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Recently (September 2013), the Hindu carried an article about a festival that had Bharatanatyam dancers performing compositions of (Mudduswami) Dikshitar. In the past too, we have witnessed memorable dance performances that used Kritis of Dikshitar – Kanjadalayataksi in (Kamala)Manohari. It has been choreographed by many masters including the late lamented Vempati Chinna Satyam, as is the grand Kedaram song Ananda-natana-prakasham, for which the redoubtable Adyar Lakshman has composed jati passages inspired by the mallari performed by Nagaswaram artistes. This kriti is particularly suited for dance since it comes appended with a chittaswaram that intersperses solkattu syllables with the solfa (swara) passages.

Does Mudduswami Dikshitar's relationship with dance end with this – A few performers using his songs in their dance repertoire? Surely not. Let us examine his association with dance more closely.

### I. The background

Ramaswami Dikshitar (1735-1817 AD) was a scholar respected for his deep knowledge of music as well as temple rituals and the Agama shastras that dictated them. The Tanjore Maratha prince Amarasimha (whose name was Ramaswami as well) honoured him and invited the savant to stay at Tiruvarur. Inspired by the deity Tyagarajeswara in a dream, Ramaswami Dikshitar codified the dance and (nagaswaram) music performances that were part of the various ceremonies and festivals conducted at the Tiruvarur temple.

He has composed varnas in a range of talas – Khanda Ata, Aditala and Rupaka, covering both common and uncommon ragas – Shankarabharana, Hindola, Purnacandrika, Sriranjani, and Hindolavasanta all in praise of

‘Viravasanta Tyagaraja’ with a (Kamala)manohari varna on the goddess Kamalamba. Dikshitar is also said to have compiled and edited the kautvams (kavitvas) and mallaris that were part of the nityotsava and brahmotsava rituals at Tiruvarur. There are said to be more varnas in the ragas ritigauLa, Karnataka kApi, Begada, Suddha sAveri and Saranga, which are part of the Nagaswara and dance repertoire at Tiruvarur.

Amarasimha, the son of Pratapasimha, held court in Tiruvarur at the time. He patronized several poets and scholars, musicians and dancers. The court of Amarasimha was marked by the presence of poets who versified in half a dozen languages, and musicians from all over the subcontinent.

The temple of Tyagarajaswami too, was the nucleus of much cultural activity, with festivals and processions throughout the year that were suffused with colourful music, dance and poetry recital performances. The daily worship entailed the music of several instruments including the rare Pancamukha vadya and the Suddha maddala. The temple reverberated with the sonorous voices of the Oduvars reciting the Tevaram hymns. The Nagaswara stalwarts of the time came from all over the south, vying with each other to perform at Tyagarajeswara’s various utsavas. There were several groups of women employed by the temple, with distinct sets of duties. A troupe of devadAsis was employed to put on performances of two operas from king Shahaji’s time – the Pallaki Seva prabandham and the Tyageshar Kuravanji. The dancers who performed the latter song, claimed descent from the goddess Nilotpalamba, and called theirs the ‘Kondi paramparai’, after the goddess’s Tamil name - Kondi. There were innumerable padams and varnams dedicated at shrines of specific deities in the massive Tiruvarur temple complex,

composed by a myriad of composers, that formed part of the Devadasis’ repertoire.

It was this multilingual, multicultural (and spiritually charged) milieu that Mudduswami Dikshitar was born in.

## 2. References to dance in Mudduswami Dikshitar’s songs

Mudduswami Dikshitar spent a significant part of his childhood in Tiruvarur, absorbing the sensory feast provided by the Tyagaraja shrine. He observed and assimilated the rich music of the great Nagaswara artistes and the graceful dance of the temple danseuses; while his father put him through a rigorous training in the various branches of traditional learning. Ramaswami

bequeathed to him the musical prabandhas and gitas of the Venkatamakhin tradition, while saturating Mudduswami with the high poetry and classical melodies of the Gitagovinda of Jayadeva; which he sang every Ekadashi.

