

## Inscribing Practice'

### Reconfigurations and Textualizations of Devadasi Repertoire in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-century South India

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The cultural scripting of south Indian 'court dance' (variously known as *sadir kacheri*, *chaduru*, *kelikkai*, *melam* and *mejuvani*) was a process that drew from a variety of already established dance vocabularies and repertoires, yet was clearly renegotiated, manipulated, and extended by the culturally-hybrid artistic atmosphere of nineteenth and early twentieth-century south India. The cultural transformations of the dance of the Thanjavur court during the reign of King Serfoji II (1798-1832) and continuing through the reign of his son, Shivaji II (1832-55), involved the invention of new forms of cultural practice based on the linguistic pluralism of Thanjavur and the very tangible presence of Western artistic practices in this area (Subramanian, 2004). Yet these new, hybrid cultural practices were short lived, as many dancers and musicians left Thanjavur after the death of Shivaji II in 1855 and the annexation Of Thanjavur to the British in 1856. Most of these artists either moved back to their native areas (including parts of Andhra and Karnataka), or were hired by smaller feudal kingdoms such as Ramanathapuram and Pudukkottai in Tamil Nadu, or Pithapuram and Nuzvid in Andhra, or moved into the urban settings of Madras city.

It is widely known that at this highly precarious moment in colonial history, a systematization of court dance occurred at the hands of the

Thanjavur Quartet' or *tanjai nalvar*, four brothers whose ancestors had been the court musicians of Thanjavur since the late-Nayaka period. However, the stimulus behind this systematization has never been clearly articulated. I would suggest that the potential loss of the dance in light of the emergent social reform movement directed towards female dancers in various parts of south India may have been a major impetus for the standardization of a formal repertoire and movement technique by Thanjavur Quartet. Standardizing the practice at the court would (and indeed did) ensure the repertoire's survival into the next century..

In this article, I explore the central role played by texts in the formation and preservation of Thanjavur court dance, before, during, and after the time of the Quartet. I look at the ways in which systematization of the Thanjavur court dance predate the Quartet's activities, and I also look at the ways in which the compositions of the Quartet survive through twentieth century attempts to capture them using the essay written word. This is divided into two parts. In the first part, I explore an example of a pre-Quartet, eighteenth-century systematization of Thanjavur court dance in Tulaja Maharaja's Sanskrit text *Sangita Saramrita*. I then proceed to examine how the Quartet incorporated pre-existing form and structure into their compositions by looking at a *nritta* or pure dance section from a Marathi text called *Kumarasambhava Nirupana*. In the second part, I briefly examine two texts, Gangaimuttu Pillai's *Natanadi Vadya Ranjanam* (1898) and Devulapalli Viraraghavamurti Shastri's *Abhinaya Svayambodhini* (1915) that I posit as new attempts to document devadasi court repertoire. In this process, I hope to elucidate the complicated and entrenched relationships between text and practice, Sanskrit and vernacular in the devadasi dance traditions of nineteenth and twentieth century south India.

#### PRE-QUARTET TEXTUALIZATION OF THANJAVUR COURT DANCE

Certainly, twentieth-century 'revivalist' discourses centred around granting legitimacy to the reinvented forms by linking them to texts such as the *Natyashastra*. While recognizing the necessity to critique the primacy and elevated status given to Sanskrit dance texts in post-1930s dance history (Coorlawala, 1994; Meduri, 1996), I concede that the relationships between late Sanskrit and vernacular dance texts and devadasi dance are highly complex and varied. By the time of the Maratha rule in Thanjavur, and certainly throughout the late nineteenth century, there seems to have been a

conscious attempt to notate, classify, and preserve songs of the dance repertoire in the form of written texts. While some of these types of texts are well known to most historians of south Indian dance—such as the Tamil *Kuravanjis*<sup>2</sup> danced in various temples that survive in manuscript form in various libraries and personal collections—other codifications of dance repertoire in textual form such as those I discuss here, are not.

*Sangita Saramrita* is a Sanskrit text attributed to King Tulaja I (r. 1729–35). Unfortunately, as V. Raghavan has noted in the production of a critical edition of the text in 1942, the dance section or *Nritta-prakaranam* is perhaps the most incomplete section in all of the available manuscript materials. However, the fragments are complete enough to provide us with a unique vision of the Maratha enterprise of re-working indigenous cultural practice. This text clearly reflects an attempt to reconcile the local traditions of dance with Sanskrit textual tradition. Its vocabulary is thus a unique amalgam of local (that is, Telugu/Tamil) vocabulary for movements, which are called *adavus* in the text, and representations of dance as found in medieval Sanskrit texts such as the *Sangita Ratnakara* of Sarangadeva, the *Sangita-muktavali* of Devenacharya and the *Nrittaratnavali* of Jayappa, each of which Tulaja liberally cites. This is most clearly seen in the section called *shrama-vidhi* (or 'directions for practice'). Below is an excerpt from the text that illustrates not only a new hybrid linguistic configuration for the dance, but also the detailed manner in which the text describes the practice of an *adavu*:

#### TEXT 1

*Sangita Saramrita* (shramavidhi)  
Tulajaji [Tukkojil Maharaja (r. 1729-35)]

vilambadi prabhedena tadevavartate punah  
udaharanam: *theyyathai* iti  
nikhaya parshnimekaikam prithakpadena tadanam  
sa patakakaranvitam syat khanatpadakuttanam

This description of the *tattadavu* provides a Sanskrit equivalent (*khanatpada-kuttanam* or 'clipping'-foot-step). Moreover, it provides a description of the practice of the step in alternating speeds of *vilambita* ('slow') and the others, supplies the vocalized rhythm or *cholkattu* (which it transliterates as *theyyathai*), and gives a short description of the formation of the step, not unlike the well-known *karana* passages from the fourth chapter of the *Natyashastra*.

