


Performative Intercessions beyond Religion-A Glimpse into Telugu Dance Traditions

Prof. Aruna Bhikshu*

Department of Dance, SN School of Arts and Communication, University of Hyderabad, Hyderabad – India

*Corresponding author: Prof. Aruna Bhikshu Department of Dance, SN School of Arts and Communication, University of Hyderabad, Hyderabad – India.

Submitted: 01 August 2024 Accepted: 07 August 2024 Published: 14 August 2024

 <https://doi.org/10.63620/MKPJSSHR.2024.1008>

Citation: Aruna Bhikshu, P. (2024). Performative Intercessions beyond Religion-A Glimpse into Telugu Dance Traditions. Planetary J Soc Sci & Hum Res 1(2), 01-09.

Abstract

The classical dance traditions of the Telugu speaking regions of Southern India mainly existed in two parallel streams, Kuchipudi dance and the dance of Kalavantulu. Kuchipudi was the domain of the Vaidiki Brahmin men. Both the practice of gender reversal and caste were adhered to, strictly till the 20th century. The socio political period of the developmental era of Kuchipudi dance witnessed an interesting interface of various cultures and religions. This was mainly because of the then rulers being the Muslims. In fact the name of the dance form is taken from the village that was gifted to them in appreciation of their art by the Golconda ruler Abul Hassan Tanasha of 17th century. On the other hand the community of dancing women who were dedicated in the service of the God in the temples was called Kalavantulu. A section of them were court dancers as well. The content of the dance of both Kuchipudi performers and the Kalavantulu was like that of any other traditional dance of India, based on the Indian mythology. These two forms had experienced a mutual inflow of give and take and have also seen many a transpositions simultaneously. A critical study of the content, compositions and of these forms will bring out quite a few striking issues like the frequent use of Urdu words and gestures to suit such instances etc. This paper focuses on the socio political reasons behind such a culmination of cultures, thus making an effort to understand the accommodations made by the performers both for the survival of the self and the art form itself. The classical dance traditions of the Telugu speaking regions of Southern India mainly existed in two parallel streams, Kuchipudi dance and the dance of Kalavantulu. Kuchipudi was the domain of the Vaidiki Brahmin men. Both the practice of gender reversal and caste were adhered to, strictly till the 20th century. The socio political period of the developmental era of Kuchipudi dance witnessed an interesting interface of various cultures and religions. This was mainly because of the then rulers being the Muslims. In fact the name of the dance form is taken from the village that was gifted to them in appreciation of their art by the Golconda ruler Abul Hassan Tanasha of 17th century. On the other hand the community of dancing women who were dedicated in the service of the God in the temples was called Kalavantulu. A section of them were court dancers as well. The content of the dance of both Kuchipudi performers and the Kalavantulu was like that of any other traditional dance of India, based on the Indian mythology. These two forms had experienced a mutual inflow of give and take and have also seen many a transpositions simultaneously. A critical study of the content, compositions and of these forms will bring out quite a few striking issues like the frequent use of Urdu words and gestures to suit such instances etc. This paper focuses on the socio political reasons behind such a culmination of cultures, thus making an effort to understand the accommodations made by the performers both for the survival of the self and the art form itself.

Keywords: Classical Dance Traditions, Southern India, Kuchipudi Dance, Kuchipudi Village, Kalavantulu, Vaidiki Brahmins, Persian, Urdu, Lyrical Compositions, Abhinaya, Golconda, Nawabs, Bahmani Sultanate, Temples, Kakatiyas, Vijayanagara Empire, Deccan, Yakshaganas, Sabdams.

Introduction

The cultural identity of any country stands as an outcome of many negotiations made by its survivors with the time and the socio political circumstances of the respective space.

It absolutely stands true of the Indian sub-continent. Both the material and non-material cultures of this land have grown in this realm of complexity. Being a land, which experienced frequent invasions, the ethnic culture had a constant dialogue with the inflowing streams of perceptions and practices. When looked into the traditions of various art forms which speak of the Cultural character of this land we get an in depth insight into the past continuous present. According to Dictionary of Sociology, "Tradition is a social custom passed down from one generation to another through the process of socialization. Traditions represent the beliefs, values and ways of thinking of a social group. Folkways, mores and myths are examples of traditions" [1]. The process of socialization is in fact in itself an interactive phenomenon which not only involves the various elements of the socio-political environment but also a few generations thus making a cultural product amicable and inherited. Tradition is a multi-layered matrix of growth and change existing in both vertical and horizontal spheres. "Classical Indian culture has many traditions, does not look upon these as mere sources of amusement. Traditions constitute the heart of much that we can call classical Indian culture, and no pains are spared to preserve these traditions and keep them alive. This not only applies to the present, but also to the past. There are plenty of reasons to believe that traditions played an important role during much of Indian history. Since in each tradition a vision of this or that aspect of the past is implied, the network of traditions that make up classical Indian culture is inseparable from a vision of India's past, which is, to be sure, multifaceted and complex" [2]. The fact that multifaceted and complex nature of the Indian culture is a result of the multiple cultures and religions that got deep rooted here is obvious.

