

The Varnam in Bharatanatyam

A Socio-historical Analysis of its Origins and Development

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The *varnam* has been the centrepiece of Bharatanatyam performances for nearly two centuries. Its format is sufficiently standardized and well known now even to foreign connoisseurs of Indian classical dance. It is always a declaration of love by a lovelorn maiden, pining for union with her lord, who may be a deity (Krishna or Nataraja or Ranganatha) or a king or a local chieftain. The erotic content and format can vary, within limits; while the pangs of separation may form the starting point, the rest of the song can be a plea for union or a taunt about his callousness or the 'other woman', and part of the song would detail the glories of the lord, his heroism, victories, his beauty and great compassion. The chief *rasa* is of course erotic, i.e. *sringara*, or specifically *vipralamba sringara* or the pangs of separation. The other *rasas* such as *vira*, i.e. heroism (attributed to the lord) or *bhayanaka*, i.e. fear (attributed to his victims) come in as ancillary or *sanchari*, *sringara* forming the base. Thus the content has become thoroughly standardized over the years.

The musical format is equally standardized; it consists of a *pallavi*, *anupallavi* (which may be omitted) and several *charanas*. The *pallavi* (or burden of the song) as well as the *anupallavi* are usually in slow tempo—but the *charanas* are usually in faster tempo—and each will have a different structure and different *gati* or speed structure. The *pallavi* is elaborated with several improvised rhythmic passages (*tirmanans*) and this rhythmic ornamentation may be added to the *anupallavi* and *charanams* too. The rendering of the *charanams* is also standardized, with the solfa passage replicating the *charanam* and then the *abhinaya* (interpretation of it), rounded off with the rhythmic passage called *tattimottu* following harmoniously the rhythmic structure of the *charanam*.

This highly stylized form (totally standardized in content as well as format) is a final recreation by the Tanjore quartet about two centuries ago. The evolution of the *varnam* in basic form can be traced back through centuries. It was first a confluence, in about the

tenth century, of one stream of development in the North and another stream of development in Tamil Nadu and the further development in the South of this confluence in concert with the golden age of Carnatic music. Let us now trace all these three stages in the next three sections.

I

The developments in North India were not independent of South Indian developments but it is convenient to trace them separately. To start with, Bharata's *Natyashastra* does not give to *sringara* that central place among the *rasas* which it came to occupy by the tenth century.¹ Secondly, it deals with the whole composite art of drama, i.e. *natya*, of which dance or *nritya* is a part.² But, Bharata as well as later authors, from Matanga down to Sarngadeva, relate *sringara-rasa* to certain types of musical compositions, thus establishing some preferred musical format for *sringara*.³ Bharata does this in his 32nd chapter *Dhruva Vidhana* and Matanga goes further in his *Brihaddesi*, detailing a particular *prabhanda*, i.e. compositional form, called *nadavati*, with special melodic and rhythmic features. This tradition of correlating compositional forms to the erotic mood or *sringara* continued in later musical texts down to Sarngadeva's *Sangita Ratnakara*. Leading North Indian musicologists try to trace a dance-related musical form like the *thumri* to this tradition.⁴ While this may be a little overdone, the tradition of relating some musical compositional formats to *sringara* is basic to the development of the stylized standardized *varnam* of later days.⁵

More important is the development of interpretative dance or *nritya*, independently of drama. This development is clearly acknowledged as a *fait accompli* in Kalidasa's *Malavikagnimitram*, wherein Malavika independently interprets a verse set to music with *abhinaya*. The verse itself is in *vipralamba sringara*, expressing the pangs and prayers of a lovelorn maiden, and is preceded by a musical elaboration.⁶ This is, perhaps, the earliest known predecessor of the *varnam*, or even *padam* or *thumri*. This development must have been evidently popular for we find similar verses in later dramas, (cf. Sakuntala's letter to Dushyanta). The most striking instance is of course the pair of prayer verses to Lord Buddha in Harsha's *Naganandam*, couched in the form of Mara's daughter tempting Buddha in aggressive *vipralamba sringara*.⁷ In short, the independent evolution of dance seems to have gone along with the evolution of a musical format for *vipralamba sringara*, to be danced by a single female dancer, quite early in its evolution.