The *Sangita Saramrita* is, in a sense, a document of tremendous historic relevance, for it demonstrates that an indigenous form of what new critical scholarship refers to as a process of 'textualization' had in fact begun as early as the eighteenth century. While there is certainly a fundamental epistemological difference between the *Sangita Saramrita* and the products of later (Orientalist) 'textualization', it is important to note the significance of a pre-colonial text that clearly 'Sanskritizes' the local Thanjavur court dance traditions in terms of linking them ideologically to the Natyashastric tradition by reading them through the lens of Marathi observers and patrons.

### THE THAN JAVUR BROTHERS

The Thanjavur Brothers, Chinnaiya, Ponnaiya, Shivanandam, and Vadivel, descended from a clan of musicians who were patronized by the Nayaka and Maratha courts. Their earliest traceable ancestor is one Gopala Nattuvanar (b. 1638) who served in the Rajagopalasvami temple at Mannargudi, and was a chief musician of the court of King Vijayaraghava Nayaka in the seventeenth century. At the decline of the Nayaka rule in Thanjavur, this family moved to Madurai, and later to Tirunelveli. During the rule of King Tulaja II (r. 1763-87), three descendants of the family, the brothers Mahadevan (1734-91), Gangaimuttu (1737-98)<sup>3</sup> and Ramalingam (dates unknown) were invited back to the Thanjavur court. The present home of K.P. Kittappa Pillai on West Main Street in Thanjavur was gifted to the family at this time by Tulaja II. Gangaimuttu had two sons, Subbarayan (1758-1814)<sup>4</sup> and Chidambaram (dates unknown). Subbarayan's sons were the Thanjavur Brothers.

Chinnaiya (1802-56), the eldest of the four, was a great teacher of dance, and in addition was supposed to have been one of the few males who actually performed the dance. He later moved to the Mysore court of Krishnaraja Udaiyar III (r. 1811-68). We can thus surmise that of all the extant compositions attributed to the Thanjavur Brothers, the few dedicated to Krishnaraja Udaiyar III<sup>5</sup> are the creations of Chinnaiya. He also wrote a Telugu text called *Abhinaya Lakshanamu*, a re-worked version of the Sanskrit *Abhinayadarpana* of Nandikeshvara. The colophon of this text reads 'as dictated by Subbarayan', presumably Chinnaiya's father.<sup>6</sup> Ponnaiya (1804-64) was perhaps the most prolific composer among the brothers, and to him is credited the systematization of the *sadir kacheri* (concert dance repertoire). Most of the compositions by the brothers on Brihadishvara as well as several nritta compositions (*jatisvarams* and *tillanas*) are attributed to him. Ponnaiya also set the *mettu* (tunes) for the *Sarabhendra Bhupala*

*Kuravanji*, a text that eulogized King Serfoji II by incorporating him into a Tamil literary genre performed in temples by devadasis. This kuravanji continued to be performed at the Brihadishvara temple in Thanjavur well into the twentieth century on the ninth day of the annual 18-day long Chaitra Brahmotsavam in April—May.<sup>7</sup>

Before the innovations ushered in by the Quartet, court dance repertoire in the Kaveri Delta seems to have been very flexible. Numerous experiments were being conducted by court-poets, dance-masters, and female dancers themselves, in terms of the creation and manipulation of various genres. Like their contemporaries, the Thanjavur Brothers drew from a cultural pool of artistic materials related to solo female dance in the region. Their re-visioning of the court repertoire consisted of the development of seven primary genres for the solo female court dancer: *alari ppu*, *jatisvaram*, *shabdham*, *varnam*, *padam*, *javali*, and *tillana*. These represented, in a well-balanced manner, both abstract dance technique (*nritta*) and textual interpretation (*abhinaya*). The aesthetic experiments of the brothers, Ponnaiya and Vadivel in particular, were 'tested' by three prominent female dancers: Kamalamuttu of Tiruvarur, Sarasammal of Thanjavur, and Minakshi of Mannargudi, who likely performed at the Maratha darbar. This systematization of various kinds of aesthetic material appears to have occurred sometime before 1834, when the Quartet were banished from Thanjavur because of a tryst with King Serfoji II, and moved temporarily to Travancore.<sup>8</sup>

In creating their sevenfold repertoire, the brothers were, in effect, weaving together various fragments of cultural practice. The compositions of the court-poets and dance-masters of other Maratha kings such as Shahaji and Pratapasimha, the Kuravanji temple dramas performed by devadasis, ritual dance in the Kaveri Delta temples, were among the sources they drew from. However, immediately before their establishment of the sevenfold repertoire, a set of Marathi texts for dance called *nirupana*, also referred to by their Tamil name *Korvai* (links' or 'chain'), were commissioned by Serfoji II. These Marathi texts are extremely important and provide one of the most important elements in the Quartet's vision of court dance. The court of King Serfoji II produced a cluster of these nirupanas that presented a series of new dance genres such as *sherva*, *tarana*, and *tri puta* along with existing genres such as *varnam*, *abhinaya pada*, and *shabda*, couched in the context of a linear narrative presentation similar to the Telugu *yakshagana* court-dramas of the Nayaka and early Maratha periods. In these new genres, we see the roots for the structural aspects of the compositions of the Quartet.

