his first padam '*Sripati sutu bariki*' in Anandabhairavi. Kshetrajna was later patronized by Tirumala Nayak of Madura (1623-59), Vijayaraghava Nayak of Thanjavur (1633-73) and Golconda Abdulla Kutubshah (1622-72). He became the favourite of Vijayaraghava Nayak and this made the other musicians in his court jealous of Kshetrajna to the extent of carrying tales against him to the ruler. To spite them, Kshetrajna composed the padam '*Vadarakapove*' in Kambhoji, left it unfinished and challenged them to complete it. They struggled for months and finally

accepted defeat. Kshetrajna completed it in a trice and won their respect. Subbarama Dikshitar says that he had with him 500 padams of Kshetrajna in his note book but unfortunately these have not been traced.

In 1916 Vavilla Ramaswami Sastrulu & Sons, Madras, published the bare text of 202 padams in the Telugu script and marked the publication 'For private circulation only' as the padams were considered to be erotic songs.

The location of Muvvapuri remained a mystery. C.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, writing in his "*Indian Dance*" in 1948, remarked that it was in the North Arcot district. Another view was that it was situated in the Chandra-giri Taluk. A third was that 'Muvva' was not a place at all but meant 'Gejjai' or 'ankle bells' and the phrase '*Muvva Gopala*' was already in existence in Telugu songs. Sri Vissa Appa Rao, in his publication '*Kshetravaya Padamulu*' (1950) claimed that Kshetrajna's birth place was Mavva or Movva near Kuchipudi in the Krishna District of Andhra Pradesh and all later writers also mention this fact.

There is a certain amount of internal evidence about Kshetrajna in his own Padams. In the padam '*Vedukato*' in Desya Devagandhari, the composer has himself reckoned the total number of songs composed by him as 4500. Of these, he wrote 2000 in the court of Tirumala Nayak of Madura, 1000 in the court of Vijayaraghava Nayak of Thanjavur and 1500 (in 40 days) in the court of the Nawab of Golconda. In the last mentioned place, he had to face the challenge of one Tulasimurti but he easily vanquished the latter by outnumbering his output. Kshetrajna also composed more than a dozen padams with the mudra of Vijayaraghava Nayak, his patron. Some of his padams contain the mudra '*Kanchi Varadudu*' and '*Chevandi Lingadu*'. He visited as many as 18 holy places from Srisailem in the North to Kadirkamam in Sri Lanka and composed songs on the deities there, thus qualifying himself to be called '*Kshetravaya*'.

Kshetrajna was a master of music, dance and *alankara sastra*. He composed his padams to depict the 'Nayakas' and 'Nayikas' described in the *Rasamanjari* of Bhanu Datta Misra. The dignity and restraint with which he handles the subject of '*Sringara*' and the felicity of his Telugu idiom have not been equalled by any composer before or after him. His padams make excellent pieces not only for the concert dais but also for dance recitals in which they provide splendid material for abhinaya.

It is difficult to say how far the present tunes of Kshetrajna padams represent his original music. The only reliable and exquisite musical versions of the padams now extant are those preserved by members of the Vina Dhanammal family. The music has to be in the *vilamba kala* with long

*karvais* and pauses to enable the listener to absorb the predominant emotions of the songs.

Subbarama Dikshitar gives a long list of pada composers in Telugu but few of them are known to the music world. After Kshetrajna in importance comes the talented Sarangapani of Karvetnagar. Nothing much is known about the life of this composer except that he was one of the brilliant music composers like Govindasamayya and his brother Kuvanasamayya patronized by the art-loving zamindars of Karvetnagar. '*Telisane*' in Huseni, '*Ni papemi*' in Gaulipantu and '*Sisapu rukalu*' in Saurashtra are among his well-known padams. But none of these is employed in dance recitals these days.

A few padakaras like Muvvalur Sabhapatayya became better known in the dance world than, say, Ghanam Sinayya because of one or two of their padams being much in demand for recitals. '*Dari Juchu*' in Sankara-bharanam is a well-known padam of Sabhapatayya. Similarly one Kasturiranga is familiar because of his one padam '*Indendu*' in Surati.

Virabhadrayya, Tallapakkam Annamacharya, Yuvaranga and Melattur Venkatarama Sastri are among the prominent pada composers in Telugu but their compositions have not gained any popularity in the dance field so far. Annamacharya's *sankirtanas* are gradually being introduced for abhinaya in Bharata Natyam.

Tamil composers appear to have taken to padams at a later date and the most popular composers are Vaithisvarankoil Subbramayyar and Ghanam Krishna Iyer. Muthu Thandavar and Papavinas Mudaliar stand in a class of their own as some of their padams read like *kritis*. But some of them are eminently suitable for performing abhinaya in dance recitals. Among the Tamil padakaras Ghanam Krishna Iyer is easily the best as he was a great musician as well who had mastered the '*ghanam*' style of singing. With one or two exceptions, his padams are couched in dignified language and have an undercurrent of *bhakti*. Most of them are dedicated to deities and some to his patrons like Amarasimha and the Zamindar of Udayarpalayam.

The late C.R. Srinivasa Iyengar has some very harsh remarks to make about Subbaramayyar of Vaithisvarankoil and says that 'he dragged down the holy ideal and trampled on it'. He obviously refers to the highly colloquial language used by Iyer often debasing the content of the song but some Telugu padams like '*Vaddantene*' in Pantuvarali are open to the same charge. The moral should be to eliminate such compositions from dance recitals and select respectable padams.

It is noteworthy that no less than 65 padams are attributed to

Maharaja Svati Tirunal of Travancore. Of these 10 are in Sanskrit, 5 in Telugu and 50 in Malayalam. With the gradual publication of these songs with notation by the Svati Tirunal Music Academy at Trivandrum, these padams are deservedly becoming popular in the Bharata Natyam field.

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*T.S. Parthasarathy: Well known musicologist and Editor, Journal of Music Academy, Madras. This is an edited version of the paper read at first Natya Kala Conference held in December, 1981 at Madras by Krishnagana Sabha, Nrithyodaya and Bhulabhai Memorial Institute.*