

## SECOND SERFOJI PERIOD ARTS AT THANJAVUR – A CASE STUDY

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### ABSTRACT

In the realm of music, the period of Raja Serfoji may be called as the augustan age of music as the Trinity of South Indian music – Sri Tyagarajaswami, Sri Syama Sastri and Sn Muttuswamy Diksitar lived at Tanjore during his reign. The blossoming of the musical genius at Tanjore had paved way for the evolution of several ragas, the popularization of the musical form 'Krti' and such other aspects, all in unison had indeed enriched the scientific system of South Indian music.

**Keywords:** *Raja Serfoji, Trinity of South Indian music, Tyagarajaswami, Krti,*

### INTRODUCTION

The treasure of the divine compositions of these three great personalities has not only placed music on a very high pedestal, but their voluminous lofty creations are today reckoned with Karnatic music itself. Among the musical trio, Sri Muttuswami Diksitar was patronized by King Serfoji. Diksitar in one of his krtis 'Nabhmani Candragini Nayanam' in raga Nabhmani – Triputa tala, had extolled King Serfoji as the ardent devotee of Lord Brhadisvara. Sri syama Sastri was a beneficiary of royal favours but saint musician Tyagarajaswami spurned the royal patronage and 'Nidhicala Sukhama' in raga Kalyani bears testimony to this, yet the King had highest regard for the saint musician and is said to have paid frequent visits to the residence. During the time of King Serfoji. there was an influx of musicians, scholars and artists from far and wide to this distinguished seat of art.

The avowed purpose of their migration was for the furtherance and enrichment of their art and acknowledgment of their talents by this illustrious scholar King Serfoji. For

centuries, Tanjore court was known for its musical excellence and was famous for musical contests. Several acclaimed musicians from different regions visited Tanjore and threw challenges to their counter-parts at the court in order to prove their versatility and supremacy but often accepted defeat.

One such interesting anecdote relating to the musical combat between Symasastris and Bobbili Kesavayya, a famous musician from Vijayanagar is worthy of note. Several maestros gave musical performances and displayed their talents in fond anticipation of receiving the appreciative nod from the highly esteemed royal musician. One such occasion to cite, was a famous singer from Andhra, visited Serfoji's court and gave an excellent performance. Serfoji who was an achievement oriented King by nature, appreciated the maestro's musical talents, and presented him with a Jan turban or Paga.

The musician, considering it as a rare honour bestowed on him by a King of such a stature, came forth with an extempore composition with the Swaraksaras Sa Ri Ga Pa Ga, (Zari paga or turban) acknowledging his valuable felicitation. Serfoji who was an illustrious composer in return enthralled by his spontaneous reply with the Swaraksaras Sa da Pa Ga, which meant that he presented a paga or ordinary turban and that even a Jar T turban was not really a match for the maestro's high musical talents. This anecdote once again signifies in unrefutable terms the King's extempore versifying ability, his humbleness towards artists and above all, his unstinted devotion for art and letters.

It is known from the contemporary records<sup>1</sup> that this enthusiastic patron maintained amicable relations with Maharaja of Travancore Sri Swati Tirunal who was also a true votary of art and literature and one of the meritorious kings among the galaxy of Royal composers.

Maharaja Swati Tirunal, even before his accession to the throne, was associated with King Serfoji and they were said to have exchanged scholars, musicians and their personal compositions too. It is learnt that some of the copies of famous works bound in superior velvet and gold were sent by Raja Swati as gift to his royal friend Serfoji – II.

Among the many musicians of repute who went from Tanjore to Trvancore were Merusvami, Vadivelu, (youngest of the Tanjore Quartette), Kannayya Bhagavatar; and better Sivaramaguru better known as Ksirabdhisastri. Meruswami alias Ananta Padmanabha Goswami, a saint singer from Maratha, introduced the ardent prince Swati Tirunal to the intricacies of music in its theory and practice<sup>2</sup>. Meruswami was considered as the most esteemed among the court musicians of King Serfoji-II. He was the pioneer in popularizing

the religious musical entertainment – Harikathakalaksepam<sup>3</sup>, at Tanjore which had its genesis in Maharashtra. Some of the celebrated musicians who adorned the court of the King Serfoji were –