For example, under the genre called *sherva* in the texts, for example, we find that it consists of three sections, called *tattakara*, *alaru* and *aditya*:

## TEXT 2

Kumarasambhava Nirupana

(attributed to Serfoji Maharaja II, r. 1798-1832)

Sherva

Raga Bilahari

Aditala

Tattakara—tathayyai thai dattatta

Alaru

tam tam thaikita taka II tam tam thaikita taka (3x)  
 tam tam thaikita taka II tadh dhalangutaka tadhimginathom  
 takatdhi dhalangu takatadhimginathom tadh dhalangu takatdhidhalangu  
 dhalangutaka dhikitalca tadhimginathom JJ tadhimginathom  
 tam digi digi digi  
 dhiki taka taka dhiki taka taka dhiki taka dhalangutaka dhiki taka  
 tadhimginathom

Aditya

tam taka jhomtatta jhomta jhomtatta jhom jhamtari jagataku kumdata  
 kumdari tadhimginathom

The excerpt above is a *sherva* from a text called *Kumarasambhava Nirupana*, which re-tells Kalidasa's version of the birth of Skanda, through a series of songs meant for dance. The parts of the *sherva* (which is translated as 'Sabhāi Vanakkam' or 'Song of Greeting to the Audience' by the Tamil editors of the text) are very similar in structure to elements of the repertoire developed by the Quartet, specifically, the genre called *alarippu*, the piece that begins the concert or court performance.

The first section of the *sherva* is called *tattakara*, a term used by the descendants of the Quartet even today. It consists of the recitation of a single line of vocalized rhythmic syllables or *cholkattu*. Here we see the sounds *ta-thay-yai thai dat-tatta*. The dancer would enter the performance arena with these sounds, while stamping her feet on the ground. The second section, *alaru* is more than likely the source of the genre that the Brothers call *alarippu*, from the Telugu word *alaru* (Tower or blossom). In this section, we see a configuration of syllables that looks almost exactly like the Quartet's *alarippu*. It ends with another form of *tattakara*, this time

to the accompaniment of the sounds *digi digi digi*—a similar structure is also found at the end of the Quartet's *alarippu*. The composition ends with a section called *aditya*, which brings closure to the piece. This fragment of *cholkattus* bears a resemblance to a short *tirmanam* or flourish that concludes most rhythmic sequences.

DEVADASI DANCE TEXTS AFTER  
THE QUARTET

The effort to 'preserve' the devadasi dance also continued well after the time of the Quartet. Patrons and dance-masters appear to have been increasingly concerned about the potential loss of the art of dance, particularly in the first decade of the twentieth century, when there appears to have been a burgeoning interest in 'documenting' the devadasi music and dance repertoire in the form of Tamil and Telugu printed texts. The advent of print culture in south India played a major role in the sedimentation of new forms of cultural expression, and mediated the transmission of and accessibility to traditional forms of knowledge. As Stuart Blackburn has recently pointed out,

... even if it did not by itself standardize languages or fix canons or maintain colonial domination, the rise of print must be included in any attempt to explain cultural change in the nineteenth century (Blackburn, 2003, p. 12).

In terms of our discussion of a new textualization of dance practice that occurs with the advent of print culture, on the one hand, it is important that printed texts serve, to some extent, to undermine traditional authority, or displace hereditary or other specialized knowledge. On the other hand, I propose that the set of printed texts we will be examining represent an anxiety about the loss of specialized knowledge. Brahmin men and *nattuvanars*, the 'brokers' of elite cultural forms in nineteenth-century south India, were eager to retain, remember, and reproduce the cultural practices that defined their identities in a changing public sphere.

One of the earliest examples of a printed work on dance is a Tamil work entitled *Abhinayasarasampūta* (Vessel Containing the Essence of Abhinaya) by Chetlur Narayana Ayyangar, published in 1886. This work, and its companion, a text called *Abhinaya Navanita* (Refined Essence of Abhinaya)<sup>9</sup> were edited by V. Raghavan and published in 1961 by the Madras Music Academy. The *Abhinayasarasampūta* is divided into six sections dealing with a range of topics related to the theory and practice

of *abhinaya*, from discourses on *rasa* and *nayikas*, to the various typologies of head and neck movements and hand gestures, all based on the *Abhinayadvpana*. The final section, entitled *Bhava Prakas ham* (Illuminations on Bhava) is perhaps the most relevant for our discussion. It notates 'word-for-word' abhinaya for twenty padams in Tamil and Telugu, including Tamil compositions by SubbaramaAyyar and Telugu padams by Kshetranya. These 'word-for-word' interpretations are suggestions for how to perform abhinaya for each word in the text of the song.' The author presents this as giving purport (*tatparyam*) to the representation of these songs (*Abhinaya Sara Samputa*, 1961, p. 4).