II

The development of *sringara bhakti* or *nayikabhava bhakti* from the fifth to the ninth centuries in Tamil Nadu was far more important than the North Indian developments. Briefly, it effected three basic social and artistic transformations which finally coalesced, namely:

(i) the transmutation of the secular erotic Sangam genre *Ahattinai* into *nayikabhava bhakti*, or the devotee identifying as the lovelorn beloved of the Lord;

(ii) the adaptation of the Sangam genre *Aatruppadai* into the *Devaram* mode of regarding the deity as a 'Vallal' or munificent king, with these two transmutations combining in another;

(iii) composite transformation of regarding the deity as a God-King and offering sensuous arts like dance and music as *raja-pachara*. This end-product was legitimized and sacralized by the *Agamas* and entrenched by the inscribed orders of Raja Raja Chola. (I have traced these complex developments in great detail in my two books *Cultural Integration in India* and *The Sacred and the Secular in India's Performing Arts*.⁸ I am giving the briefest account of them here.)

Early Tamil literature of the Sangam period was divided by grammarians into *Aham* or works dealing with human love in all its aspects and *Puram* dealing with heroism in war and other heroic virtues such as generosity. The former or *Ahattinai* was the dominant genre, as is clear from the anthologies of the period that have come down to us. Of the major eight anthologies known as *Ettutogai*, five are clearly *Aham* and a sixth nearly so, and of the ten long poems known as *Pathuppattu*, five are so. Apart from numerical dominance, there is clear evidence that Tamil poets considered *Ahattinai* as the core and heart and glory of Tamil literature, particularly in the colophon of the work *Kurinjippattu*.⁹ There is also internal evidence in some individual *Aham* poems which seems to support the view that Tamils considered the Aryans quite deficient in this regard.¹⁰

The basic characteristics of *Aham* poetry as laid down in grammar were functional so as to transmit the whole mood and feeling to the reader or listener and it was perhaps this 'efficiency' that persuaded the Tamil Bhakti poets to adopt it—quite apart from its dominance in Tamil literature. Its first rule or characteristic was that it was

sung in the first person by the very person feeling that experience or emotion. The second rule was his or her anonymity. Together, these two characteristics conveyed the full importance of the feeling to the listener. A third rule prescribed a natural background for each mood and feeling to be evoked first before the poem began. This is made up by the different types of land, flowers, birds, the time of the day and the season. Thus *mullai* or foothill agricultural land, the jasmine flower, dancing peacocks, clouds and the rainy season—singly and together—signify the pangs of separation or *vipralamba sringara* and make frequent appearance in *Aham* poetry of the Sangam age, and later in Bhakti poetry. These three basic rules made *Aham* poetry the most powerful vehicle for transmitting human love experiences.

The rise of Bhakti devotional poetry in the sixth-seventh centuries coincided with a general decline of the political realm and the last stage of Sangam poetry. The Tamil Bhakti poets could find no better vehicle than the *Aham* genre to express their intense personal love for Lord Krishna or Shiva, since it was so functionally efficient; they might also have taken it over as the major dominant genre of early Tamil literature. But by following all its conventions and rules, they leave us in no doubt that they are using the *Aham* genre.¹¹ The Vaishnavite Bhakti poets or *Alvars* at their best see themselves as the forlorn beloveds of Lord Krishna and they pour out their devotion in *vipralamba sringara*. Thus the transmutation of the secular eroticism of ancient Tamil Sangam poetry by the Bhakti poets not only enriched Bhakti poetry immensely but entrenched *vipralamba sringara* as the dominant mode of literary expression; in the process it was enthroned as the dominant mode of expression in dance as well.

Simultaneously, the Saivite Bhakti poets or *Nayanmars* were transmuting another poetic genre from *Puram*, i.e. *Aatruppadai*, into Bhakti poetry. In this genre a lucky minstrel, who has received rich presents from a munificent chieftain or Vallal, shows the way to another indigent minstrel. The poem describes the beauty of nature round the chieftain's castle and his valour, charm and generosity. The Saivite poets followed this pattern, equating the deity in the temple with a munificent king and describing the beauties of nature round the temple or his palace, thus producing some of the finest nature poetry in Tamil.¹² This poetic equation of the deity with a king and the temple with a palace was a most important socio-cultural transformation by itself. It was buttressed by the *Agamas*

which were coming down South by that time, but the *Agamas* essentially legitimized the idea of King-God which was already created by the transformation of *Aatrappadai*.¹³

The idea became more important for art when the two transformations of *Ahattinai* and *Aatrappadai* were fused in Bhakti poetry and the Bhakti movement. The *Ahattinai* transformation sacralized eroticism and sensuousness and sublimated them as offerings to the Deity, while *Aatrappadai*-transformation equating the Deity with a king made him a King-God with the temple as his palace. Together they made all art, austere as well as sensuous, as appropriate offering, and in particular the sensuous art of dance with erotic themes, as part of *rajopachara*, i.e. *La Dolce Vita Royal*. The *Agamas* legitimized it, elaborated it more and more, so that a long tradition was built up of dancers attached to the temple. This important development not only made for a continuous classical dance tradition in the South, but entrenched *vipralamba sringara* as its pith and substance. The reforms of Raja Raja Chola uniformed and spread this tradition. By arranging for regular secondment of dancers from temples to the Brihadeeswara temple in Tanjavur, he ensured some uniformity in the evolution of dance and made Tanjavur its centre. It was no accident that the long *sringara* tradition of dance evolved into the *varnam* in Tanjavur at the hands of the Tanjore brothers in the 19th century.

