

## **Vasanthotsava - Dances of the Spring Festival in Vijayanagar Times**

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Innumerable accounts of the glorious period of Vijayanagar Empire with particular reference to the spring festival, Vasantotsava are found given by many historians and foreign travelers. The history of Vijayanagar is so rich that it offers more attempts of interpretation with a fresh perspective. The Vijayanagar times was a golden era for all art forms, especially, the dance and music as both these forms reached their pinnacle during this period. Royal Patronage was largely responsible for the thriving of these art forms. The rulers of Vijayanagar Empire were connoisseurs of music and dance and were themselves exponents of various art forms. Their knowledge of these art forms can be evidenced in the work of Venkataramanayya, "Vasantotsava during the Vijayanagar times was a grand celebration of the king's power. During the rule of Sri Krishnadevaraya, a typical Classical Sanskrit drama- "Jambhavathi Kalyana" was written and attributed to King Krishnadevaraya, which was enacted annually at the capital city. (Venkataramanayya:1986: 412)

Thriving of dance and music during the period cannot be solely attributed to the royal patronage, as it was also a reflection of times, when the people under the rule of Vijayanagar were happy and prosperous. A peep into the history reveals the democratic, secular and benevolent characters of the rulers. All these attributes along with their exploits have been chronicled by Abdul Razak; who says, "The pupil of the eye has never seen a place like it and the ear of intelligence has never been informed that there existed anything to equal" this city in the world. (Suryanath Kamath:2004:47)." Domingo Paes says "Cost of it all is not to be wondered as there is so much money in the land and the chiefs are so wealthy".(Suryakanth Kamath:2004:49). The influence of their rule over people, was such that, they would voluntarily involve and participate in all festivities. It was a norm to celebrate all seasons and occasions and the prime place among them was accorded to the spring season.

After a cold hiatus in winter, nature unfolds in its full splendor to provide a vibrant ambience after months of dullness. It is a season of expression of joy which also brings out the romantic feelings. Man has learnt to respond to this bountiful creation and celebrate its beauty. It is a season for festivities and enjoyment. These changes in nature generates a sense of optimism in people. This season also sets the imagination wild and brings out the best in poets. In sync with the nature, man celebrates the onset of this season. The celebration found expression in the form of dance, music and rituals during the Vijayanagar times called Vasantotsava.

Vasantotsava was held annually in the months of April and May or the Chaitra Maasa (according to the Hindu calender). Ahobala, an author of the Vijayanagar times has given a detailed account of the elaborate celebrations in his work Virupaksha Vasantotsava Champu. "He describes a Vasantotsava referred to variously as Vasantotsava, Caitrotsava ,Rathotsava, Mrgayotsava and Virupakshadevamahotsava which is said to last for nine days in spring"(Anderson:2005:175).) "The words Vasantha and Madhu mean spring and the month of chaitra is also called 'Madhumasa'. The text of the Vijayanagar times of medieval India 'Virupaksha Vasanthotsava Champu' mentions that Vasantotsava is an annual festival performed on the full moon day of 'Madhu Masa'/Madhava masa".(Anderson:2005;189) .Madanotsava Kamotsava and Madanatravayodashi are variants of Vasantotsava during which the Hindu God of love and desire, Kama is worshipped especially by the royal women. This is evident in the sculptures of Vijayanagar times where panels of Madana with his consort Rati are found as noticed in the Vijaya Vittala temple and Mahanavami Dibba. Thus "Vasantotsava, is one of the multitude of celebrations which punctuates the ancient and medieval festival calendars" (Anderson:2005:1)

The performing arts, dance and music were patronized and promoted extensively by the Vijayanagar kings. They played a prominent role in the Spring Festival and they participated both in temple rituals and public entertainment programmes during Vasantotsava. As it was a community celebration, group performances

Dance sculptures and the literary works of the period enumerate the nuances and intricacies of the time and display aesthetic sense of the artistes. The traditional dance style 'Margi' transitioned to the regional style 'desi' through the codified language of dance and music. Group choreography with breath-taking patterns gained importance those times. Though there are references of desi dance forms in the 9<sup>th</sup> century itself, it gained importance only during the Vijayanagar times.