Mudduswami's musical career began in Tirutani, at the shrine of Chengalvaraya-Subrahmanya – a centre well known for its dance traditions. However the largest set of his songs are composed on deities in the Tiruvarur temple complex, with intricate detail lovingly woven into the lyric, steeped in majestic melody. Tiruvarur had a very special place in Mudduswami dikshitar's heart, not just for childhood memories, but as the site of his first education in music and temple lore. While the Srividya tantra suggests the worship of Srirajarajeswari or Lalita Tripurasundari, who is enshrined in the peak of the Sricakra, free of the bounds of space or time; Mudduswami has chosen to identify Kamalamba of Tiruvarur as his Upasya devata, and has made her the locus of his Avaranapuja. It can be said that Dikshitar's relationship with the Tiruvarur temple was one where the boundaries between antar-yaga [internal – mental worship] and bahir-yaga [external – ritual worship] were blurred, and the temple itself became his siddhikshetra, where his pursuit of the Srividya Upasana attained fruition.

Muttuswami Dikshitar's songs are replete with generic references to the dance of the deities he praised, as well as specific allusions to the theory and ritual role of dance. Some of the more important references are listed here. First the Tiruvarur songs -

The special ajapa dance of Tyagaraja-Siva, consists of the ouroboric hamsassoham mantra. The ajapa dance of Siva is in resonance with the rise and ebb of Narayana's breath, as the latter dozes in yoga-nidra meditating on Siva, completing the self-reflexive cycle. The special form of dance associated with Vithi-vitanka Tyagaraja, is also mimed by the palanquin-bearers, as they carry the processional icon of Chandrashekhara-Siva. This is recorded in the Gaula song 'Tyagaraja palayashu' in the phrase *ajapa-natana-ranga*, and in the Atana song 'Tyagarajo virajate' - *ati-lalita-h*

*amsa-lasyollAso*

. Lord Viswanatha of the nearby Kuzhikkarai (Gartatira) is similarly praised as

*ucchwasa-ajapa-nata-abharanam*

[Vishwanatham bhaje - natabharanam]

Hatakeshwara is described as *maruti-nandiyarjuna-bhAratacaryair-vedita-natana-sphurte* in the eponymous Bilahari masterpiece. Here we can see Dikshitar's acquaintance with the *purvasuris*

– the past masters of dance – Maruti, Nandi, Bharata and Arjuna.

Nilotpalamba is described as being pleased by the kummi dance (hallisa) in the Kannadagaula song Nilotpalamvikaya - *hallisa-lasya-santustaya*. Mudduswami Dikshitar records his high regard for the devadasis who dance for the daily worship of Tyagaraja by his use of the word vimala – spotless in the passage ‘*vimala-rudra-ganika-nartana-vinoda-bheda-modakarasya*’ which means Tyagarajeswara is delighted by the varieties of dance forms presented by the pure rudra-ganikas.

### 3. The Purvacaryas

Mudduswami Diksitar had a deep sense of history, and his musical creations were made as much with a sense of discharging a debt to the genealogical and intellectual lineage and tradition, as expressions of his musical and spiritual ideas. He mention Bharata, the fountainhead of all Indian traditions of dance, music and theatre, and Matanga – the author of the Brhaddeshi, in a few songs.

The Rasamanjari song composed on Kamakshi, the crowning glory of his suite of songs in the 72 raganga ragas of the *kanakambari-phenadyuti* scheme says ‘*dvisaptati-raganga-raga-modinim matanga-bharata-vedinim*’ -

‘O goddess who revels in the 72 ragas, and who is supplicated by Matanga and Bharata’.

The Todi song on the deity Abhayambika at Mayuram-Mayiladuturai repeats this sentiment as ‘*Bharata-matanga-nute*’

. The reference to dance masters like Nandi, Arjuna etc in the song on Hatakeswara has already been seen. Dikshitar seems to endorse the (later) interpretation of the term Bharata as being an abbreviation-mnemonic in the Kalyani song on Balambika of Vaithiswarankoil in the passage ‘

*bhava-raga-tala-modinim*’

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There are many more generic references to dance and the deities’ fondness for dance, which do not illuminate any specific aspects of Dikshitar’s scholarship in dance. Nonetheless they are

enumerated at the end of this article.

### IV. Dikshitar's disciples

Among Mudduswami's Dikshitar's students we find a large number of dancers and natyacaryas – the brothers Ponnayya and Vadivelu, the dancers Vallalarkoil Ammani and Tiruvarur Kamalam; and naTTuvanar KorainADu RamaswAmi Pillai, who was an expert singer and Natyacarya.

Of these, Ponnayya was hailed as 'Bharata-shreshta' by Dikshitar himself. Upon Ponnayya's request Dikshitar spent a while at Tanjavur, and it is suggested that he composed the songs in the raganga ragas during this Tanjore sojourn. This surmise seems plausible since an overwhelming majority of the compositions from the raganga raga set are composed on deities in and around Tanjavur (and Tiruvarur of course).