1. Sankarabharanam Narasayya
2. Todi Sitaramayya
3. Anai – Ayya brothers
4. Pallavi Doraiswami Ayyar
5. Tanjore Quartette
6. Muvvalur Sabhapatayya
7. Kottayur Sivakkolundu Desikar
8. Vedanayakam Pillai
9. Pallavi Gopalayya
10. Sonti Venkata Ramanayya (Guru of Sri Tyagaraja)
11. Vina Perumalayya
12. Athana Appayya
13. Dharmayya Ramasamayya
14. Varahappayya Diksit

Several court musicians noted for the specialization in particular ragas and pallavi singing became popular with the appellation, pallavi and the names of the ragas prefixed to their names. To cite a few - Todi Sitaramayya, Sankarabharanam Narasayya, Athana Appayya, Pallavi Gopallayya, Pallavi Doraiswami Ayyar etc.

Vina Perumalayya, became famous for playing the Bhairavi raga for 3 hours daily for 10 consecutive days without the repetition of the already rendered Sangatis. In recognition of the artiste's manodharma sangita and amazing feat, an entire village of Mahipala was awarded by Serfoji and since then the musician was known as Mahipalai Vina Perumalayya. Likewise, the nagaswaram player Tiruvazhundur Nagaswara Subramanyam is said to have received Silver Nagaswaram from the king as reward for his expertise in playing on the instrument. Several modi manuscripts refer to the liberal patronage

of gifting lands and houses by the king to the court musicians and Bhagavata artists attached to the court.

### **Dance - Sadir**

Among the Maratha rulers Raja Serfoji-II occupies significant place in the history and development of 'Sadir dance' also referred to as Thanjavur Natya, presently called as 'Bharatnatyam'. His court was remarkable with the confluence of many eminent nattuvanars (dance teachers), composers, musicians and dancers whose creative energies fostered the development of Sadir and marked the period as the most innovative and distinguished in the annals of Bharatanatyam.

Many of the dance compositions which even now enjoy great popularity in Bharatanatyam recitals, are ascribed to the galaxy of great composers and nattuvanars who adorned the court of this distinguished king. The artistic and the intellectual atmosphere of the Tanjore court was further illuminated with the advent of the four illustrious brothers, Cinnayya, Ponnayya, Sivanandam and Vadivelu popularly known as 'Tanjore Quartette'. They deserve the greatest credit of systematizing the sadir attam format, which is still being continued under the nomenclature Bharatnatyam. Centuries contribution to dance in Tanjore by the Kings and several luminaries in the field of this art, to cite a few, the dedicated efforts of the worthy predecessors of the famous Tanjore Quartette Gangaimuttu, Mahadeva Annavi and Subbaraya Oduvar, had paved way for the blossoming of the art that reached its pinnacle of glory in the esteemed court of King Serfoji II.

A noteworthy feature of the contribution to dance by the Tanjore brothers was they launched new teaching and learning methods and improvised, developed and established the pedagogy for Sadir and systematized its format and the presentation order with an artistically graded progression of dance numbers. The prolific output of the court musicians, namely Tanjore Quartette. Muvvallur Sabhapatayya, Pallavi Doraisvami Ayyar etc., have not only enriched the repertoire of Sadir dance but also have contributed in unfolding the various developmental trends which the art form witnessed and facilitated in accentuating a definite standard of excellence.

It was due to the utmost devotion, dedication and bountiful patronage extended by the king that 'Sadir' steadily attained high level of excellence especially during the period of King Serfoji-II. In this context it would be quite interesting to note the origin of the term Sadir which has many versions to offer regarding its coinage.

Dr.R.Nagaswamy, a scholar in the field of dance and music, opines that the term 'Sadir' had been used to denote the beautiful form of classical dance in vogue in Tamilnadu as nearly as 1300 years ago. This may be seen from the Tevaram of Tirugnana Sambandar which refers to the dance conforming to Jatis as Sadir<sup>4</sup>.

