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PAPER 11 VARNAM



ज्ञान - विज्ञानं विमुक्तये

PAPER 11

MODULE 1

THE VARNAM - PIECE DE RESISTANCE OF BHARATANATYAM

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The Varnam - Piece De Resistance Of Bharatanatyam



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MODULE 1 The Varnam- Piece de resistance of Bharatanatyam

"Varna" means "color", some scholars also relate the word to "Varnanam / वर्णनम्" (description). Description of the dance style, where it is fully exploited. Perhaps, due to its adequate nature to portray all the possible and admirable combinations and colors of the style, the Varnam took its birth. Varnam is a song in the Carnatic music repertoire which is also part of the dance repertoire that is in the Margam of Bharatanatyam. A Varnam is a relatively long piece and can range from 30 minutes to up to nearly an hour or 40-50 min. It is usually set to Aadi / आदि, Rupaka / रूपक or Ata tala / अट ताल. It is the center piece in a recital of dance. The lyrics are simple and consist mostly of long syllables and swara / स्वर phrases of various lengths which bring out the essential features of the style.

Varnam comprises of two parts:

1. First part is called *Purvaranga* / पूर्वरांग and includes Pallavi / पल्लवी, Anupallavi / अनुपल्लवी, Muktai Swara / मुक्ताई स्वर and Muktai Swara Sahityam.
2. The second part is called *Uttaranga* / उत्तररांग and comprises Charanam / चरणं and Charana swaras / चरण स्वर (also called as Chitta Swaras, short notes). Charanam, some Varnam will have only Sahitya, whereas some will have both Charanam and Charana Sahitya as well. Following the Charanam is Charanam Swara and Sahitya passages. They are also known as Ettugada swaras / एत्तुगडा

स्वर and Ettugada Sahitya. Each Varnam may have two, three or more of these.

"Ettugada" may be compared to the Charana of kriti or keertana. Sometimes it is mentioned as "Upapallavi" or Chitta pallavi. In Telugu and Kannada "Ettigada" means "commencement", "position of attack". King Shahji substituted the word "Charana" with "ettugada" in some of his compositions that were later adopted by Varnam composers. The piece of lyric used in Ettugada is comparatively short and mostly, has incomplete meaning or may compliment to the statement found in the Pallavi and Anupallavi. Pallavi has some statement in the nature of a prayer or request, while Anupallavi continues the statement by supposing the statement of the Pallavi and addresses the deity or the patron, as the case may be.

Muktayi svara is indicated as "chittasvara / चिटस्वर" by some. Chittasvaras with or without Sahityas are used in kriti to add color, serve as complementary, not compulsory part. They may have been composed by composer or added later on by other singers. In Varnam Muktayisvara is a must. "Muktayi" means "finish", it is concluding portion of Poorvaranga / पूर्वरंग. In Tana Varnam Muktayisvara may have sahitya or not.

The svara passages that follow the ettugada are called 'ettugada svaras' to differentiate them from the muktayisvara / मुक्तायिस्वरा. The content of Varnam may be found in the wordings and its underlying theme. It may possess either devotion or love or in praise of a patron. The aim of the choreographer and composer is to portray the content in all its brilliant hues and shades. Pada Varnam is used only for dancing purpose. It is always rendered in a slow tempo and hence is called 'Chauka Varnam / चौक वर्णम' (slow Varnam). This is replica of Tana Varnam in form, but every svara passage has its own sahitya. Sometimes Pada Varnam may contain jatis, then it's called 'padajati / पदजती Varnam' which is nothing but

svarajati. Pada Varnams never admit excessive gamakas, nor loaded with sangatis (embellishments).

Varnam in Dance

Varnam is the most complicated item of *Bharatanatyam Margam* comprising both *Nritta* and *Nritya* aspects. Main mood of Varnam may be either *Sringara* or *Bhakti* (devotion expressed through love to God, called Bhakti–Sringara / भक्ति-श्रिंगार).