A critical study of Dance in terms of its cultural history, economics, patronage, body kinetics, aesthetics, literature, language and mainly its integrity with the religion and ritual practices brings forth both the micro and macro levels of implications of survival and struggle of the art form. Such a comprehensive study reiterates the significance of Dance as a cultural product, thus helping in understanding the Construct of Dance. The present paper aims at an inquiry into the cross cultural interventions that structured the Telugu Dance Traditions.

Methodology

Historiography of Performance, Historical approach, Cultural history, Empirical study of the Text and Performance are being

followed as the essential methodological approaches. For this particular study two major dance forms of the Telugu speaking region were taken into consideration. Both these forms though come from different communities share a common space of practice, "Religion". Their spaces of performance also revolve around the temples. Hence the spaces are also taken into clear analytical consideration.

Discussion

Parallel existences of multiple streams of Dance manifestations remained and still remain to be a unique feature of the Telugu speaking areas of Southern India. Both the little and the Great traditions were nurtured and perpetuated during the rule of various dynasties. Ideally the Telugu dance traditions can be categorized into Alaya , Aasthana , Aathabhagavatam . While both the Alaya and Aasthana traditions were the domain of the women dancers dedicated to the temple and the court, the Aathabhagavatam was the forte of male dancers who also were well known for their female impersonation. The first two forms were often addressed to as NattuvaMelam . The third genre is termed as NatyaMelam . Two surviving classical traditions of these origins are Kuchipudi dance and the Dance of Kalavan-tulu, which is renamed as Andhra Natyam during its revival . "Kuchipudi was originally a group performance-Natyamela, exclusively performed by men of hereditary families in Andhra until 1930's. They performed the Kalapas and Yakshaganas which essentially involved large groups. Parallel to this, Nattuvamela tradition practiced by women, actively existed in Andhra. Traditionally, these performers were known as Devadasis in the south, but called Sanis, and Bhogams in Andhra, performed in the temples, courts and outside the temples. While in the temples, their performance was a ritual practice, in the courts, the performance by women was more of entertainment for Zamindars and his courtiers. Their performance was called Kutcheriatta which comprised of sabdams, Varnams, Padams, and Javalis with predominance of Nritya and Abhinaya" [3].

The present classical dance of India can be traced back to the medieval times. It's around 12th century AD that the temple construction had taken the prime seat during the rule of various dynasties and reached its peak during 15th and 16th centuries AD. These temples have served as the abodes of arts. Simultaneously the courts have embraced literature, music and dance and contributed for their constant growth. "We learn of Halaiyyati Ranganayakiyar Manikkam, a dancing girl daughter of Sendikka Devi, being given the first turn to perform in the temple of Arulalandan and being rewarded with land in AD 1356, during the reign of Harihara Raya" [4]. The temple construction reached its pinnacle during the Vijayanagara period (1336-1646, Fig 1)



Figure 1: Map showing the Vijayanagara Empire

Each of these temples had a Rangamandapa or dancing platform. If this was the case in the regions of Andhra and Rayalaseema, in Telangana region it was the beneficence of the Kakatiya rulers

(1163-1323, fig 2) that have brought in upliftment of art and architecture.



Figure 2: Map showing the Kakatiya Province
Courtesy: Wikimedia

The Vijayanagara empire succeeded by the Nayaka rulers (1532-1673) who ruled Tanjore were great patrons of Telugu art and literature. Among them Vijayaraghava was himself a poet and writer of many Yakshaganas. Vijayavaraghava's Rajagopala Vilasam makes a note of the dances prevalent in the 17th century. "After Vijayaraghava the Tanjore kingdom came under Maratha rule and Ekoji I became the ruler in AD1676. He was succeeded by Shahaji (AD1684-1712), who was popularly called Abhinava Bhoja. A musicologist, composer and above all, a patron of arts, Shahaji was the most prolific writer among the Telugu Yakshagana poets. A polyglot (he knew Sanskrit, Telugu, Tamil, Marathi, Urdu and Persian), Shahaji developed Thanjavur as a seat of learning and the center of creative activity" [5].

