

THE TANJAVUR QUARTET

Margadarsis of Bharatanatyam

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The brothers

Historically, Bharatanatyam was mostly prevalent in Tamil Nadu, though traces of it were found in the 20th century in what are now Kerala, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. Today it is taught and practised throughout the globe. The term 'Bharatanatyam' has been in existence at least from the 15th century but we do not know the compositions the dancers performed in the early years of Bharatanatyam. The *Silappadhikaram* mentions eleven types of dance, but not the individual pieces danced. We find the term 'tillana' in an inscription of Rajendra Chola (1052-1064), and 'jakkini' during the times of Krishnadevaraya of Vijayanagara. Rajaraja Chola brought 400 dancers from different places and appointed them in the Tanjavur Brihadeeswara temple to do regular service there, but we do not know their dance repertoire. Some agamas mention dances like the Bhujangatrasam and Suddha nrittam. Only during the time of the Tanjavur Nayak rulers, do we come across many items like sollu, jakkini, alznu, pushpanjali, perani, and korvai, as also the names of the experts in these. In many courts of the Marathas, who followed the Nayaks, most of the dance compositions practised during the previous regime were kept intact. During the reign of the ruler Tulaja, kavuttuvams were composed and danced in temples. The repertoire added during the time of Tulaja and Serfoji II owes its credit to four brothers of Tanjavur who belonged to a traditional natyacharya family. They were Chinnayya, Ponnayya, Sivanandam and Vadivelu, the 'Tanjavur Quartet' we know.

CHINNAYYA

Chinnayya (1802-1856) learnt vocal music and Bharatanatyam from his father Subbaraya Nattuvanar. It is generally believed that all the four brothers were disciples of Muthuswami Dikshitar, while, according to Pandanainallur Meenakshisundaram Pillai, only Ponnayya and Sivanandam studied with Dikshitar.



All of them were serving in the Brihadeeswara temple as natyacharyas conducting the daily service performed by the devadasis attached to the temple, and annually the *Tyagaraja Kuravanji* (not *Tyagesa Kuravanji*). Serfoji asked the brothers to teach nattuvangam to one of his courtesans' students and the brothers agreed. But after about four years, during the annual Brahmotsavam, the ruler asked the temple priests to tie the 'parivattam' (an honour from the temple) to this new person. The four brothers felt insulted as the honour belonged to them. Such practices were common to Serfoji. He dismissed many dancers and

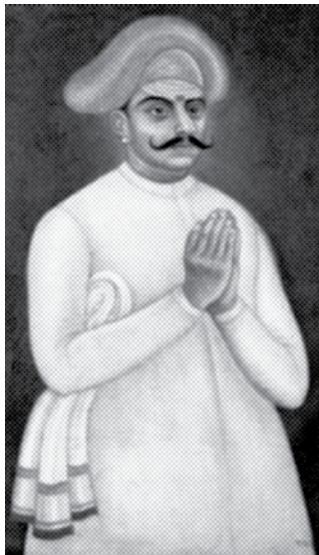


Serfoji

Carnatic musicians from his court, appointing a European band on 21 January 1799. When his wedding took place, he forbade the nagaswaram troupe to play and asked the band alone to offer music. Perhaps because of Serfoji's behaviour, the composer Adiyappayya left for Pudukottai, while Veenai Venkatasubbayya, Sonti Venkataramanayya and others went to different samasthanams. Similarly, when the four brothers felt insulted, they left Tanjavur the same evening after resigning their temple service. They went to Orattanadu (about ten miles from the town) and from there to Mannargudi. They soon set out for Madurai and Tirunelveli on a pilgrimage. From there they went to Mysore. Two years later, Chinnayya became the asthana vidwan in the court of Maharaja Mummati Krishnaraja Wodeyar III. Born in 1794, and coronated on 30 June 1799, Krishnaraja Wodeyar passed away on 27 March 1868. Tanjavur Bhavani, Mysore Chikkadevamma and many others were trained in Bharatanatyam by Chinnayya. Besides, he composed many varnams like *Neevanti* (Kamalamanohari) and *E maguva bodhincheru* (Dhanyasi), sabdams like *Gokulambudhi*, kritis like *Amba Sowramba* (Arabhi), and javalis like *Cheli nenetlu* (Paras) and some jatiswarams. His Kalyani jatiswaram in tistra Triputa tala (S; N|D P|G M|| P;M| G R|) stands out for its high standard. As mentioned earlier, he also authored *Abhinaya Lakshanam*. Chinnayya is said to have composed a few javalis in praise of Mysore's ruler

Chamaraja Wodeyar. However, this cannot be correct as Chamaraja Wodeyar was born in 1863, eight years after Chinnayya died, and came to power on 23 September 1868. Chinnayya married Jnyanambal, daughter of Ammachatram Abhiramisundara Nattuvanar, and lived in Mysore till his death. Even when Raja Shivaji ascended the throne after Serfoji II, Chinnayya was adamant in his resolve not to return to Tanjavur. His last rites were performed by one of his disciples at Paschima Vahini in Srirangapatna. Chinnayya had no children.