Ammani hailed from Vallalarkoil near Tanjavur, where Dikshitar has composed the heart melting song 'Vadanyeswaram' in Devagandhari. Kamalam was supposed to have been an extremely talented dancer who won appreciation at the hands of Dikshitar. He is said to have composed the Telugu varnam 'rupamu juci' for her performance at the shrine of Tiruvarur Tyagesha. It is another matter that some scholars question Dikshitar's authorship of this song. There is another Telugu daru in Sriranjani 'Ni sati' which describes the glory of Tyagesha, and is part of the Tiruvarur dance repertoire. This too is a composition of Mudduswami Dikshitar.

Ponnayya has drawn much inspiration and guidance from Dikshitar in his development as a composer. He even uses his guru's mudra or signature - guruguha in some of his songs. Ponnayya's first song was 'Mayatita-swarupini' in Malavagaula raga, like his guru's maiden effort 'SrinAtha-adi-guruguho', and says 'I am a slave to our lord Guruguha' – *mA guruguhaswamiki ne dasudaiti*

. There are eight more songs composed by Ponnayya that refer to Dikshitar-Guruguha, of which the Purvakalyani-Gamakakriya song merits attention. It goes '*Satileni guruguhamurtini ne Anatiyunna namminanu... Ada!O bahu-dhirudE*'. A translation

- 'I have reposed my faith in the peerless Guruguhamurti, ever since the day(I saw him)... He who is very talented in dance'. This line by Ponnayya, who is seen as a founder of the modern Bharatanatyam margam, and who was the uncomparable dance master of his age, –

### *Adalo bahu-dhirude*

is an incontrovertible endorsement of Mudduswami Dikshitar's knowledge of the art and theory of dance.

Mudduswami Dikshitar's songs are a treasure-trove of melody and detail, and are eminently suited to be taken up for dance performances – be it the smaller sprightly gems like Saraswatimanohari Sankari and Sriguruguha tarayashu, or the sonorous majestic masterpieces like Srirajagopala in Saveri and the Caturdasharagamalika, that are like magnificent gopuras of melody and lyric, timeless testaments to his genius.

Mudduswami Dikshitar's references to dance [Not exhaustive]

Title – raga – relevant passage

1. Abhayamba jagadamba – kalyani – bhavaraga-tala-visvasini
2. Abhayambayam – sahana – sabhesha-modita-natanayam
3. Abhayambikayai – erukalakambhoji – surucira-natana-bhedayai
4. Avyajakarunakatakshi –salanganata - rasalanga-nataka-kriye

5. Ananda-natana-prakasam – kedara - divya-patanjali-vyaghrapada-darsita-kuncitabja-caranam & sangita-vadya-vinoda-tandava-jata-bahu-tara-bheda-codyam

6. Srngara-rasamanjarim – rasamanjari - raganga-raga modinim matanga-bharata-vedinim

7. Nilotpambikaya – kannadagaula - hallisa-lasya-santustaya –

8. Hatakeswara - maruti-nandyarjuna-bharatacharyair-vedita-natana-sphurte – bilahari

9. Gauri giriraja-kumari – - gauri - srngaradi-navarasadhare

10. Cintayeham sada citsabha-nayakam – noteswaram – tandaveswaram.

11. Tyagaraja-palayasu – gaula - ajapa-natana-ranga

12. Tyagaraja virajate – atana - ati-lalita-hamsa-lasyollaso

13. Dakshayini abhayambike – todi - bharata-matangadi-nute

14. Balambikayai – natakuraji – nateswaryai

15. Mahaganapate - natanarayani - mahanata-narayani-nandana

16. Mahishasuramardinim – narayani - mahisa-mastaka-natana-bheda-vinodinim.

Modin̄im

17. Lalitambikayai – bhairavi – natabhairavi-nartanayai
18. Viswanatham – natabharanam - ucchwasajapa-natabharanam
19. Srityagarajasya – vimala-rudra-ganika-nartana-vinoda-bheda-moda-karasya -  
rudrapriya
20. Sivakameswaram - arabhi - nateswaram .
21. Sriviswanatham - saranga passage - citra-viswa-nataka-prakasam and  
parama-hamsam ananda-nartanam [caturdasha ragamalika]
22. Bhaja re citta - kalyani - bhava-raga-tala-modinim

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**Mudduswami Dikshitar and dance**

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