Tevaram

Vidivazhi marayavar mixhalai ular nadam

Sadivazhi varuvad5r 'Sadire'

Sadivazhi Varuvador Sadir udair umai

Atigunar pugalvadum alagae<sup>5</sup>.

The term 'Sadir' according to Sri R. Nagaswamy, is a derivative of the Sanskrit word meaning beautiful<sup>6</sup>. But, surprisingly it is to be noted that the term Sadir was not in popular usage, as there seems no mention of the term in the works of the post-Sambandar period. Sri. T.S. Parthasarathy, well-known musicologist and music critic, holds the view<sup>7</sup> that the term Sadir might have originated during the Nayak period evolved out of the Telugu word "Caduru" which means a 'Sabha' and a 'dance performance arranged during occasions like weddings'. The word Caduru or the squared dais (Caduranga) meaning Sabha or court has been mentioned by the great composer Ksetrayya in one of his famous padas-Vedukato in raga Devagandhari, Aditala.

Here the first Caranam states 'Caduru midane unna sami ki santosamintinta tada', which means "To the lord hovering over the dais" (Caduru) the pleasure was of boundless measure<sup>8</sup>. This verse is in reference to the Sabha or court of Tirumala Nayaka of Madura. According to Dr. Arudra, Scholar, poet and dance critic, "Sadir of Bhosala Kings is said to have taken its shape from erstwhile Karnatakam<sup>9</sup>. Not only the music but also the dances of South India were called Karnatakam and in the Telugu districts the old Devadasis still call it as Karnatakam. However, the term 'Sadir' perhaps coined during the Maratha seems to be more convincing as these dance performances by the court dancers were usually witnessed by the kings seated in the large chamber known as Durbar, an urdu word which in the Marathi parlance is 'Sadar' means the court\*. And since the dance (attam) was held in the court 'Sadar' the dance style itself came to be acclaimed as Sadar – attam or court dance. With the passage of time and as result of tongue-twisting, the pronunciation got slightly modified from Sadar to Sadir and ultimately the dance style was named as Sadir-attam. Hence in all probability it was during the Maratha period that the 'Dasi-attam, came to be known as Sadir

which was performed in the court.

The Sadir dance, Hindustani Natya and western dances in the court were usually whole night performances, lasting until dawn. These dances were held in the Sadir-madi\* (the term madi, both in Tamil and Marathi means first floor) facing the south of the five storeyed building in the palace. Sadir-madi situated in the natural surroundings with imposing structure, high roof is a well ventilated spacious hall with architectural beauty. One significant feature of Sadir-madi was the installation of the idol of Lord Vignesvara and it is learnt from modi manuscripts that even the western dances were performed in the Sadir-madi in front of the icon of Lord Vigneswara.

The same Sadir-madi has been converted by the descendants of the Maratha Kings, into visitors room today. The research scholar had the privilege of interviewing the descendant of Raja Serfoji; Prince P.Tulajendra Raja Bonsle, the life member of the Sarasvati Mahal Library, in the same hall. An interesting information elicited from the interview<sup>10</sup> worth knowing is that the women of the royal family were not only entertained with these dance performances, but were even privileged to learn the art from the Raja Nartakis or court dancers in their own respective chambers.

King Pratapasimha's two daughters, Sukanya and Sanya were said to have been accomplished Sadir dancers. The Rajanartakis were residing in the Palace and they were given prior intimation regarding their performances in the court but when any foreign dignitary or guest visited the court, without prior notice (which was rampant during Serfoji-II's period) the court dancers were summoned to perform few simple dances<sup>11</sup>. The court dancers commenced their performances by offering prayers to the God, followed by salutations to the King and other important personages present in the court.

These dancers used to perform only to the songs composed for dance and they had to strictly follow the traditions of the court. Dancing before the royal presence was not an easy task. Every dancer had to undergo rigorous training to prove her mettle and win the appreciation of the King. The meritorious court dancers in addition to their monthly salaries were given presents by the kings immediately after the performance as a token of appreciation of their scholarship.

## **COSTUME**

The two pictures<sup>12</sup> depicting Sadir or Thanjavur and Hindustani (vide plate No.