In Varnam *Nayaki* / वर्णम नायकी (the heroine) addresses her Lord directly or indirectly (by appealing to her close friend, Sakhi, asking help and convey her message). She requests help, laments, and reproaches or expresses her love and devotion. In Varnam the God is considered as *Nayaka* (the hero), i.e. abstract idea of God finds its manifestation in God–like human creature.

There are two types of Varnams:

1. *Pada Varnams* / पद वर्णम are used for dance choreography, and are also called Chowka Varnams. They are set in slower tempo (chowka kalam). All the swaras are accompanied by sahityam (lyrics) and thus are more suitable for dance.
2. *Tana Varnams* / तान वर्णम are intended for musical performance and practice. Tana Varnams are set in faster tempo. Chitta Swaras of the second part of Tana Varnams do not have sahityam.

Varnam commences with *Trikala Jathi* / त्रिकाल जती. Sollukattus (garlands of syllables) and corresponding series of adavus are executed in three speeds (kala–s): vilambita / विलंबित, madhyama / मध्यम and druta / द्रुत. The last portion of Trikala Jathi is called *Kuraippu*. Adavus of Kuraippu are performed without repetition. *Muktaippu* / मुक्तैप्पू is finishing sequence of Kuraippu / कुरैप्पू, final

chain if adavus called makuta / मकुता or teermana adavus / तीर्मान आडवु executed in triple cycle.

Trikala Jathi (and all other jathi) are followed by Aradi (Arudi / अरुदी-आरुदी) (rhythmical patterns used as conclusion of Nritta portions accompanied by footwork.) Besides Trikala Jathi, Purvaranga of Varnam includes Kuraippu (performed separately) and several different jathi-s, intermingled with singing of Pallavi and Anupallavi. After each line of Pallavi and Anupallavi, jathi-s are executed, each followed by Aradi. Muktai Swaras are sung after Anupallavi (and corresponding last Jathi). For Muktai Swara dancer executes Korvai (set of adavus). Usually, Muktai Swara is repeated twice. Muktai Swara Sahityam is again illustrated using Abhinaya. It is also repeated twice. The second repetition is accompanied by *tattu-mettu adavu* (footwork, set to different rhythmic patterns). Here abhinaya may be also accompanied by Sarpa nadai / सर्प नडै, special way of moving on the stage along snake-like curve.

Uttaranga / उत्तरांग part of Varnam is rendered in faster speed. It starts with Charana sahityam illustrated using Abhinaya. Charanam is repeated several times. Each Chitta swara is repeated twice. The dancer performs short and brick Korvai-s. Chitta swara sahityam follows, also repeated twice. First time Chitta swara is illustrated with pure abhinaya. The second rendering of sahityam is accompanied by *tattu-mettu adavu* or *Sarpa nadai*. Varnam is concluded with Charanam. Charanam is the heart of Varnam, the most emotionally charged line of sahityam. It expresses the main idea, the message the heroine seeks to convey to her beloved. Often it is formulated as a question (How can I bear the shower of Manmada / मन्मद arrows?), sometimes as imperative sentence (Please, come back my beloved!) which contains more or less evident hint or suggestion, hidden intention and innermost wish.

The practice of performing Varnams in the solo Bharatanatyam repertoire has seen many changes over the years. In recent years, a lot of dancers do extensively long Tirmanams with very fast speed. One of the opinions of a senior teacher's regarding this is "In the Varnam, teermanam-s should be in proportion to the rest of the piece. Disproportionately lengthy teermenam-s spoil the continuity of the work. So do unnecessary long Sanchari-s. When Sanchari go beyond three or four avarta-s (rhythmical cycles), the dance turns into a drama or mono acting. At one recital, I counted as many as 60 repetitions of a line, at which point I gave up counting. This kind of a thing distorts the form of the Varnam. It is possible to communicate what is necessary in the shortest span of time.