"The kings that followed Shahji-Sarabhoji I (AD1712-1728), Tulaja I (AD 1728-1736) Ekoji II (AD 1736-1739), Pratapa Simha (AD 1739-1763), Tulaji II (AD1763-1787), Amarasimha (AD 1787-1798) and Sarabhoji II (AD 1798-1832)- were all great patrons of the arts, of music, dance and drama and several of them were endowed with commendable creative skills themselves" [5].

The Bahmani Sultanate (AD1347-1527) was one of the first Muslim states of the Deccan in South India and one of the great medieval Indian kingdoms (Fig 3).



Figure 3: The Bahmani Sultanate
Courtesy: Wikipedia Courtesy

"The South Indian emperor, Krishna Devaraya of the Vijayanagara empire defeated the last remnant of Bahmani Sultanate power after which the Bahmani Sultanate collapsed. After 1518 the Sultanate broke up into five states: NizamShahi of Ahmed Nagar, KutubShahi of Golconda (Hyderabad), Barid-Shahi of Bidar, ImadShahi of Berar, AdilShahi of Bijapur. They are collectively known as the Deccan Sultanate." (<https://www.clearias.com/>). Amongst the rulers of all these five states the Nawabs of Golconda were great connoisseurs of art and culture. Sarma writes, "The Nawabs of Golconda who ruled the Deccan

during this period were also patrons of arts and literature. Specially to be mentioned in this context was Ibrahim Qutub Shah (AD1550-1580) who was a poet of merit in Telugu and a patron of poets. Sultan Abul Hassan Tanashah (AD1672-1687) pleased with their performance donated Kuchipudi Agraham to Brahmin families" [5]. An art form which was practiced by the Vaidiki Brahmin families was given a permanency by a Muslim king. In fact, the dance form gained its name Kuchipudi after the name of the village gifted to them by the ruler (fig.4.).



Figure 4: Temple in Kuchipudi Village

The Telugu speaking land that remained united till the rule of Kakatiyas gained back its past glory of political unity during the Qutub Shahi regime. “After the Kakatiyas, the Telugu speaking area witnessed political unity for the second time under the Qutub Shahis of Golconda, this period saw complete understanding between the Muslims and the Hindus and the glory of this dynasty lies in bringing about a cultural synthesis. They not only provided the necessary religious freedom, but also identified themselves with the native religious beliefs and practices. Their rule was based on tolerance and though their homeland and religion were alien to the land, they never neglected their natives and never tried to thrust their customs upon them. On the other hand, they absorbed many local customs and traditions into their own lifestyle. All the rulers were highly educated and many were poets. Under these rulers the progress made in the field of literature was in no way less than that of any other dynasty in the Deccan. During the times of Ibrahim Qutub Shah, Abdullah Qutub Shah and Abul Hassan Tanashah, regional languages such as Urdu and Telugu also enjoyed royal patronage as the languages of the people. Although Persian was the court language, Telugu was given its due place” [6].

The coalescence of polar cultures and religions was established during this period. Urdu words became part and parcel of Telugu language and were used most fluently. In the same fashion rituals Phirs during the Moharram were observed by the local Hindus while the Muslims offered coconuts for the local Hindu deities. “The kingdoms of the Deccan almost six hundred years ago recognized the need for cooperation and coordination between people of various backgrounds- both who resided here, and those who came and settled down from outside. This process took various forms: it was the integration and acceptance of the native Hindus, north Indians, Afaqis, Hadramis, Habashis into a common society; later, it was also the acceptance of colonial influences into the mainstream culture. Medieval Dakhani Society was engaged in promoting a diversity that stood against all forms of religions, racial and cultural hegemony. What went into putting into effect this kind of tolerance and adaptability was a slow, ongoing process lasting several centuries, advocating a structure in which cultural and religious groups could comfortably coexist” [7].

The synthesis and synergy of cultures created by these rulers echoed in the variant arts and dance in particular. We shall now look into the variegated intercessions in the performance traditions of dance which mirrored this harmony.

Glimpses of these performative intercessions can be seen in the use of language, gestures, music and costumes.