Group dances were popular during the Vijayanagar period could be due to multitude of reasons. Firstly, could be the mass appeal it generates with a group minimum 16 to 64 dancers of both genders dancing in pairs

in beautifully choreographed geometric patterns. The visual effect of these dances was spectacular with the dancers in colourful and glittering costumes with multitude of props. The spectator could easily relate to the subject being portrayed. Secondly, might be that people with lesser dancing abilities could also join and participate in such group performances and thus deriving satisfaction of being part of festivities. Thus the dance of Vasantotsava is the colourful extravaganza of seasonal significance. The holi dance is the most popular folk form of dancing throughout India. The royals, commoners and courtesans took part in the festival with great enthusiasm. However, the sculptural representation of the dance of spring festival is quite interesting and the entire sequence can be visualized by graceful sculptures on the walls, pillars, ceilings, door jambs and basement portions of Vijayanagar temple architecture. (Nandagopal: 1990, 106)

### **I. Vasantotsava In Sculptures And Literature Of Vijayanagar Times:**

“The Temple architecture is a barometer for measuring the standards of cultural life during the ancient and medieval times”. (Nandagopal: 1990, 162). The sculptures stand as a testimony that the Vijayanagar period was a fertile ground for the development of the popular regional dance forms. Exhaustive, aesthetic documentation in the temple sculptures, choreographic details and techniques recorded in the literary works of the period give a beautiful picture to visualize and understand the art better. The Nriya-lakshana and Nriya lakshya and poetic texts of the medieval times, focusing during the Vijayanagar and post Vijayanagar period, reflect on the contemporary cultural scene. From these sources, a clear picture can be drawn of the dance forms as reported in Sanskrit treatises and regional texts.

### **II. Nritta Ratnavali And Vasantotsava**

The 13<sup>th</sup> century exclusive nriya-lakshana treatise ‘Nritta ratnavali’, by Jayasenapathi, an elephant commander/military general in the army serving the Kakatiya dynasty ruler Sri Ganapathi raja is a useful source for the Vasantotsava dances and compositions, which is clear and explicit. He has recorded minute aspects of both music and dance elements of these the dances performed during Vasantotsava. It appears that he was a direct witness to the performances and has accounted the details completely.

In the seventh chapter ( Rao,Thakore:2013:412-418) Jayasenapathi defines Rasakam, Natyarakam, Carcari prabhandhas and Dandararakam all pertaining to the celebratory dance performances spring festival. According to Jayasenapathi, rasakam, the first of the three forms, is to be performed in the Pindibhandha<sup>1</sup> form by experienced, young, dancers in pairs of 8,12,16 and dressed appropriately, exhibit various caris<sup>2</sup> entering from either sides of the stage in tune with the musical instruments, the sangeeta vadyas. Jayasenapathi further explained about the features of music for the rasakam. These compositions were in regional languages set to regional melodic tunes specially composed for the occasion with emphasis on joyous spirit.

The singers have to render Carcari prabhandhas<sup>3</sup> in desi suda<sup>4</sup> ragas, in appropriate mood suitable to the spring season. The choreography included a plethora of mandalas, khandas<sup>5</sup>, caris, gesticulations to the lyrics, moving with the rhythm in beautiful formation. While performing rasaka, the entry and exit of the dancers on the stage has to be flawless, singing Carcari prabhandhas in ‘dvipadi and ‘varnataala’. The equivalent to carcari prabhandhas is known as jajara in some of the Telugu texts on Vasantotsava. Further Jayasenapathi explains that the carcari prabhandhas extol the presiding king’s valour and greatness and the dancers must enter singing the carcari songs holding musical instruments and dance in circular patterns.

Natyarakam is another desi dance form, where in groups of youthful dancers or heroines dance in a state of intoxication, praising the king through gestural language -padarthabhinaya.<sup>6</sup> The songs adapted to natyarakam are lullabies in regional languages. While Dandararakam is a form of group performance during spring which is performed with sticks in hand by even number of pair of dancers, usually in multiples of 4 -24. In some variations, fly-whisks, daggers are held by the dancers in one hand and sticks in the other. The instrumentalists have to play melodious music to which dancers have to perform choreographic patterns including lasyangas<sup>7</sup>, brahmaris<sup>8</sup> caris utplavanas<sup>9</sup>, circling movements with the accompaniment of striking of sticks. Khandams or dance segments must be continued along with elegant leaps to the left and right hand sides. Specific strokes of the sticks must create the required beats. The author explains that the songs were composed

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<sup>1</sup> AChoreographic pattern prescribed in the Nayasatra

<sup>2</sup> Prescribed leg movements in the Nayasatra

<sup>3</sup> A specially structured musical composition

<sup>4</sup> Regional melodic scales different from codified one

<sup>5</sup> Segments of a set of dance movements

<sup>6</sup> Word to word meaning

<sup>7</sup> Graceful prescribed movements

<sup>8</sup> Prescribed circling movements

<sup>9</sup> Prescribed jumps and leaps

in praise of the king's virtues. Dances were to be performed by experienced dancers. Muraj, the percussion instrument is similar to today's dhol<sup>10</sup> is popularly used both in south Indian and north Indian stick dances.