We will now turn to an important Tamil work, *Natanadi Vadya Ranjanam* by Gangaimuttu Pillai (1837-1920), written in Tirunelveli in the year 1898 (Fig. 2.1). Gangaimuttu Pillai himself was a nattuvanar employed by the Minakshi temple in Madurai. Two other Tamil works, *Sabharanjita Chintamani* and *Sangita Bharata Sara Sangraham* are also attributed to him (Sundaram, 1997, p. 41). Like the work of the Thanjavur Quartet, the *Natanadi Vadya Ranjanam* also seeks to 'document' older compositions that appear to be declining in current practice. The older compositions preserved herein are largely Telugu shabdams. Some of these appear to be compositions of Bharatam Kashinathayya, and thus date back to the time of Shahaji Maharaja (1684-1712), who is thought to have been Kashinathayya's patron." Thus, we have the *Ramayana Shabdham*, *Tripurasamhara Shabdham*, a *Salam Shabdham* on King Pratapasimha, *Gopala Shabdham*, *Venkataramana Shabdham*, *Mukunda Shabdham*, *Kodandarama Shabdham* (likely a composition of the Quartet), and *Subrahmanya Shabdham*, all recorded in the first part (*purvabhagam*) of the *Natanadi Vadya Ranjanam*.

### TEXT 3

*Natanadi Vadya Ranjanam* (1898)  
by Gangaimuttu Pillai (1837-1920)

Venkataramana Shabdham  
Talam Sarvalaghu

In Telugu transliteration:

*chalamu valaduduru sukhayitu rara  
jalama yala samiki mrokera  
valapu minchuyika tamasa yala  
prasanna venkataramana paraku*

*Vaiieft\_ralizar  
strutio •vanwcs.*

தந்தி	ei—,s	slips	கிடதெஜம்
தங்கிடதகதி		owespoigiit_Asa	தகதரிகிடத
தா	தெய்	தந்த	தந்த
சலமுல	லததரு	ககயிடு	ததா
ஜால	ம்யாலசா	மிகிம்ரொ	க்கோசா
வலபுமி	ஞ்சயிச	தாமச	ம்யாலசா
ப்ரசன்ன	வேங்கட	ரமணப	ராரு
தளங்கு	தகதி	தகதி	ங்கிணதெய்

This composition is similar in structure and content to the Telugu *salam-darus* and shabdams that I have recovered from the repertoire of the devadasis of Viralimalai and Thanjavur. Though we have not yet been able to find this composition in practice among living devadasi families in south India, it is highly probable that this shabdham was part of Gangaimuttu Pillai's own sadir kacheri repertoire, likely a song that he would have taught to devadasis in Madurai.

In addition to courtly compositions such as the shabdams, the early part of the *Natanadi Vadya Ranjanam* also presents us with devadasi temple repertoire, in the form of ritual dances called *kavuttuvam*. The text contains the full cluster of the nine famous *navasandhi kavuttuvams*, and in addition, nine other *kavuttuvam* compositions. The *navasandhi kavuttuvams* are a set of nine compositions that invoke the deities of the eight cardinal directions (called *lokapalas* or *dikpalas*) plus the god Brahma in the centre (*brahmasthanam*) of the temple during a major festival (*mahotsava*). The ritual is accompanied by the worship of the structure called *balipitha* (seat of offering), and thus is thought of as part of a larger offering often called *balidana* or *baliharana*. Textual injunctions for the performance of such dances at the time of *balidana* is found in south Indian Sanskrit Agamas such as the *Kumara Tantra* and in the Shaiva commentator Sadyojatashivacharya's manual for priests called *Kriyakramadyotika* (Kersenboom, 1987, pp. 115-28; Janaki 1988). In the form of the *kavuttuvams* that we find in the *Natanadi Vadya Ranjanam* however, these rituals were performed by devadasis at the Thanjavur Brihadishvara temple and the Madurai Minakshi temple until ca. 1946 in Thanjavur and 1955 in Madurai.<sup>2</sup>