The kalapramanam / कालप्रमाणं (tempo) for a Varnam should be moderate. This enhances the beauty of the presentation. In the older forms, tattu mettu was never done for the Pallavi and Anupallavi. Tattu mettu was done for the Chittaswara sahitya. The continuity of teermanam-s should also not be broken. Adavu-s should be in proportion to the teermanams. The stage space should be correctly used. Just as the delineation of adavu is important, so also are the lines created when covering the stage. A dancer should not wander on the stage; there are certain prescribed ways of moving which should be respected.

Sahityam and Abhinaya in Varnam

Normally and usually, the Varnam, treats the theme of love and yearning for one's beloved. The story line of Varnam is woven around the anguish and longing expressed by the lovelorn maiden for an ultimate union with the Nayaka who is presented either as the Lord himself (embodied in form of local deity) or the king, in whose praise the Varnam was composed.

Thus the hero can be a God or the king. Often it is description of a passionate woman temporarily ignored, pining or abandoned by her lover. She pleads with him to return to her and attempts to lure him with praise, scolding, images of frustration and sexual

consummation, or whatever else might effectively draw him back. This is all suggestive of earthy pleasures and desires, often quite unabashedly so. On the other hand one may (as is expected to) interpret this appeal in a more spiritual and philosophical vein, as the yearning of Jeevatma / जीवात्मा for Paramatma / परमात्मा (the individual soul for the supreme), the desire of man to be united with god, the passionate entreaty of devotee to deity. This dual approach to love, with its great hungers and profound consummations, is in fact no duality at all, but a recognition that the greatest of man's passions carries him beyond all distinctions of physical and spiritual into the realm of supreme undifferentiated bliss. It is the Hindu conception of love as both passion and freedom from passion.

The Varnam is distinguished from a Shabdham or Kirtanam due to the **Nayaka-Nayika bhava** being its main feature. Relationships between the hero and the heroine are interpreted in terms of Madhura Bhakti or supreme devotion to God through unalloyed love (Sringara). The contents of majority of the Varnams depict **Vipralambha Sringara / विप्रलंभ शृंगार** (love in separation.) There are three major characters in Varnam, Nayika (heroine), Nayaka (hero) and Sakhi (confidante, friend, or even Guru of the heroine.)

The plot of Varnam is set according to the spirit of **Madhura Bhakti / मधुर भक्ति**, where the most refined kind of love is that for the God. Thus, in Varnam the hero is symbolically represented by the Deity or king. Real patrons of those days were kings, chieftains or noblemen. All of them had "Ishta Devata / इष्ट देवता" or the deity whom they worshiped with particular devotion. Thus in sahityam, the image of this deity is used to denote the character. According to BM Sundaram:

"Since the Pada Varna is a product of feudal times, its theme is based on Bhakti and Sringara, as found in Padams. The methods to approach God are many, Madhura bhava or Bhakti Sringara is one of

them. Vipralambha Sringara / विप्रलंभ श्रृंगार (opposite to Sambhoga Sringara) arises pangs of separation and innumerable feelings and emotions, expressed in poetry. That is why this type of Sringara is more employed as theme of Pada varnas." (BM Sundaram)

Varnam is composed as a monologue of the heroine addressed to hero either directly or indirectly through the media of Sakhi, the close companion of the heroine. It is a form of monologue of either the heroine, Sakhi or the hero, addressed to the one the three. Respectively, the following situations are possible:

- Nayika / नायिका addresses Sakhi / सखी regarding the pangs of separation experienced by her (in this case, Sakhi is supposed to be present on stage while the composition is developed.)
- Sakhi speaking on behalf of the Nayika to the Nayaka about the distressful state of the Nayika and requesting him to return to the Nayika (in this case the hero is also supposed to be present of the stage.)
- The Nayika herself making a plea to the Nayaka to alleviate from her sufferings (in this case the presence of the hero is not very certain, as in some composition the hero is the God, thus in this case we have the most pure version of monologue of the heroine addressed to the transcendental divinity.)