Another parallel development in literature which was supportive of all this during the crucial centuries was the evolution of royal romantic erotic poetry *pari passu* with Bhakti poetry. That same transmutation of *Aham* and *Aatrappadai* which gave rise to Bhakti poetry gave rise also to works like *Muthollayiram* and *Nandikkalam-bagam*, using the God-King image portraying the king as a great warrior, great lover and great lover of art.¹⁴ This parallel development of royal romantic poetry along with Bhakti poetry became very significant for the development of classical dance. The songs on deities and kings developed a close resemblance and affinity in regard to the stress on *sringara* and in relating other qualities such as heroism to it. One can already notice in these poems the evolution of the relationship of *sringara* as the *sthayi* (base) and other emotions as *sancharis* (ancillary).¹⁵

Another equally important development about the tenth century was the export of *nayikabhava bhakti* from Tamil Vaishnavite Bhakti poetry to North India through the new *Bhagavatha Purana* which incorporated all this in a de-Tamilized form¹⁶ (i.e., in a Pan-

Indian format). This sowed the seeds of erotic Bhakti in the North in literature and dance.

III

During this same period, the importance of *sringara* in classical Sanskrit literature and dance was also increasing fast. The main reason was the influence of Prakrit literature at first, followed later by the export of Tamil erotic *nayikabhava bhakti* to the North through the *Bhagavata Purana*. Gunadya's famous and monumental *Bruhatkatha* in the Prakrit Paisachi which included many love stories—and in particular those of Udayana and Vasavadatta—exercised a major influence, not only supplying love themes for Sanskrit drama but also stressing *sringara* as the major *rasa*.¹⁷ This is clearly seen not only in Bhasa's plays using *Bruhatkatha* themes but in Kalidasa's preoccupation with love themes in his three famous dramas *Malavikagnimitram*, *Vikramorvasiyam* and *Sakuntalam*, his long poem *Meghadutam*, and his preoccupation to sacralize it in *Kumarasambhavam*. Along with *Bruhatkatha*, the influence of *Gatha Saptasati*, i.e. the 700 verses on love, in Prakrit, went even deeper.¹⁸ This was all supplemented and even supplanted by the more powerful influence of *Bhagavata Purana* from the South which de-regionalized Tamil Bhakti eroticism of its local format and exported the content of erotic-*nayikabhava bhakti* to the North. There was thus building up a veritable Ganga of influence in favour of recognizing *sringara* as the main *rasa* and full and formal recognition finally came through king Bhoja's authoritative work *Sringara Prakasam* (the Elaboration of Sringara).¹⁹ With that work, the central place of *sringara* in literature and the performing arts was assured for centuries through a stream of commentaries on aesthetics. This influence continued strong in the Vijayanagar empire and its viceroyalties, in literature and in dance. Whatever we know of the dance traditions of Vijayanagar emphasizes the central place of *sringara* therein.²⁰

IV

From the 13th century onwards, classical dance practice in the Tamil country was shaped by the Vijayanagar erotic tradition, preserved through the Nayak viceroyalties and the ongoing Tamil literary and dance tradition. The former streamlined the earlier

*The reader will find a profitable study in the parallel *padavali* of Vidyapati—Ed.

composite erotic tradition in music and dance through new compositions of which the erotic *padam* of Kshetragna provides the best example. *In Tamil literature the King-God concept and the tradition of royal romantic poetry continued to produce new genres. We have already noted how Bhakti poetry and classical royal romantic poetry (typified by *Muthollayiram* and *Nandikkalambagam*) grew side by side. This development became more specialized as the years passed, leading in succession to three other genres, namely *Kovai*, *Ula*, and *Kuravanji*. The *Ula* is the oldest of these, contemporaneous with the earliest royal romantic poetry, and describes a king or a deity going out in procession.²¹ It elaborates his beauty, charm, grace and valour and the loving admiration of the ladies crowding his way. The *Kovai* which was developed later was more erotic, consisting of a series of connected poems on the erotic charms of a chieftain, king or deity. Of these *Tanjai Vanan Kovai* on a zamindar of Tanjavur was regarded later as the best *Aham* work illustrative of all the phases and modes of *Ahattinai*.²² Later came the *Kuravanji*, which incorporated aspects of the *Ula*. The hero, king or deity goes in grand procession, as the ladies on the way admire his beauty and valour. The heroine in the crowd falls madly in love and is eager to find out whether her love will be fulfilled. The gypsy soothsayer or *kuratti* comes along and assures her of fulfilment. This form which combined the classical and the folk dances became immediately popular.