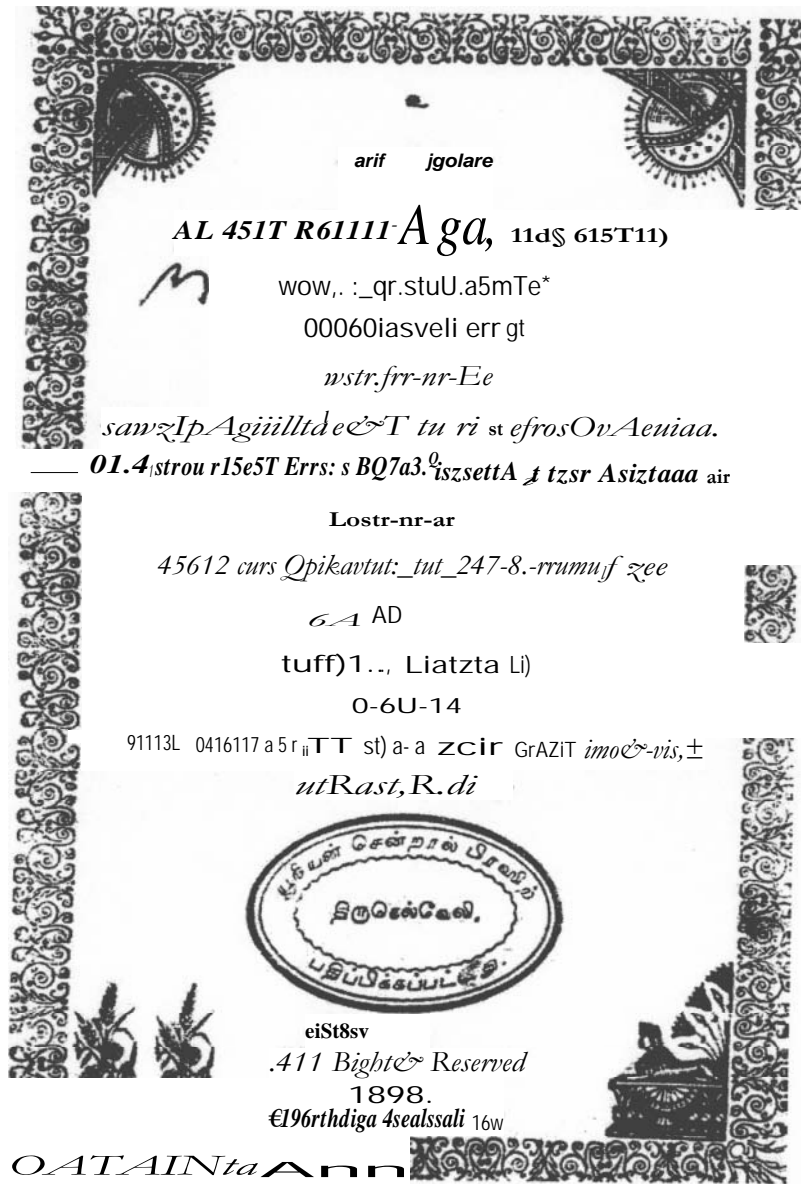


Fig. 2.1: Cover of the *Natanadi Vadya Ranjanam*.  
Published by Central Union Press, Tirunelveli in 1898

The texts of the songs of the navasandhi kavuttuvam are descriptive in nature. They invoke both Sanskrit terms (such as the *krantaka karana* movement from the *Natyashastra*, and hand gestures *pataka* and *arala* mentioned as those used to depict Vayu in the *Abhinayadarpana*) and Tamil ones, (including the names of the basic modes [*pans*] of ancient Tamil music):

## TEXT 4

*Natanadi Vadya Ranjanam* by Gangaimuttu Pillai  
(1837–1920)

*Vayusandhi kavuttuvam*  
*talam chaturashrajati rupakam*

*vayu disaiyil kodiyayudham shikhibahana madi anjana devi sabitamaga*  
In the direction of Lord Vayu [the North-West], who holds a spear as a weapon, riding a peacock, together with the Goddess Anjana Devi

*sakala bhuvanapramana kartta simbasanadhiparku*  
[Resides] the Ruling Sovereign, who measures all the worlds.

*tanata jonuta dhimita kitata*  
*pancha vadyam gitam makuta ramagiri*  
Using the instruments called *panchavadyam* and the song (*raga*) called *makutaramagiri*,

*sa ri ga ma pa dha ni sa*  
*kanti rtrittam ardbapatakaralamam*  
the dance movement called *kanti* [*krantaka*] and the hand-gestures *pataka* and *arala*,

*tam titaka tadhi mitaketta tanata jonuta*

*pali talam takkesi raga pan meviya vayudisai kavuttuvam*  
this is the *Vayu Sandhi Kavuttuvam*, in the *tala* [time-cycle] called *bali*, and the *pan* [Tamil melody] called *takkesi*.

*takanangi takatarikita*  
*takataka tiki tadbingi Oatom takku tikku takkitta*  
*tonkiaa kitatakatan tangi kitataka tikki*  
*tam tat to tam tatta II*

The other kavuttuvams found in *Natanadi Vadya Ranjanam* are the following: Ganapati kavuttuvam (on Ganesha); Subramaniyar kavuttuvam (on Murugan); Sirkali Campantar kavuttuvam (on the nayanar Tirujnanasambandar); Chidambara Natesar kavuttuvam (on Shiva-Nataraja); Tiruvalankadu Kali kavuttuvam (on Kali); Tiruchengodu Vishnu kavuttuvam (on Vishnu); Srivilliputtur Nachiyar kavuttuvam (on the alvar Andal); Madurapuri Chokkar kavuttuvam (on Shiva-Chokkanatha of Madurai); and Darukavanam Mahalinga kavuttuvam (on Shiva-Mahalingasvami of Tiruvidaimarudur). Of these, four (those on Ganesha, Murugan, Nataraja, and Tirujnanasambandar) were among the five *panchamurti* kavuttuvams sung by the descendants of the Thanjavur Quartet every year during the festival of Tiruvadira (also known as Arudra Darshana) at the Brihadishvara temple. These four songs plus another kavuttuvam on the saint Chandikeshvara would be sung by the dance-master as they played the cymbals (*talam*) while the processional image of Shiva as Somaskanda would be taken around the temple grounds.