- Nayaka expressing his unrequited love to the Nayika. The Nayaka-Nayaki Bhava is portrayed using two kinds of Abhinaya, the **Padartha** and the **Sanchari Abhinaya / संचारी अभिनय**. Rukmini Devi says "The technique through which Bhava or expression manifests itself is called Abhinaya. Abhinaya literally means, to carry forward, that is to convey a sentiment, a story, and a situation to the audience through various means." (Rukmini Devi Arundale)

In Varnam two types of Abhinaya are employed:

1. *Padartha abhinaya / पदार्थ अभिनय* is illustration of direct meaning of sahyam, i.e. "word-to-word" interpretation.

2. *Vachikartha abhinaya* / वाचिकार्थ अभिनय is more elaborated illustration of sahyam (vachikartha lit. means "going with speech"). Its purpose is to give wider context to direct meaning of particular line, i.e. to explain indirect aspects using related mythological stories, associations, etc. Such free interpretation is called Sanchari (lit, roaming round). "**Sanchari**" also implies a depiction of a story indirectly or directly connected to the meaning of the Sahitya.

Padartha usually precedes Sanchari abhinaya. For each line of Sahitya several variations or several different Padartha interpretations are performed followed by one Sanchari. Padartha variations usually take one avartana / आवर्तन (one line of sahyam). Sanchari is performed to two or even more lines of lyrics. Padartha abhinaya is employed within the whole Varnam, and Sanchari is performed only to the lines of Pallavi/Anupallavi and sometimes to Ettugada Pallavi as well.

"Delving a little deeper into the delineation of Padartha, it can be observed that the Padartha is subjected to modifications and improvisations. That is, not always is absolute word-to-word interpretation adhered to. Sometimes a word undergoes modification, by way of depiction of its adjectival form. That is the word "beautiful" can be improvised to depict "one who has fish like eyes" or "one who has long tresses" or "one whose eyebrows are like the bow". This can be said to resemble the Sangati / संगती aspect of music. In other words, the interpretation of the line does not undergo a complete change but is only improvised. While the depiction of Sanchari Bhava is likened to the Niraval / निरावल aspect, wherein the interpretation is from a totally different view point." (Priyashri Rao).

In Varnam, the Pallavi is "the burden of the song." It contains declaration of the love by the Nayika who has come to meet her lord, or question which the heroine strives to resolve, or expression of her

utmost anguish. Thus, the Pallavi gives the start to the whole story. Pallavi comprises a major statement, which opens the drama of relationships. It could be in form of prayer or request, or it could be a question in rhetoric form (Why are you angry?)

Anupallavi continues the theme given in Pallavi and includes identification of the person addressed (the deity or the patron). Usually, there are hints to characteristic qualities of the hero addressed, description of his nature, virtues, and qualities. The mudra of composer occurs in the second half of Anupallavi and it is highlighted by singing this portion once in the beginning after Pallavi and once towards the end after Anubandham. The Anupallavi also may include descriptive details regarding the glory, entrancing beauty, glorious deeds and accomplishments of the hero (this section reminds the Shabdham by structure.)

Muktayi svara sahyam concludes the first part of Varnam. Its function is to summarize the meaning of Pallavi and Anupallavi. Thus, sahyam of Muktayi svara can contain some myth or story taken from life of the hero, which is very illustrative of his character and helps to understand nature of relationship between the hero and the heroine.

Ettugada pallavi is emotionally charged plea of the heroine. Here she reaches the point of her monologue addressed to the hero. She reveals her attachment and discovers her innermost wish. Ettugada pallavi is the heart of Varnam, the most emotionally charged line of sahyam. It expresses the main idea, the message the heroine, which she is trying to convey to her beloved. Often it is formulated as a question (How can I bear the shower of Manmada arrows?), sometimes as imperative sentence (Please, come back my beloved!) Ettugada pallavi contains the essence of the Varnam. It is the most charged sentence of the whole lyrics. Appeal contained in Ettugada Pallavi is the message of the heroine to her hero.