Thus Tamil literary forms continued their erotic tradition with adaptations while musical forms also continued a similar tradition, with Kshetragna's Telugu love lyrics or *padams* and Muthu Thandavar's Tamil lyrics in the same manner.²³ It was this great continuous tradition that the Tanjore quartet and Muthuswamy Dikshitar inherited when they took up the task of crystallizing the *varnam* of Bharatanatyam.

The lyrical content part of the *varnam*, i.e. the love pangs of the lonely maiden expressed in the first person, is as old as the songs of *Ahanaanuru* or *Kuruntogai* of 2nd century AD in Tamil, and as old as Malavika's plea to her Lord, in Sanskrit. All the variations used in the *varnam* such as requesting the *sakhi* to fetch the Lord (*Nathanai Azaithu Vaadi*) or pleading with the Lord to give up his neglect (*Chalamela Rangayya*) are indeed the traditional *Turais* used in *Ahattinai*. The new element is really the standardized musical format, which was the result of the enormous musical developments in South India after the publication in the 17th century of Venkata

Makhi's *Chaturdandi Prakasika*, which unleashed a new wave of musical creativity. New ragas were created, new musical forms developed and old ones changed.

The *varnam* for the musical concert was probably developed about this period from earlier elaborate compositions called *prabandhas*. The word '*varnam*' is probably a shortened form of '*varnanam*' or definitive description.* The concert *varnam* was developed with its verbal and solfa passages to contain all the characteristic phrases, twists and turns of a raga. The dance *varnam* (or *padavarnam* as it is sometimes called) similarly attempts to include all the nuances of an erotic mood and the rhythmic patterns that will embellish it. The particular format described at the beginning of this paper was probably evolved so as to give the maximum opportunity for *abhinaya* or interpretation as well as *nritta* or pure rhythm with footwork and poses. It looks as if some model was already there for the Tanjore brothers to polish and perfect.²⁴ The elaborate use of solfa passages with intricate rhythm was already embedded in the concert *varnam* and the triple rendering of the *charanam* as verbal *sahitya* solfa passages and pure rhythm might have been also derived therefrom.

V

How and why did the *varnam* survive as the centrepiece of Bharatanatyam for two centuries? Is it worth retaining, with the same measure of importance? It is worth discussing these questions, if only briefly.

The *varnam* and, in fact, all the other major items of a Bharatanatyam performance such as *padam* or *sabdam* are composed with a single lady danseuse in mind interpreting them; the content was essentially the monologue of a single lovelorn or jealous lady and the rhythmic format was a challenge to her individual footwork and posturing. This suited the 19th-century society's sensuous patrons: maharajahs, nobles, magnates and merchants. The firm establishment of British rule later created considerable agricultural prosperity among the Brahmins and upper castes, eager to spend on dance performances at their daughters' marriages. This was later followed by the rise of the urban middle class and of Sabhas for fostering

As in *varnaratnakara* for *varnanaratnakara*. Besides, both in Sanskrit and in Tamil *varna* means beauty: it also denotes a letter or syllable which is a dominant part of the *varnam*, structurally—Ed.

classical dance and music. The individual danseuse thus survived with her musicians and her repertoire of *varnams* with the support of this new middle class which was somewhat revivalist.²⁵

Is the *varnam* still the glory of Bharatanatyam or has it outlived its usefulness? This writer is inclined to the latter view for aesthetic and practical reasons. Its erotic content has become awfully repetitive. Unlike the *Aham* poems of the Sangam age or the Alwar Bhakti poetry, the diction of the *varnams* of the Tanjore brothers and their contemporaries is substandard, written as it was during that period of Manipravalam or mixed-up language.²⁶ Its concentration of too much rhythmic activity into one long item is again more a test of stamina than of virtuosity or aesthetic balance. The good in it is already being distributed over several other items, and several dancers are replacing it with story-laden items like *nrityo-paharam*. There is no need to frown upon these healthy tendencies which are gradually displacing the *varnam*. □