PONNAYYA

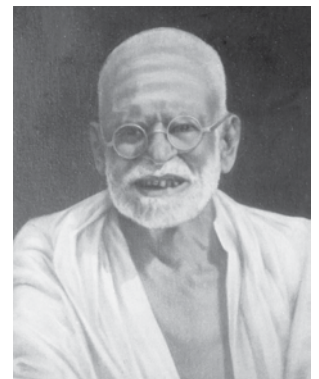


The second son of Subbaraya Nattuvanar was Ponnayya (1804-1864). He learnt vocal music and veena from Muthuswami Dikshitar and served the Tanjavur court for some years. It was he who composed the music for the *Sarabhendra Bhoopala Kuravanji* of Kottaiyur Sivakozhundu Desikar. He also left Tanjavur with his brothers and went to many places, but when King Shivaji sent a message to the brothers seeking

forgiveness for the mistake committed by his father Serfoji, and asking them to return to Tanjavur, Ponnayya and Sivanandam acceded to his request. A considerable number of jatiswarams, sabdams (for example, *Sreekara sugunakara*), varnams like *Sadayuda*, *Niratamuna* and *Sami ninne*, and many tillanas and javalis were composed by Ponnayya. Curiously the varnam *Sami ninne* has the mudra 'Kodandapani'. The famous swarajati in raga Huseni, *E mandayanara*, as well as its replica *E mayaladira*, are said to be the compositions of Ponnayya. The common mudra found in most of Ponnayya's compositions is 'Brihadeesa' though he also employed other mudras. A higher official in the Tanjavur palace during the reign of Shivaji was Muttoji Appa and his son was Ramalingam. Ponnayya's varnam *Atimoham* (Sankarabharanam) praises Ramalingendra. When he went to Tiruvarur, Ponnayya presented the same varnam but changed the mudra from 'Ramalingendra' to 'Tyagesa'. When he went to Madurai, he composed the varnams *Samini* in Khamas (which also has a Tamil sahitya version *Samiyai*) and *Sarasa ninnu* (Kapi). He composed the Bhairavi varnam *Mohamana* at the Tanjavur Brihadeeswara temple, when the deity came in procession as Tyagaraja; his Anandabhairavi varnam *Sakhiye* is in praise of the Mannargudi deity Rajagopala. *Sudati ninne* (Kalyani) was also composed at the same

place. The varnam *Sami neepai* (Dhanyasi), found in the family's manuscripts as that of Ponnayya, has no mudra. *Pantamela*, the varnam in Anandabhairavi has 'Mallarji' as its mudra. Ponnayya composed not only on Siva and Ambika, but also on Vishnu; examples are *Ranganathude* (Saurashtram) and *Deena rakshaka* (Ahiri). Some beautiful ragamalikas like *Madana bilahari* (four ragas) and *Sami ninnu* (12 ragas) are also to Ponnayya's credit. The device of echoistic syllables or swarakshara is not uncommon in his works. The ettukkada swara in the Sankarabharanam varnam in khanda jati Ata tala (*Papa jati marudu*) is one. Similarly the ettukkada swara in his Adi tala varnam in the same raga has *dha* as the primordial note, as well as the sahitya syllable. Ponnayya composed many padams in honour of Serfoji, before the brothers left Tanjavur. *Ninne kori* (Bhairavi) and *Ee viraha* (Ahiri) are among them. As Marathi was prevalent in Tanjavur, Ponnayya composed a Marathi padam *Nareemani* in Huseni. Tiruvarur Kamalam, Mannargudi Meenakshi (great grandmother of vidwan Mannargudi Rajagopala Pillai), Tirunelveli Manikkam and Madras Jagannatha Nattuvanar were among Ponnayya's disciples.

In most Bharatanatyam programme sheets we find the name of the composer mentioned as the Tanjavur Quartet in general, it is the duty of the teacher and the dancer to identify which of the brothers composed a specific composition. Very often the composer's name is mentioned as Ponnayya or as Ponnayya Pillai, perhaps without knowing the difference between Ponnayya of the Quartet and the later K. Ponniah Pillai (see my article in *Sruti* 243).



Meenakshisundaram Pillai

Orattanadu is a village about seventeen kilometers from Tanjavur. There lived a traditional family of natyacharyas and one of them was Kodandarama Nattuvanar. His eldest daughter (name not known now) was given in marriage to Ponnayya and the couple had four daughters. The eldest, Kutti Ammal was given in marriage to Pandanainallur Sooryamurti Pillai (1843-1897) and she gave birth to Meenakshisundaram, who became a famous nattuvanar (1869-1954). Chinnakutti, the second daughter of Ponnayya, was the wife of Madras Jagannatha Nattuvanar (1836-1907) and the mother of Nelliappa Nattuvanar (1859-1905). Ponnayya's third daughter married Ammachatram Subbaraya Nattuvanar. Pandanainallur Chokkalinga Nattuvanar was the grandson of this Subbaraya Nattuvanar. The last daughter of Ponnayya died when she was only three years old.