13(a&b)) found in the collection of Indian Art preserved by The Victoria and Albert museum, in London are quite interesting. These pictures were painted during the period of Serfoji-II(1800 A.D.) by artists of the Tanjore Court who were entrusted by the British residents in India to paint the traditional costumes worn by the people of Thanjavur especially the dancers and the musicians.

The first picture shows the Sadir dancer in action who is adorned, in fan like dress, which is typical of the present day costume of the Bharatnatyam dancers. She is followed by six musicians who are depicted in the costume of dhoti in Kaccham. Kurta and the upper sash tied around their waist and covering their heads with turban.

Among the 6 musicians, two men wielding the cymbals are invariably the nattuvanars, the other four musicians are seen playing on different musical instruments such as violin, Flute and bagpipe or These musicians are followed by two young dancing girls along with a woman who is presumed to be either the mother of the danseuses or an elderly devadasi. The first picture shows the sadir dancer in the half sitting posture otherwise called in Tamil terminology as 'araimandi' which is the basic stance of the dance style.

The label beneath the painting reads "Thanjavur Natya" in Telugu script. The costume and the ornaments worn by these dancers in the picture conform to the present day pattern of dressing by the dancers in the Bharatnatyam recitals except for the long garland woven round their body extending from their right shoulder up to the knee.

The other canvas shows three Hindustani dancers in action. The dress worn by them is almost akin to the costume of North Indian Kathak dancers with ghagara or Lahanga (long skirt extending up to the knee) in the typical Rajput style with their heads partially covered with a duppatta or upper cloth.

The five musicians at the back of the dancers are seen garbed in gurta Pyjama and Maharashtra headgear, with the sash tied round their waists. All of them are shown playing on Hindustani musical instruments. Two are depicted playing on Sarangi, one on pakhavaj, the other two on Tambura and one wielding the cymbals. Both, from the point of view of the costume and the musical instruments, it is apparent, that the dance is of North Indian origin.

Besides the Sadir dance, several folk art forms such as Lavani, Dummy horse dance, Pinnalkolattam (Goph dance), Modi dance and Kanchin nautch\* were highly encouraged by the King and his son Sivaji-II. King Serfoji's works on these populist art forms such as Kuravanji, Lavani and Goph dance highlight the King's interest in these arts which

had gained high popularity along with its classical counterpart. Likewise, Kuravanji natakas and Bhagavatameja natakas received enormous patronage at the hands of King Serfoji-II and Sivaji-II.

### **Bhagavatamela Nataka**

In the history of Indian classical traditional dance-dramas, Bhagavatameja natakas are the most popular temple art form which have become unique for its religious and aesthetic spectacle. Several villages in Tanjore District such as Melattur, Sulamangalam, Uttukkadu Saliyamangalam and Tepperumanallur were the true centres of these natakas but Melattur, about 10 miles from Tanjore is the only village where this dance-drama form now survives, being annually enacted in the temple of Sri Lakshminarasimha Svami, during the Vaisaka or the month of April-May. The themes of these natakas culled from puranic lore are set to high standard of Karnatic music supplementing with the Sadir technique for dance and abhinaya, interspersed with poetic speeches and dramatic actions.

The art form since ages has been a male practiced art by Bhagavatars or men from the Brahmin adept in the triple arts of music, dance and drama and in which even the female roles in the natakas are impersonated by the males dressed in female attire.

From the Modi manuscripts we infer that separate Bhagavatamela troupes were attached to the court as well as to the Chattrams instituted by the king in the villages in Tanjore like the at Orathanadu (Orathanadu situated 18 Km from Tanjore) and that the expenditure incurred for the purchase of articles required for the performance of these natakas in the palace was met from the royal treasury. The girls of the Bhagavatamela troupe attached to the court were given free meals, but this practice was later dispensed with in the year 1825 and the girls were given salary in cash and kind. Interesting information elicited from the modi manuscript is that there was exchange of ornaments and other costumes for staging the natakas and dance programmes between these nattuva (Sadir) and natya melas (Bhagavatamela) attached to the court.