FOOTNOTES

1. Bharata's *Natyasastra*, edited by Professor Nagar, Delhi University (1982), in 4 volumes with English translation. Also the Banaras Chowkamba edition in 3 volumes.
Its 36 chapters are comprehensive but no particular emphasis is given to *sringara*. In fact, some importance is given to *vira* and *raudra*, since the first two dance dramas discussed are Siva's destruction of Tripura and the churning of the ocean by the Gods—rich in *vira* and *raudra*.
2. The term *natya* means drama in Sanskrit while it has acquired the more limited meaning of dance in Tamil and other languages—dance is signified by *nritya* in Sanskrit.
Bharata's work devotes much space to stage conventions, stage arrangements, costumes and make-up, showing its comprehensive interest in drama.
3. Premlata Sharma, "The History and the Origin of the Thumri with Special Reference to Gharanas and Style" in V. Subramaniam ed., *The Sacred and the Secular in India's Performing Arts*, Ashish Publishing House, New Delhi, 1981.
4. Jaideva Singh, "The Evolution of the Thumri" in V. Subramaniam, *op. cit.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. Quoted by Jaideva Singh, *op. cit.*
7. The two verses challenge Buddha with tempting questions: "Have you no compassion for my lovelornness?" etc.

8. V. Subramaniam, *Cultural Integration in India*, 1979, chapter III, and V. Subramaniam, *The Sacred and the Secular in India's Performing Arts*, 1981, chapters 1, 2 and 3, both by Ashish Publishing House, New Delhi.
9. The work according to the colophon was composed by poet Kapilar to instruct an Aryan king, Bruhadatta, in the ways of Tamil romantic love and marriage.
10. In poem 156 of *Kuruntotai*, the love-sick hero tells his Brahmin friend that the latter (with his ideas of arranged marriage) cannot possibly understand what it is to be in love.
11. Several examples can be given of how the Bhakti poets followed Aham conventions closely. Thus, separation is always associated with the rainy season, jasmine and peacocks. Again, Tirumangai, even when breaking a convention like Madal, shows his deep knowledge of it.
12. See V. Subramaniam, *Cultural Integration in India*, Appendix III for a few samples.
13. For a more detailed discussion, see V. Subramaniam, *The Sacred and the Secular in India's Performing Arts*, Ashish Publishing House, New Delhi, 1981, chapter III.
14. For a more detailed discussion, see V. Subramaniam, *Cultural Integration in India*, Ashish Publishing House, New Delhi, 1978, Appendix II, "Courtly Romantic Poetry in Tamil".
15. For example, the following poem in *Muttollayiram* starts on the basis of unfulfilled love of ladies for the Pandya King, and branches off to describe the pearl-wealth of his kingdom and his marital prowess:

Bright pearls that dazzle
Not only does your (port) Korkai produce;
The eyes of maidens in love with
Handsome you, of the bloody victorious spear
And your broad sandalpaste-decked chest
The same pearles (like tears) produce.
16. Re: the *Bhagavata Purana*, see V. Subramaniam, *Cultural Integration in India*, pp. 63-65.
17. The influence of Prakrit literature on Sanskrit, by interaction, is now being widely acknowledged by scholars. The earlier view that Sanskrit writers kept Prakrit and Tamil literature at a distance was based on the express contempt for that in Sanskrit literature. Most likely that this conscious dislike was modified by the sheer strength, volume and beauty of Prakritic works.
18. See footnote 17.
19. This work is the very first elaborate thesis on *sringara*, coming several centuries later to the Tamil classics on it such as *Iraiyanar Ahapporul*, *Meypattial* and the *Kamattuppal* of Kural. But its influence was decisive.
20. The corpus of *padams* preceding Kshetragna that we know of is all erotic. Particularly famous is a piece attributed to Rangajamma, wherein the successful 'other woman' says about the jilted wife: 'Is she not woman enough to hold her man? Do I kidnap him against his will? She has herself to blame.'

21. See V. Subramaniam, *The Sacred and the Secular in India's Performing Arts*, chapter III.
22. In fact *Nambi Ahapporul* editions illustrate their observations with examples from this *kovai*.
23. Kshetragna's lyrics are too well-known as illustrations of phases of romantic love. But his predecessor Muthu Thandavar has already the same genre in a limited way.
24. The composition of the Todi *varnam* '*Roopamu joochi*' at the request of Kamala Muthu suggests that the form of the *varnam* had already stabilised.
25. For more details see V. Subramaniam, *Dima Panchakam*, Ashish Publishing House, Delhi (1984) App. III.
26. The diction and style of the *varnams* of the Tanjore brothers is substandard by comparison with the earlier work of Arunachalakavi or the contemporary work of Ramaswamy Sivan and Gopalakrishna Bharati.