In sahyam of Ettugada svaras, the heroine gives wide picture of her love towards the hero. Using myths or stories as examples, she describes her attitude and relation to the hero. Here she openly

expresses her emotions using metaphors. She refers to similar situations of some mythical or real characters or the hero himself. Ettugada svara sahyam is descriptive, contains additional stories, pleas, pangs of separation and etc., all of which resolve in the same line of Ettugada Pallavi, which is repeated many times as the pledge of the most cherished desire of her heart.

Sahityam of each Ettugada svara is concluded with Ettugada pallavi as intermediate, still unfinished refrain. The nature of Ettugada pallavi is very interesting in this role of "intermediate" conclusion. It give conclusion to the previous line of Ettugada svara sahyam (meaning of each line of svara sahyam can be understood only coupled with Ettugada pallavi.) However, it does not provide final resolution, but gives beginning for the next line of Ettugada svara sahyam.

Anubandham is sung after the last couple of Ettugada svara-Ettugada pallavi. Anubandham could be regarded as being part of Ettugada pallavi, which is sung in full only after completion of all the Ettugada svaras, the same way as in Kritis only the first line of Pallavi is repeated as refrain. Anubandham completes the sentence of Ettugada pallavi.

Earlier, after Anubandham Anupallavi and Mukthayi svara were sung, and composition was concluded finally with Pallavi. The heroine, after opening her heart, still is waiting for an answer of her hero. This dramatic effect is very beautiful. This feature provides possibility to integrate the Varnam into some bigger context such as drama.

Interplay of Music and Lyrics in Varnam

Varnam is versatile composition. It unites four essential components - rhythm, music, poetry, pure dance (nritya) and expressive acting (abhinaya). So what is the contribution of each component, how each aspect affects the spectator, in separate and in combination with the other components?

Rhythm is what we feel by body, music is what we hear, lyrics is what we understand by mind, and finally movement and expression is

what we see. The dance is the key component, as visual representation of the rhythm, music and sahyam.

Rhythm is embedded in both music and lyrics. Rhythm is backbone of the dance. Rhythm connects all the components together. Nattuvanar, the keeper and master of the rhythm, is the director and conductor of the performance, accordingly. Rhythm is also the source of power and energy of the whole ensemble. It controls intensity of the energy released in form of movement of the dancer, sound produced by musical instrument in hands of musicians (including human voice) and power of emotions released by all the members of performance. Interplay of lyrics and music is very interesting problem in the context of the Bhavam / भाव (emotional atmosphere) of the performance.

The general idea of Varnam is love (sringara). The love risen up to transcendental level (Bhakti), which helps the human to reach liberation of illusions and release the best of his or her nature. At the other side, if the music is not very good, even the great poetry would not save the situation. The good part of that simple fact is how carefully composers select ragas for their compositions and how long and hard they work on selecting Varna mettus / वर्ण मेट्टू and setting the tune.

Poetry of symbolism try to convey feelings, moods, and conditions of mind using mechanism of association. Symbol contains no description, instead of that it evokes imagination. Symbol is suggestive and gives freedom for interpretation as well. Symbolists emphasized the musical qualities of verse and believed that all poetry aspires to the condition of music. Thoughts can be expressed in words. Feelings and emotions are subtle, complex, often contradictory and uncertain. Language is not able to express all shades of emotions. Language is linear and one-dimensional. The lexicon is too limited. Descriptions are subjective. Language appeals to logic. Sound breaks through language barrier and transcends logic. In short, language is descriptive, and music is evocative. Varnam

discovers power of vowels and superiority of abstract sound patterns over verbal meaning.