Use of Urdu vocabulary in Kuchipudi Yakshaganas: Kuchipudi Yakshaganas include dialogues, Singing, recitation and dance by multiple artistes. The entire dance drama is conducted by a prime narrator called Sutradhara. Besides Sutradhara we also see common characters like Vetrapani . Vetrapani not only announces the arrival of the prime characters but also fulfills the need of a comedian. He is seen in a constant conversation with the sutradhara. His speech is often an amalgam of chaste Telugu with colloquial words and also vocabulary from foreign languages like Urdu and English. As a case study we shall now consider the dialogues of this character from “PahladaNatam” Yakshaganam.

Vetrahastudu/ Watch man: “Khamosh Kaun repukaarta- sab silence-pesaade” (who is the one who is shouting keep silent do not talk. This line includes Urdu, English and Tamil words).

Sutradhari:” Oyineevevandavu Balneetuga Eesabhaku vachitivi” (who are you gentlemen who arrived to this court).

Vetrahastudu: “laalrangeen-khishishumaa-naukedaar-sabeli-yat-lasharaanpuri pathani paagaachutti- buthedaar-tejbehatareen banush-kabaanush joodangeelanutodhangi- keepkaap- guldaaru-muppaj-suteenaasharaayinidodhagi-gulaabidookhushva-jaamukhamalneemanizdodhagi – hyderabadujemamaulkhu-shrangujarikotunudodhagi-reshmiguldaarbemahaakaashmir –dussalaanudharinchi- abdaarijauhaari bahudhvesh bjaapur tuwaalunu dharinchi- Munasab jamolamma mahataajchauhaarnigar kamaru bandunu biginchi- tejilki loth bekiimati bundelkhand kattikhatharinichekki –Nomramurassajeeni baldastanugathi -ginjanmudarverkuchedaar- vaasaanidhaalunu dharinchi- Balshoke jamaayinchaga Raakshaasaadhisudagu Hiranya Kasyapa Maharaju Chaupudaarunayya” [8].



**Figure 5: PahladaKuchipudiYakshaganam
Courtsey: Pasumarti Kesava Prasad**

This passage of the Vetrarani stands a great connotation because of its heterogeneous overtones. Firstly, let's look into the aspect of language, a number of Urdu words like laalRangeen, Khush, Taaaj, Dastaan, patahni, jauhaari and the like were used, certain corrupted and improper accent is also found. The aberrations were a part of the process of assimilation. The second point of interest is the reference of the regions which were under the Muslim rule such as Hyderabad, Bijapur, Barhampur of the South and Bundelkhand and Kashmir of North. And the third aspect is that of the costume, that Vetrehastudu describes his attire in his dialogue, he says that he wore a colourful Angi/ shirt, a Turban, a silk shawl and also makes a mention of the places from where these were brought, for instance the shawl from Kashmir. At the same time, he also makes a mention of the material of the costume as Makhmali, which is a kind of silk, he also gives a reference of his dress as that of Pathani. An overall picture of his attire is set on a Persian model. An employ of a demonic King of Hindu mythology is seen in a Persian costume and he addresses himself as Chaupdaar.

The course of acculturalization is upheld in such creative exercises which was the characteristic of Kuchipudi dance. Concurrently the influences of the then contemporary forms have also added for such actions.

Anuradha Jonnalagadda quotes Ramakrishna Sastry "The period between 1881-1930 was very important in the history of Kuchipudi for it was the time when, for the first time, the professional drama companies like the Dharwad and Parsi started performing in the Andhra region. With their systematic adoption of the advanced stage techniques in terms of lighting, stage décor and costumes they swept over Andhra with their performances" [9].

It is not only the minor characters like the Vetrastudu but also Hiranyakasyapa himself uses certain Urdu words like 'Sahabhash!' The incursion of such vocabulary is perhaps a gesture of acceptance of the culture of the rulers. Further, we find many more such instances in compositions like Sabdam s and Jawalis .

For instance we shall look into the script of the "MandookaSabdam" which is the narrative of the Gajeendra, an elephant who is saved by Lord Vishnu. This lyric is a traditional number and ends with the lines:

- "JaanaakiRaama- Bhujabalabheema
- Sri Raghu raama- Konadandha
- Raama Salam- Dhisalaam -dhidhi salaam" [10].