Clearly then, the compositions in *Natanadi Vadya Ranjanam* were specifically compiled in textual form by observing and recording the living traditions of devadasi dance at a crucial point in history, and therefore its significance as an early 'documentation' of the south Indian dance repertoire cannot be understated.

*Abhinaya Svayambodhini* is a Telugu text written by Devulapalli Viraraghavamurti Shastri (Fig. 2.2) in Kakinada in the year 1915. Like the *Natanadi Vadya Ranjanam*, it too can be read as a text that documents current practice. In the preface, its Brahmin author, Viraraghavamurti Shastri explains why he has written this text. He claims that the repertoire of the Andhra devadasis is fast disappearing before his very eyes, and thus, this is perhaps the first conscious attempt to 'document' the living traditions of the Godavari Delta for posterity. The text itself consists of four sections (*adhyayas*). The first is an assemblage of concert music songs (*kirtanas* and *svarajatis*); the second is purely devoted to *padavarnams*; the third is dedicated to Kshetranya padams; and the fourth, deals with theory and dance technique such as *shirobhedas*, *drishtibhedas*, *grivabhedas* (movements for the head, eyes and neck), and *hastas* (hand gestures) and their applications. The fourth section clearly follows the codification in the *Abhinaya-darpana*, and here we should keep in mind that this was published two years before Coomaraswamy and Duggirala's edition of the same text came to light.<sup>3</sup> The description of each composition includes the sahitya plus suggestions for how to interpret each word or phrase through abhinaya,

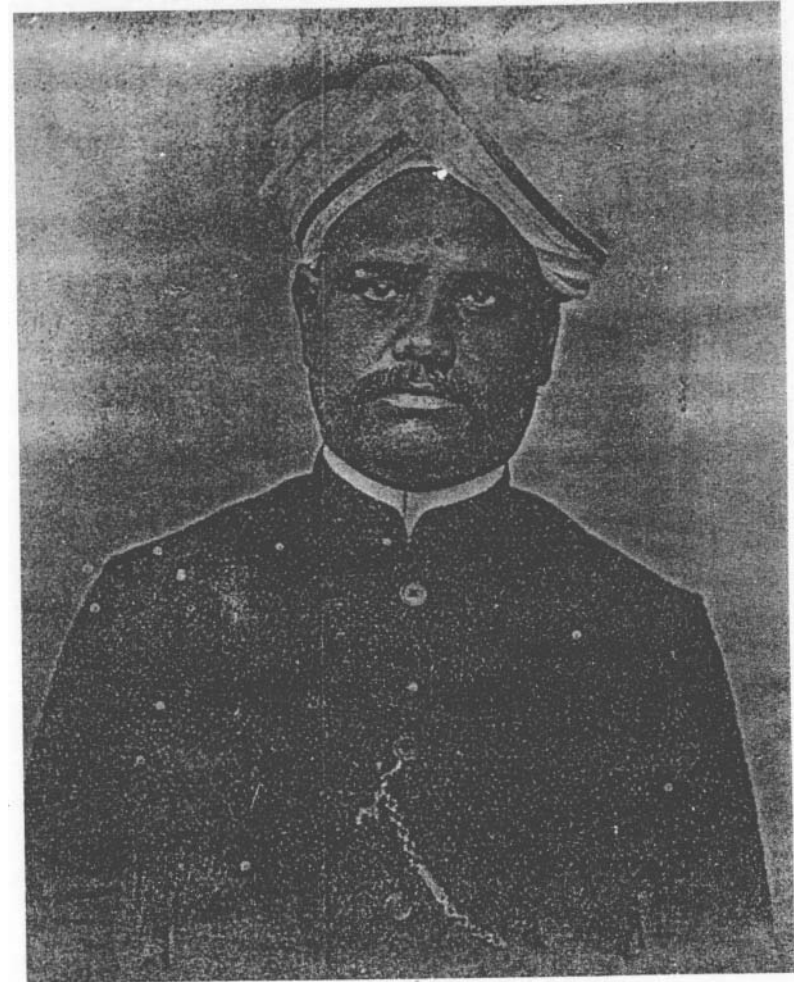


Fig. 2.2: Devulapalli Viraraghavamurti Shastri, author of *Abhinaya Svayambodhini*. From the frontispiece of the 1915 edition published by Sarasvati Mudrakshara Shala, Kakinada

much like the *Abhinaya Sara Samputa* discussed earlier. Shastri claims to have culled these abhinaya suggestions from the devadasis of the Godavari Delta region. Most importantly for us, the text also contains several compositions of the Thanjavur Quartet, indicative of their popularity in the Godavari region at the turn of the century. An examination of the content

of the second section is telling—included in this list, for example, is Chinaiya's padavarnam 'chalamu jesite' (the Telugu version of 'sakhie inda velaiyl' in Anandabhairavi Raga) dedicated to King Krishnaraja Udaiyar III of Mysore (r. 1811-68):

## TEXT 4

*Abhinaya Svayambodhini* (1915)  
by Devulapalli Viraraghavamurti Shastri  
Excerpt from *Table of Contents*

