



## Shabdham

### How a Court Tradition found place in a Bharatanatyam Margam

Jagyaseni Chatterjee

Sanskrit and Indian Culture Department

Sri Chandrasekarendra Saraswathi Viswa Maha Vidyalaya (SCSVMV)

Kanchi University, Kanchi

**Abstract:** Shabdams have been a part of the court tradition and consequently adapted themselves to suit the needs of the Bharatanatyam repertoire. While dance choreographers across the world are painstakingly preserving the content and structure of Shabdham, pioneering contributions have been made by Tamil Professor, S. Raghuraman and eminent Bharatanatyam dancer and choreographer Dr. Lakshmi Ramaswamy.

This paper shall examine and discuss the role of Shabdham and its developments in the Bharatanatyam repertoire until recent times highlighting simultaneously the contemporary Shabdams that have found place in the margam today. Touching upon its variety in form, content and structure, it will also study its role from the perspective of performance.

**Keywords:** Shabdham, Sabdam, Bharatanatyam margam, Bharatanatyam repertoire, court tradition, Indian classical dance

#### Introduction

The prominence of Shabdham has undergone tides over time. It held a special place in the court tradition. (Ref: *Dance Traditions of Andhra* by Dr. Arudra – “During the times of Raghunatha Nayaka (1600-1630 AD) and his son Raghavva Nayaka (1633-1673), the dance item was very popular. 2 exponents of shabdham in the vijaynagar court were Campakavalli and Candralekha. The first was given the title Sabda Chudamani and the other was honoured with Sabda cintamani”). With due course of time, it slowly found its way into the Bharatanatyam margam. A popular piece during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, its prominence decreased in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. So, does its significance lie only as a treasure of the past? Or encourage the influx of new age shabdams with new composers and choreographers attempting to give it a fresh attire?

#### Etymology and meaning

The name ‘Shabdham’ is supposedly derived from ‘Sabda’, (synonymous to sound, word, dhvani, nada) an old word in classical Sanskrit. It refers to the words of praise with which a deity, a hero or a king is greeted in procession or are seated in court. Often referred to as ‘Yashogiti’ they are also called as salamu-s also salamu darus. The word salamu can be taken as one indication that it was part of the Mughal courts probably hailing the king. The third item in the format of Bharatanatyam (marga)m, it is through this that words or sahitya is introduced for the first time in a margam. Lines of the lyric and rhythmic passages are usually found to alternate each other.

In this case, a perfect example would be the traditional Shabdham penned by the Tanjore Quartet hailing the king who is synonymous to Kodandapani. *Saami Ninne Chalanamidhi NAdupai ChalamelAra (Why are you neglecting me..my Lord?)in Ragam: Kamboji and Talam: Misrachapu.*

This shabdham is an eka raga shabdham. Interestingly the last line uses the word ‘Salamaiyya’ at the end. *Elu Elu nannElukOra sabhASurE kOdaNDapANi salAmayyaA* (Rule and reign over me Kodandapani, the one with the bow, Salutations to you).

## Literary Sources

In terms of literary resources, Sangita Muktaivali of Devendra (probably written in 1400 AD) lists a sabda nrtta, a sabda cali and a suda-sabda in the desi items popular in those times. According to Dr. Arudra, “Chandrasekhara, a famous poet in 8 languages (1<sup>st</sup> quarter of 15<sup>th</sup> century) described a sabda prabandha in his Pampa Asthana gives details of its beautiful adavu jathis called tarahara, nissarane, ottumana, bettumana, tirupumana, keku, alaku and osara definitions of which elude the research scholar.” Sangita-Darpana of Damodara lists a Sabda-cali in its sequence of items. It also mentions sabda-nrtta and suda-sabda.

Bharatam Kasinadhayya (1690-1764) of Melattur was famous for long shabdams. Long shabdams are characteristic in Kuchipudi or Bhagavata Mela natakas. Kasinadhayya dedicated his Gajendra Moksa Shabdham to Sri Rama (even today's kuchipudi repertoire of Padmabhushan Vempatti China Satyam, has a Ramayana Shabdham). This Shabdham in Sri Raga and Ata tala is more popularly known as Mandooka Shabdham. Kasinadhayya composed Shabdams in the theme of Rukmini Kalyanam, Parijaatapaharanam as introductory pieces to be sung after the invocatory Todaya Mangalam. Interestingly, this natyacharya dedicated bhakti mara shabdham-s to Pratapa Simha (1739-1764)

Melattur Venkatarama Sastri too composed some Shabdham like Prahlada Pattabhisheka shabdham that is sung after todayamangalam while staging ‘Prahlada Charitramu’ in Bhagavata Mela.

The Tanjore Quartet composed Shabdams and published seven of them in Ponniah Manimalai; all of them in Kamboji raga and Misra chapu. Some Shabdams are also ragamalika.

## Repository of History

Shabdams also serve as repository of history. For example, it is through the disciple of Kasinathayya, Panchanadhi Vaidyanathayya's (1694-1758 A.D), that we come to know of Unnathapuram was earlier the name of Melattur. He salutes Unnathapureswara as “...minnaina melatturi Unnatapuresa Swami parakuninnu nammithi salaamu.”