The offering of 'Salaam' a salutation in Persian is offered to the Hindu gods as well as the Hindu kings irrespective of the reference to the court language. Here are a few more examples from the writings of Bharatam Narayana Kavi

- "Bheekara sreekara tanjapurisa salaam" (AtataalaSabdam)
- "Aurauramelu Shabhaashu Salaamu!" (PrataapaRaamaSabdam)
- And another quote from Bharatam Kasinadhayya Kavi
- "Sabhaashure! Sallaamu re!" (Atataala Sabdaam)

Innumerable of such accommodations can be seen all through the medieval dance compositions. The dance of Kalavantulu also refers to these Sabdams as Salaam Jathis because of the use of the word Salaam. In fact, it should be understood that both the Kuchipudi dance masters and the women dancers of Kalaavantulu had great level of interactions. (Fig.6.)

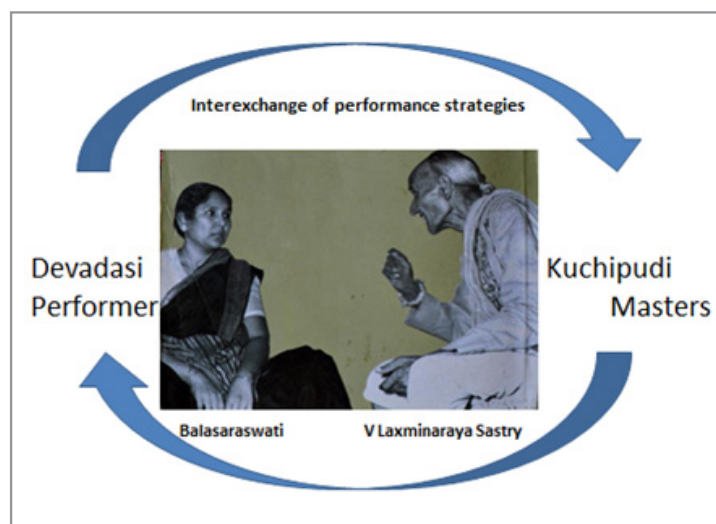


Figure 6: Eminent Bharatanatyam Devadasi T. Balasaraswati in interaction with Legendary Kuchipudi master Vedatam Lakshmi Narayana Sastry.

Courtesy: Pasumarti Kesava Prasad

There was a mutual give and take of the creative skills amongst them. While the women dancing communities had learnt Abhinaya/expression and HastaAbhinaya/ gesticulation from the Kuchipudi masters the varied solo dance numbers such as Sabdams,

Javalis, Jathiswarams were adapted into the Kuchipudi repertoire during its transitional period into a solo dance from the repertoire of Kalaavantulu. (Fig. 7)

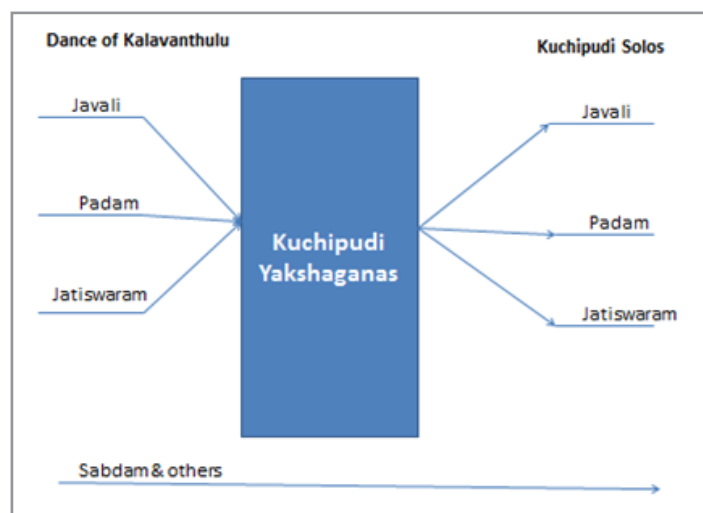


Figure 7: Figure showing the process of interaction between Kuchipudi dancers and the Kalavanthulu.

If these were the performance strategies adopted by the artists to own and appreciate the culture of the patrons, the rulers also stood a step ahead as connoisseurs and donors. An elucidation of such benevolence is already noted in the case of Abul Hassan Tanashah who gave the Kuchipudi Agraharam to the performers in appreciation of their art. (Kuchipudi village). Yet another representation of such chivalry can be seen in the case of Abdul Qutub Shah (1614-1672).