2 Adhyayamu (*padavarnamulu*)—pp. x-xi

8. *nelataroyimarulu* (*kambhoji*)
9. *e mayaladira* (*bussenzi*)
10. *chalamu jesiteyikatalajalara* (*anandabhairavzi*)\*
11. *chalamusetura napai ni chakkani sami* (*mukhari*)
12. *danike tagjanara* (*tochi*)\*
13. *ninnekoriyunnadira* (*purnapanchama*)
14. *mohamanapijala* (*vasanta*)
15. *manavigaikonarada* (*shankarabharanam*)\*
16. *murulumilupajala* (*shankarabharanam*)
17. *vanajakshirovani* (*shankarabharanam*)
18. *varijakshimadigaravinchaka* (*bilabari*)
19. *valugantibharita* (*natakuranji*)
20. *samini rammanave* (*kamachi*)\*
21. *samivinara* (*bhairavzi*)
22. *sarigadanipainenarunchara* (*regupti*)\*\*
23. *intainadayaleda* (*navaroju*)
24. *nisatidora* (*bhairavzi*)\*

\*indicates compositions attributed to the Thanjavur Quartet

\*\*also found in the *Sangita Sampradaya Pradarshini* (1904) of Subbarama Dikshitar (1839-1906)

The inclusion of Thanjavur Quartet compositions in the repertoire of the devadasis of the Godavari river delta in Telugu-speaking south India is remarkable. It is an index of the popularity of the compositions on the one hand, and also of the breadth of their dissemination on the other. Moreover, the fact that these compositions appear in the *Abhinaya Svayambodhini* with notes on how the coastal Andhra devadasis performed the abhinaya clearly marks it as a text that must be understood as a genuine attempt to preserve the songs and performance technique of these women.

Texts, and the literal 'scripting' of dance culture in Thanjavur, appear to have played a major role in the preservation and survival of devadasi dance in the midst of social reform of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and into the present. The compositions of the Thanjavur Brothers themselves, drawing from earlier attempts at systematization and codification, made their way as far north as coastal Andhra, while texts such as the *Natanadi Vadya Ranjanam* attempted to preserve them along with a host of other devadasi dance genres. As we have seen, the inclusion (or invocation) of Sanskrit dance culture, whether in the *Sangita Saramita's* classification of movement or the incorporation of names of hand gestures in the texts of the *navasandhi* kavuttuvam certainly *did* figure in the repertoire of devadasis, though clearly not in the ways in which contemporary histories of 'Tharatanatyam' would like. The process of 'textualization' was indeed an indigenous one—the notebooks of the Quartet housed in their descendant's homes speak clearly of this—but ultimately the question of the purpose of such codifications must be raised. What use would Vadivel's notations of his own compositions be after his own death? In this article I have suggested that we take seriously the idea that there was a self-conscious attempt to preserve and sometimes even 'document' devadasi dance traditions that were undergoing major changes or were facing the threat of extinction. Such an understanding may help us move towards a critical reading of the performance practices of the devadasis of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

## NOTES

1. Research for this project was supported by the Dance Department, Wesleyan University. I wish to acknowledge the help provided to me by Davesh Soneji at various points during this project. I am particularly indebted to B.M. Sundaram, whose pioneering work on dating and genealogies of nineteenth-century personalities has greatly impacted my own work. I also wish to thank my teachers, the late Kittappa Pillai of Thanjavur and R. Muttukkannammal (devadasi of the Murugan temple at Viralimalai), for their invaluable comments on dance history in early twentieth-century south India. Finally, Indira Viswanathan Peterson and Lakshmi Subramaniam have provided critical comments and suggestions through careful readings, and I am grateful to both of them.
2. The Kuravanji drama tradition formed a key component of the devadasi dance repertoire of many temples in the Tamil-speaking parts of south India. Kuravanji (lit. 'Drama of the Kura Woman') is a post-eighteenth-century literary and performance genre from Tamil Nadu. The second



- half of the typical plot of the kuravanji texts revolves around the fortune-telling Kura woman from the hills (also called Kuratti or Singi) and her lover, a hunter or bird-catcher, known as Singan. See Muilwijk (1996) for a literary study of the *Kumaralingar Kuravanji*, and Peterson (1998) for an excellent critical study of the kuravanji genre in transition.
3. This is *not* the same Gangaimuttu Nattuvanar who was the author of the text *Natanadi Vadya Ranjanam* discussed elsewhere in this paper. The author of this text came from Pasuvandanai, a village near Tirunelveli. The *Natanadi Vadya Ranjanam* was first published in Tirunelveli by the Union Central Press in 1898. According to B.M. Sundaram, the two were 'collateral relatives, and there has been great confusion about their identities' (Personal communication, January 1998). However, the kavuttuvam compositions found in the *Natanadi Vadya Ranjanam* may in fact be those of Gangaimuttu of the Thanjavur court.
  4. According to T. Sankaran, Subbarayan was a musician who was highly respected by his peers including Melattur Venkatarama Shastri, Muttusvami Dikshitar, and Shyama Shastri. T Sankaran cited in Higgins (1973), p. 26.
  5. There is some discrepancy about the dates of Chinnaiya. Many of the compositions attributed to him are dedicated to Chamarajendra Udaiyar (r. 1868-94), son of Krishnaraja Udaiyar III. However, Chamarajendra only ascended the throne in 1868, and Chinnaiya passed away in 1856. K.P. Kittappa insists that all of the compositions on Chamarajendra are in fact by Chinnaiya and that he may have been alive well into the rule of Chamarajendra.
  6. This text is currently being edited by B.M. Sundaram and should be available very soon.
  7. The last time the Kuravanji was performed in the Brihadishvara temple was ca. 1947, when K.P. Kittappa Pillai provided vocal music for it. In 1994, he edited the musical notation of the entire text, and this was subsequently published by the Tamil University, Thanjavur. This text was erased from contemporary performances of Bharatanatyam dance, perhaps because it was deemed aesthetically inferior by revivalists such as Rukmini Arundale. See Peterson (1998) for details on the uses and interpretations of the *Sarabbendra Bhupaiya Kuravanji* by Arundale and others.
  8. Sundaram's recent work (1997) indicates that the brothers were exiled from Thanjavur because of a confrontation with Serfoji II: The service of the brothers continued for only a few years under this nominal ruler [Serfoji II]. During that time, they composed a few *varnams* honouring the new king. Ponnayya also composed music to *Sarabbendra Bhoopala Kuravanji* and *Manmatha Vilasam* and staged them in the Brihadeesvara temple each year. But the situation gradually deteriorated. Serfoji

