

THODAYA MANGALAM — 2

Singing of the set of five thodaya mangalam songs prior to the start of a solo Sadir recital was still in vogue in the early decades of this century. T. Sankaran, cousin of Balasaraswati, wrote in an article on the Tanjavur Quartet in the *Hindu* of 25 March 1970:

“The melaprapti from behind the curtains consisted of konnakkol to the accompaniment of the nattuvanar’s cymbals and the clang of the mridangam— all in the khanda nadai. This convention used to be a wonderful preliminary thus building up the proper atmosphere for a dance recital. The curtain rose only after the thodaya mangalam in Nattai ragam heralded the dancer.”

In the scheme of dance developed by the Tanjavur Quartet, the melaprapti was indeed obligatory as an overture. T. Balasaraswati also mentioned the practice of melaprapti, which included the singing of the thodaya mangalam, in the exclusive interviews she gave to SRUTI editors prior to her demise. Her observations were reported in the first of the two-part article on her which appeared in the February 1984 issue.

Yet, in her presidential address at the Tamil Isai Conference at the end of 1975, she omitted reference to the melaprapti and thodaya mangalam while drawing a parallel between the format of a Bharatanatyam recital and the architecture of a temple. She said: “We enter through the gopuram (outer hall) of alarippu, cross the ardhmandapam (half-way hall) of jatiswaram, then the mandapam (great hall) of sabdam, and enter the holy precinct of the deity in the varnam.” She made no

mention of the thodaya mangalam at all, probably because the thodaya mangalam is a prelude to and not a part of the dance recital, but more probably because the practice of melaprapti had been discontinued years earlier. The person who reportedly had taken the initiative to do so was none other than her own guru Kandappa (see SRUTI, February 1984).

While melaprapti has fallen into desuetude, dancers belonging to the older tradition do have knowledge of its prior existence. Thus Indra Rajan, for example, recalls her grandmother Tirunallar Sundaramma telling her about melaprapti and thodaya mangalam.

Strangely, U.S. Krishna Rao’s little lexicon, *A Dictionary of Bharatanatyam* (first published in 1980), makes reference neither to melaprapti nor to thodaya mangalam, although Krishna Rao had the privilege of studying dance from none other than Pandanallur Meenakshisundaram Pillai.

If melaprapti, with the complementary thodaya mangalam, rendered as an overture from behind the curtains prior to the start of a dance event is no longer in vogue, some dancers present a thodaya mangalam as the first choreographed item of their recitals. Dancers trained by the late Mangudi Dorairaja Iyer and Adyar Lakshman do so, for example. What they offer, however, are abridged versions of the vintage thodaya mangalam, evidently because it would be time-consuming to dance to all the 70 lines of the original five songs.

Products of the Vazhuvoor school also present a thodaya mangalam, but this piece is a creation of the great nineteenth century nattuvanar who hailed from Vazhuvoor but was known as Tanjavur Swaminathan. It starts with the words ‘Jaya subhrapurivasa, jaya mahajnana sameta’, in Nattai. In its last line it contains the mudra of the composer, which is Bhakta Swaminathan. Swaminathan was the grandfather of Vazhuvoor Ramiah Pillai who refers to him as Samu Thatha.

Kamala, Padma Subrahmanyam, Chitra Visweswaran and all the others who studied with Ramiah Pillai start their recitals with this particular thodaya mangalam. Chitra says she has seen the song inscribed on the walls of the Vazhuvoor temple. The disciples of Swamimalai Rajarathnam and K.J. Sarasa— gurus who were earlier associated with the Vazhuvoor tradition— also do the same. Ramiah Pillai claims he has composed many melaprapti jatis, but they are not in vogue now. Many have replaced the erstwhile melaprapti and thodaya mangalam with the rendering of invocatory verses or songs prior to the entrance of the dancer. Some sing Dikshitar’s *Mahaganapatim* in Nattai or *Vatapi Ganapatim* in Hamsadhvani; some sing Kothavasal Venkatarama Iyer’s *Vinayaka ninu vina*, also in Hamsadhvani. There are a few, however, who eschew this practice altogether.

With the emergence of Bharatanatyam as a stage art, either the dance teachers or the dancers or both appear to have felt the need to instal an iconic

image of a diety-- usually Nataraja — in the northeast corner of the stage and offer worship to it before the start of the recital. It is commonplace today that the dancer first seeks the blessings of the deity and the guru and then alone performs for the audience.

Even people who have been regularly witnessing Bharatanatyam recitals for the last four and a half decades cannot be definite who started this practice of placing a divine figure on the stage.

Was it the late K. Subrahmanyam, film director and promoter of performing arts, who triggered it? He introduced this feature in his Natana Kala Sevai programmes in which V.M. Janaki (now wife of M.G. Ramachandran, the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister) and S.D. Subbulakshmi (the famous stage and cinema actress) used to play the roles of Velan and Valli

respectively. Was it E. Krishna Iyer, who did much to protect Sadir from the onslaught of puritans? Or did Shanta Rao introduce it?

Some people think it was Kalki Krishnamurti that initiated this custom when his daughter Anandhi and her partner Radha used to dance in the early days. Anandhi says she was then too young to remember whether there was any icon on the stage, but she vividly remembers her father's innovation of an additional curtain just behind the usual front curtain. When the curtain supplied by the theatre people was raised or drawn across, the second curtain with a painting of a large Nandi on it was there to be seen and admired by the audience for four or five minutes. Kalki with his poetic imagination might have probably wanted the patron-saint of the South Indian dance tradition to be remembered at the

beginning of a performance. Nandikeswara's *Abhinaya Darpana* has been the source book of the Tanjavur tradition since the times of the Nayak kings.

Anandhi Ramachandran believes that Rukmini Devi, the founder of Kalakshetra, was the first person to place the icon on the stage to bring the temple spirit to the temporal dance stage. However, Rukmini Devi herself later deplored the practice of many of installing an ugly papier mache figure of Nataraja on the edge of the stage.

Whoever be the originator of this manifestation of fanciful faith or fad, Balasaraswati flatly refused to follow suit. She used to say, quite vehemently, that she would not show any disrespect to Nataraja's idol with her lifted foot pointing towards him in dance movements.