“A prominent ruler of the dynasty, the last but one Abdullah Qutub Shah patronized the two artistes, Taramati and Premamati, perhaps sisters or cousins, and built two monumental pavilions

one for each, where they could entertain their patrons, often nobles of the court or owners of caravans or merchant princes visited them whenever these artistes were not busy with their court obligations. He gave them each a village as Jagir – Premamati pet and Taramati pet which are known by their names even now. They were also conferred a rare honor- allotting mausoleums for their final resting places in the royal graveyard! All this is narrated in Nataraja’s book, *Swargadhamamlo Swarna Kamalalu*” [11-16]. (Fig.8) While Taramati was a dancer, Premamati was a singer. The verses from the holy Quran were inscribed on their tombs. (Fig.9)



Figure 8: Taramati Baradari

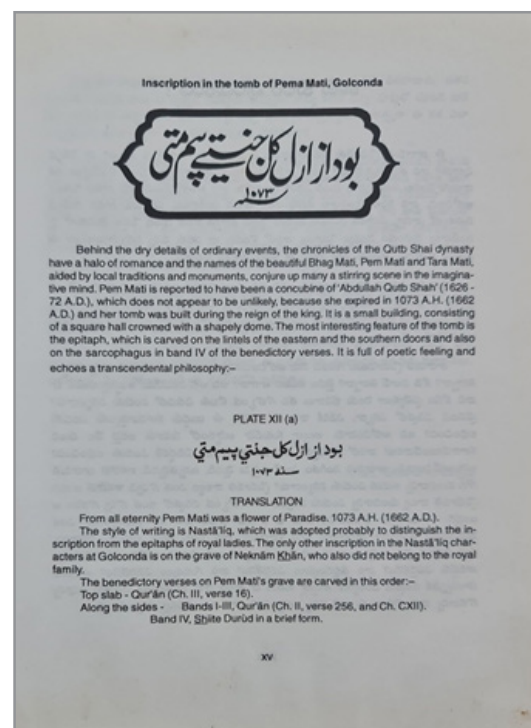


Figure 9: Inscription on the tombs in Golconda

Though the music of the South originally was Karnatic, the Hindustaani music spread at pan Indian level through the Mughal courts and also was part of the Deccani culture. It is evident through the compositions of the Javalis as most of them are done in Hindustani Ragas.

As already discussed, both the Hindu and Muslim rulers were tolerant and accommodative of the cultures that were not of their own. The Golconda rulers had often given place to Sanskrit and Telugu writers in their courts. The great lyricist Kshetrappa of 17th century was invited to the court of the Golconda rulers.

He also had a creative argument with the court poet Tulasi Murthy. It's not only the Telugu and Sanskrit writers who won the hearts of the rulers but also the Muslim writers contributed and carved a niche for their command over Telugu and Sanskrit languages. Saint Akbar Shah of the Golconda court had written a Treatise in Sanskrit called 'Sringaaramanjari'. Sringaaramanjari is a textbook for dancers who expertise on the skills of histrionic expression. It eloquently deals with the various personality typologies that are enunciated in the lyrical compositions of dance. (Fig.10)

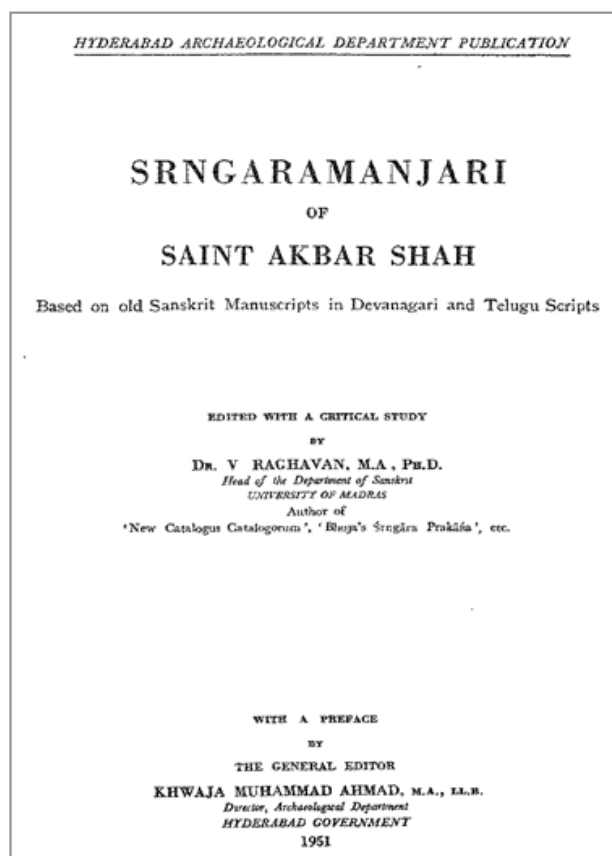


Figure 10: The first page of Sringaramanjari text.