- II, a ward of Reverend Schwartz, had been educated in English by him . . . but Western music was more pleasing to his ears. He passed orders that all his court musicians must learn Western music and even went to the extent of fining his own minister, Varahappayya, 'because he was not ready to perform Western music'.<sup>8</sup> On one occasion, Serfoji sent for the Quartet and declared that he planned to appoint a person for daily service in the Brihadeesvara temple in addition to them. The person was none other than the son of Serfoji's concubine and trained, to some extent, by the brothers themselves. The brothers submitted that the Raja should keep in mind the age and talents of the appointee before taking a decision. But Serfoji promulgated a *firman* [official order] by which the new incumbent would not only be appointed in the temple, but would also have exclusive right to temple honours such as *parivattam* [the ritual honour of wearing the cloth of the deity around one's head]. This was an insult to the brothers so they left Thanjavur. (Sundaram, 1997, p. 34)
9. The *Abhinaya Navanita* (lit. 'Clarified Butter of Abhinaya') was written by Ayyangar in collaboration with Panchapakesa Nattuvanar (1842-1902) from Thanjavur, father of the famous Tiruvidaimarudur Kuppaiya Nattuvanar (1887-1981) who founded the Sri Rajarajeswari Bharatanatyam Kala Mandir in Bombay in 1945.
  10. Such 'word-for-word' abhinaya texts are not new in themselves. This appears to have been a standard way of notating abhinaya in south India. Manuscript sources from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries confirm this. For example, in 1950, K. Vasudeva Sastri, pandit at the Sarasvati Mahal library in Thanjavur edited and published an edition of Jayadeva's *Gitagovinda* that provides word-for-word suggestions for performing abhinaya to each of the *ashtapadis*. His sources were two paper manuscripts found in the library. The performance of ashtapadis by devadasis since at least the nineteenth century has been documented in both Thanjavur and the Godavari river delta (Soneji, 2004). But instead of positing that these relatively recent paper manuscripts may have belonged to a nattuvanar in the Thanjavur area, Vasudeva Sastri, who feels that 'the traditional practice has suffered by the general break of tradition due to the foreign invasion and foreign influence,' (Sastri, 1950, p. ix) wishes to posit a North Indian origin for the manuscripts: It is . . . clear that this work must have been composed before the mixing up of the Indian and Persian [sic] styles of Dance, under the Afghan and Mughal rule of the 14<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> century in Northern India. It is extremely probable that this work was composed by the direct disciples of Sri Jayadeva himself or those just after him. (Sastri, 1950, p. x)
- The content of these manuscripts employs the abhinaya and gestural language described in the *Abhinayadarpana*, whose techniques are used

so widely by nattuvanars in the region. It is clear that the manuscripts must have a Southern origin, and that this text is an early precursor of other 'word-for-word' abhinaya manuals that follow after the advent of the printing press in south India.

11. Bharatam Kashinathakavi is accredited with the composition of *salam-darus*, also called tala-cholkattu or shabdham. Usually addressed to a king of a local deity, they involve the recitation of rhythmic utterances (*cholkattu*) and epithets of the hero. They usually end with Urdu words like *salam* (hence the name of the genre, *salam-daru*) or *shabash* ('well done!' or 'brava'), reflective of the multilingual nature of the Thanjavur court. For details, see N. Visvanathan's Tamil work (1985), *Sabdam alias Tala Solkattu of Bharatam Kasinathakavi, King Sabaji and Bharatam Narana Kavi*.
12. As Davesh Soneji notes, the baliharana rites were also found among Telugu-speaking devadasis in what is now coastal Andhra Pradesh, and were common to both Vaikhanasa-Vaishnava and Shaiva temples in this region. See Davesh Soneji, 2004, p. 98.
13. In 1917, Ananda Coomaraswamy and Gopala Krishnayya Duggirala, a Telugu scholar, edited and translated the *Abhinayadarpana* for the first time. The majority of manuscripts available were in Telugu script, and were likely found, like many manuscripts of *Bhamakalapam* and *Gita-govinda*, in the homes of Telugu poets who interacted with Telugu-speaking devadasis (Davesh Soneji, 2004, pp. 106-9; 145-7).

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