One more interesting thing about Varnam is the existence of two different "centres of gravity" in it, one lies in Pallavi of Purvanga, and the other one in Ettugada pallavi of Uttaranga. The major music theme is the Pallavi itself. The first avartana or even the first phrases of Pallavi are like an embryo and seed of the whole composition. The main theme of Pallavi is developed in Anupallavi, and summed up in Muktai svara. Melodic lines of Ettugada section concentrate on specific areas of the raga. In case of Sahityam situation is different. Ettugada pallavi is the central, the most important poetical line of the Varnam. Pallavi could be considered as preamble, Anupallavi and Muktai svara sahityam (if any) contain descriptive development of the situation. The message and meaning of the composition is given in Ettugada pallavi. Ettugada svara sahityam is insinuating. It elaborates the idea formulated in Ettugada pallavi, projects it on similar mythical situations.

In the Purvanga section melodic aspect dominates. Here emotions and feelings of the heroine are hidden inside and uncertain even for the heroine herself. Sahityam is not very elaborated here, and the underplaying mood (sthayi bhava) is determined by music. As Sahityam do not give clear and exact descriptions, there are many possibilities for imagination and suggestions. Pallavi/Anupallavi concentrates on emotional state of the heroine. Correspondingly, Abhinaya of the first section is more intense and deep, as in Padam. Here rhythm exerts itself in Jathi, clearly separated from musical portions. Thus, music is also given a lot of freedom. Each line is repeated many times with musical Sangati while the dancer performs variations and Sanchari. Muktai svara serves as conclusion of the Purva ranga. At the same time, it is employed as transition, the bridge to the second part of the Varnam.

"In abhinaya, the singer and musicians employ all possible expressive means to unfold shades and nuances of the single line, variations of words, interpretations, feelings arisen by sahityam and melody, and

purely melodic aspect of the composition, Raga bhava, the media in which the composition, melodic patterns and rhythmic patterns live. Raga bhava has strong impact on the Sthayi bhava of the composition in sense expression via music and dance. Alankaras like sangati are the basis for Kai variations (execution of padartha abhinaya using different choreography). Sanchari enriches and intensifies transitory bhavas. It is free flow of the story, interpretation, deviation from strict meaning of sahityam in order to show wider picture, the context of the situation, or to tell some related story”(Priyashree Rao)

In the Uttaranga, Sahityam plays more important part. Music is restricted by rhythm more than in the first section. Sahityam includes more lines than in the first section, and becomes more informative. Sahityam attracts more attention. Padartha abhinaya is predominant in this section. It is empowered by crisp rhythm of Tattu mettus. Meaning of lyrics in this section is clear and precise. The context of the situation, outlined in the first section, makes the situation, condition and inner feeling of the heroine clearer.

In this section, the heroine expresses herself out - she wants to be heard and to be understood by the hero. Here music takes part of vehicle supporting and empowering meaning of the words. Emotional tone (Sthayi Bhava) evoked throughout Purva ranga, like a long and powerful wave, reaches its summit in the second section. Fleet of meanings, expressed in words the heroine addresses to her hero, is carried forward by this wave. Brightness and colourful variety of moods and feelings are characteristic features of Ettugada svara sahityam, included into Uttara ranga section, all of which resolve in Ettugada Pallavi, repeated after each svara.

There is an interesting question regarding Sthayi Bhava in Varnam:

"In the dance, the mood or the Bhava would automatically be that expressed by the Sahitya, which the dancer is interpreting. However it is a question whether there is a single dominant mood (Sthayi Bhava) which is kept sustained throughout the performance of a Varnam. As we have seen, the Varnam form alternates between

Teermanam-s containing meaningless syllables, Sahitya and meaningless Svara passages. During Sahitya passages we occasionally also see the presence of Tattu mettu. In such a structure it would be difficult to expect the sustenance of a single Bhava. The presence of a single dominant mood might be the feature of a padam or a Javali, but perhaps not a Varnam.

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