Conclusions

To conclude, the cognizant nature of the rulers paved way to the co-existence of cultures beyond religion. The Magnus operandi of socialization at various levels and strata of the society perpetuated and nurtured the growth of Telugu dance traditions. Though the dancing body is of the present, the dance speaks volumes of the past. The shades of the past are carried out to the present through the continuum of traditions.

References

1. Scott, W. P. (1988). Dictionary of Sociology. GOYL SaaB.
2. Bronk Horst, J. (2005). The Reliability of Tradition. In P. Berger & F. Heidemann (Eds.), Boundaries, Dynamics and Construction of Traditions in South Asia (pp. 62-76).
3. Anuradha, J. (2014). The rise of the Solo. A Shish Mohan Khokkar's attendance. The Dance Annual of India, Telugu Traditions.
4. Lalitha, V. (2014). Devadasi system in Vijayanagara Kingdom. In Comprehensive History and Culture of Andhra Pradesh, Late Medieval Andhra Pradesh AD 1324-1724.
5. Nagabhushana Sarma, M. (2014). Dance. In Comprehensive History and Culture of Andhra Pradesh, Volume V. Late Medieval Andhra Pradesh AD 1324-1724.
6. Syed Ayub Ali. (n.d.). The Qutub Shahis of Golconda. In Comprehensive History and Culture of Andhra Pradesh, Volume V. Late Medieval Andhra Pradesh AD 1324-1724. (Original work published between 1510-1687).

PrahladaNatakam is a KuchipudiYakshagana. It deals with the story of the fourth incarnation of Lord Vishnu called Nrisimhaavatgara, which is a half lion and half human form. The story involves the characters of the demonic king HiranyaKasipu and his son Prahlada, who is a devotee of lord Vishnu. Lord Vishnu takes this avatara or incarnation to save the world and also Prahlada from the atrocities of HiranyaKasipu. The text referred for the present study is an edited version of the original penned by VedachalaTirunaaraayanaachaaryulu and TiruvallikeniRaamaanujaachaaryulu and edited by Vedantam Parvateesam.

Sabdam is a narrative composition which includes both expression and pure dancing. It is usually an anecdote of a deity or a song in praise of the rule with many adjectives mostly performed in courts.

Javalis are expression-oriented members erotic in content mostly done in courts.

7. Farooqui, S. A. (2014). Comprehensive History and Culture of Andhra Pradesh. Late Medieval Andhra Pradesh AD 1324-1724.
8. Tirunarayanaacharyulu, V., & Ramanujachaaryulu, T. (1981). Prahlada Natakamu (V. Parvateesam, Ed.).
9. Anuradha, J. (1993). Kuchipudi Dance: Who is who. Kuchipudi Mahotsava Committee and Nehru Centre.
10. Seth, R. L. (2012). Sabdams the Lyrical Dance Compositions in Kuchipudi Repertoire.
11. Chennuri, A. R. (n.d.). Revival of the Taramati Baradari. In Comprehensive History and Culture of Andhra Pradesh, Volume V. Late Medieval Andhra Pradesh AD 1324-1724.
12. Satvik, T. (2020). Map of the tiny Kampili kingdom along with the other kingdoms of South India at that time.
13. Rama Krishna, N. (1988). Swargadhamamlo Swarna Kamalalu, Taramati-Premamati. Andhra Natyam trust.
14. Radha Krishna Sarma, M. (2014). Architecture. In Comprehensive History and Culture of Andhra Pradesh, Late Medieval Andhra Pradesh AD 1324-1724.
15. Shah, A., & Raghavan, V. (1951). Srngaramanjari of saint Akbar Shah, based on old Sanskrit manuscripts in Devanagari and Telugu scripts (pp. 1-171). Hyderabad Archaeological Department.
16. Satish, S. (2022). Art, culture, and architecture of Bahmani sultanate. Clear IAS.
17. Wikipedia contributors. (2024, March 26). The Bahmani Sultanate. Wikipedia. Retrieved April 5, 2025, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bahmani_Sultanate