Redolent of Nayak court, King court too had women musicians who were not only adept in conducting the dance but also proficient in handling percussion instruments such as Mrdangam. From the modi manuscript. We infer that an artiste by name Rukmini was the nattuvanar of the nataka section<sup>13</sup> and that Kamaksi played on efficiently<sup>14</sup>.

Several natakas produced from the royal pen as well as the court poets of the Maratha Kings were especially enacted during important festivals such as Vinayaka Caturti.

Navaratri (Dusshera), Deepavali and so on. During the Vinayaka Caturti celebrations, which usually lasted for nearly 22 days, each of these dance-dramas was staged every day, which was followed by dance and music performances. The dance recitals were given by the descendants of the court dancers and the musical concerts by the Vidyadhikaras or experts in the field of music.

It is evident from the manuscripts of King period that various natakas were performed in the palace which testify to the existence of such a practice during the reign of his father, King Sivaji-II's period that various natakas were performed in the palace which testify to the existence of such a practice during the reign of his father, King Serfoji-II.

Some of the natakas enacted are as follows

1. Sarvanga SundarT natakam of Giriraja Kavi in the year 1852.
2. Pancabhasa vilasa nataka of Sahaji-II and the names of the artists who participated were Kantimati, Doraisvamy, Gokilavani, Sivarama, Sarasasikamani, Ganapati, and the Kuratti or bhill woman's character was portrayed by Krisna gurumurti
3. Subhadra Kalyanam natakam of King Serfoji-II - This is in Marathi language written in Telugu script
4. Rati Kalyanam nataka of Sahaji-II. Kolattam was also performed by a group of artists.
5. Samantopakhyana natakam of King Pratapasimha - Marathi - Telugu script.
6. Sasipurandara natakam,
7. Govardhanodhara natakam
8. Satipatidana vilasam
9. Vignesvara Kalyana natakam

The dance recitals by the dasi Kaveri's daughter Krsna and daughters of Candraprabha and Sundari were presented after the completion of the natakas and expert musicians were also said to have given concerts at night which lasted until dawn.

### **Sangita Mahal and Maratha Durbal Hall**

In addition to the dance programmes at 'Sadir madi'. folk dances and the Bhagavatamela natakas were also regularly enacted in 'Sangita Mahal', an auditorium built

during Nayak period which the Maratha Kings "enlarged and designed with such acoustic perfection that from the remotest corners of the hall one could hear the softest tune and the highest footfall; the hall which is a triumph of artistic and engineering skill symbolizes the acme of the evolution of the dance hall from the Kiottambalam of the Silappadikaram age<sup>15</sup>.

Likewise, it was in the Maratha Durbar hall's courtyard, wrestling competitions and such other sports and arts were witnessed by the Kings. The Maratha Durbar hall was modeled and rebuilt by Sahaji-II (1684 A.D.) and named it as Siva Sowdah. It is situated on the eastern side of the Sarasvati Mahal Library. "Having a courtyard in front, the Hall consists of two mandapas while the front mandapa is having wooden sloping roof covered with tiles supported by wooden pillars, the raised mandapas on the rear side is made up of granite stone plastered with lime and brick, the entire ceiling and stacco figures of ten avatars or incarnations of Visnu are painted with elegance and grace.

Some hunting scenes of royal personages appear on the Northern wall. The portrait paintings drawn on the eastern wall are master pieces of Maratha period<sup>16</sup>. Among these paintings, a beautiful dancing girl in the pose of Goddess and an European dancer with a native dancing girl and Lord Krsna playing on Violin are truly the most attractive ones.

"A beautiful durbar made up of wood, decorated with glass pieces and supported by wooden pillars is placed on a rectangular granite stone in this mandapa. It is believed that the Maratha Kings used to give audience to the public by being seated in this Durbar. The Durbarhall is today declared as a protected monument under the Tamilnadu Ancient and Historical monuments and archeological sites and remains Act of 1966. A subterranean passage 30 feet in length in this Durbar hall was recently discovered by the Department of Archeology<sup>17</sup>. Likewise, the Muktabalipuram Chatram at Orathanadu is rich in sculptures. The sculptures of Natya Vinayaka, several musicians playing on musical instruments are quite interesting sights for viewing.

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