## Structure and Form of a Shabdham

The form and structure of a Shabdham has undergone very little change. The primary characteristic of a shabdham are:

- It begins with *ta tai tat ta tam* – a popular korvai rendered in Kutta adavu.
- Rhythmic sequences are sung.
- Literal translation and padarthabhinaya is used.
- Concept of sancari is introduced for the first time but it is kept very simple.
- Several korvais intersperse each other in between the sahitya

As mentioned earliest, shabdams often hailed the presiding deity. Not just the deity, but Dr. Lakshmi Ramaswamy (Bharatanatyam dancer and Fulbright Fellow) has also choreographed a shabdham on manmatha or a sub deity. Penned by Dr. S. Raghuraman and tuned by Dr. Vanathy Raghuraman in Ragamalika and Talam: Misrachapu, the shabdham goes as *Mayilanaya rathiyudanE matiyudanE varugindRa kamadeEvA* (Oh Kamadeva, the one whose paraphernalia includes moon and peacock like rati) and continues with *Ezilmigu*

*pariyAga kiLi(y)ondru izukkindRa thErvAhA* (while parrot is like a horse that pulls the chariot, the chariot that manmatha drives is 'breeze').

### New and innovative Shabdams

Shabdams have had various interpretations. While on one hand, Rukmini Devi in Kalakshetra Quarterly, 1980, Vol II. No 3, Pg 20 said, "I found the Shabdams, musically uninteresting, as it depended much on the Manodharma and the quality of the singer to make it good," her successors of the Vani, the Dhananjayans composed special Shabdams like Rama Shabdams, Shanmuga and Ganesha.

While there is no dearth of already existing Shabdams, new choreographers are attempting it with new dimensions to give it a fresh attire. Delimiting the content of a Shabdams from hailing and praising a deity or a king, it has now moved on to taking up concepts and themes either from literary texts or philosophy. Adyar Balu has composed *KandhanE Umai Baalane* while Madurai R. Muralidharan has composed a Shabdams on Jesus. Shabdams can be grouped into broad categories:

- **From literary texts (in a traditional format)**

Verses from literary texts have also been culled out to form a Shabdams. This is useful to take the content of a text in a simpler version to a larger audience. For example, *verses from Aiychiyar Kuravai of Illango Adigals Silappadikaram - Moovula iradiyal murai niramba vagai mudiya (Three worlds you conquered in two feet?)* have been set to Ragamalika and Talam: Misrachapu. 'What is the purpose of the ears if they don't hear your glory; purpose of the eyes if they do not savour the sight of your form and the purpose of the tongue if they do not chant thy name?' asks Ilango Adigal.

- **From literary text (incorporating a new idea of small korvais rendered with sollukattus)**

While korvais are sung in a shabdams, there have been shabdams with small korvais rendered in Sollakettus (rhythmic syllable). For example, while depicting the concept of 'PatinOru' aadal (11 types of dances) as mentioned in CilappadikAram, sollukettus have been used to give the dances a rhythmic flavour. The eleven types of dances that dancer Madhavi performs are Kotukotti, Pandarangam, Alliyam, Malladal, Tudi Aadal, Kudai Aadal, Kudamadal, Pedi Aadal, Marakkal Aadal, Paavvai Aadal and Kadaiciyar Aadal.

Of which two were performed by Shiva, Maal (Vishnu), Muruga and one each by - Manmatha, Durga, Krishna, Lakshmi & Indraani. It can be noted that there are mythological stories that are connected with these dances. *Ilagu aruL thazaikka chO nagar aziththu marakkAl Adinai (You danced with wooden legs/stilts by destroying the city 'Cho' as a gesture of benevolence)* set to Ragam: Lalithapriya and Talam: Misrachapu.

### Propitiating one single concept

Shabdams need not hail only a god or a king. They can also be based on one particular concept. For example – a *panca padai* shabdams written by Prof S. Raghuraman and tuned by Dr. Vanathy Raghuraman in hails the five weapons of Vishnu - bow, mace, conch, discus and sword.

### Shabdams – as an educational tool

Since Shabdams primarily use the literal meaning and incorporate very simple hand gestures, they can serve as a fantastic tool to take forward dance as well as knowledge based school curriculum. For example the innovative Shabdams on surya- *Odhu brahmalthin oppilA mudhalE (Praised the Brahman unequal and the first)* written by Dr. S. Raghuraman and tuned by Dr. Vanathy Raghuraman in Ragamalika, children can be taught about the big bang theory, the power of solar energy, light as the prime life giving source, nature and its flora and fauna in abundance and many more. Interesting lines *Adi oLiyena akilam vaLampera jOthi vadivAi tOndridu ezilE – veiyiOi (primordial source of light that has allowed the world to flourish)* give children an enterprising way to enlighten kids of any age.

## Relevance in today's Bharatanaytam repertoire

Thus we can see that Shabdham is definitely not the part of a margam that can be ignored. While many opt out to keep it aside due to paucity of time in today's performances, many choose to conceptualise, choreograph and bring forward new ideas to keep intact the nuances of the repertoire and contribute to the growth of the art form whose life line spans thousands of years.

With the digital short videos on the runway, it looks like, there is a big scope for Shabdams to do a rapid comeback.

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