### III. Vasantotsava In Telugu Literature:

In his essay 'Sankirtana Lakṣaṇamu, a combination of Lakṣya with Lakṣaṇa' by Salva Krishnamurthy discusses the contents of the work 'Sankirtanalakṣaṇamu' by Cinna Tirumalācārya, has a reference to Jājara. He makes a statement that 'the word 'Jājara' is a derivative of the word 'Caccari' in Sanskrit'. Further, the description of Jājārapāṭālu being connected with Vasantōtsava. In Bhīmakhāṇḍam, a work by Śrīnātha, the court poet of Reddy Kings (written in the early part of the 15<sup>th</sup> century) the following verse is found:

#### This verse equates Caccari to Jājara

Jājara jājara ansu mṛḍu caccari gītulu Vāruṅiraśāsvāda madātīrēkamuna candrika kāyaga Dakṣavāṭilō vīdhula vīdhulan Kanaka vīṅalu mīṭucu pāḍiraṅganal

The above verse describes the spirit of the spring season. The people in the spring season get intoxicated with love, hit by madana<sup>11</sup> in the ecstatic moonlight, in the streets of Dakṣa vatika, one can hear the melodious playing of the golden stringed veena. The 1<sup>st</sup> line says jajara means caccari songs and this verse is an example of a 'Jājara' poem, with 16 mātra-s in a line.

Nācana Sōmana is a poet of the 14<sup>th</sup> century known for his work 'Uttara Harivaṃṣam' (composed in 1344 AD) has also authored a work entitled 'Vasanta Vilāsa' which is not available however, a verse from this text is quoted by Sri Veturi Prabhakara Sastry in his introduction to the 'Uttara Harivaṃṣa' edited by him and published in the early twentieth century.

Vīṅā gānamu ventela teṭa Rāṅāmīraga ramaṅula pāṭa Prāṅamaina tīna brāhmaṅu vīṭa Jāṅalu metturu Jājara Pāṭa

The music from the veena in the moonlight and the profound songs of love by the ladies are very close to the heart of the young Brahmin boys and the experts praise such attraction and expression of love. They tell us about the seasonal features and the moods of the people during the spring season. The playing of the veena, the moonlight, love songs define the ambience of the season of love and an aura of excitement.

#### Vijayanagar Sculptures And Vasantotsava

Art Historian Choodamani Nandagopal has researched on the sculptural panels of Vasantotsava during Vijayanagar times, covering the temples of Hampi, Tadapatri, Penukonda and Srisailam in her book, 'Dance and Music in Temple Architecture. It is one of the sources to study the sculptures on this subject. Vasantotsava was a monumental and extravagant event in Vijayanagar times. The study on sculptures provide details that proves the fact of fondness of celebrating Vasantotsava in those days. The awe-inspiring sculptures in the temples of the period, the majestic Mahanavami Dibba, the superb kolata sequences, the impressive dance techniques captured in the ceilings and the stone panels expressive of Holi festival, give us the grand picture of the lifestyle of the Vijayanagar kings and their interest towards the celebration of the Vasantotsava. Here a few selected sculptures of Vasantotsava are illustrated in the Appendix.

#### Virupaksha Temple:

The Virupaksha temple is the oldest and only functioning temple in the present Hampi, the capital city Vijayanagar Empire. On the ceiling of the right exit of the sukanasi, a beautiful Dandarasaka<sup>12</sup> sequence is carved in stone. In this sequence dancers are in a circle with defined movements, posing in tribhangi<sup>13</sup>. The dancers strike the sticks with fine bending and on kuncitha pada<sup>14</sup> stances. (Picture - 1)

#### Krishna Temple

The Krishnaswamy temple was built by Sri Krishnadevaraya to commemorate his victorious return from the campaign in Orissa. On the ceiling of the ranga mantapa in the suksnasi<sup>15</sup>, an intricate kolata circular panel is found where the movement and binding are in complicated form and pairs are dancing in unison. The practice of mixed acting and male-female dancing together was not uncommon during Vijayanagar times. (Nandagopal: 1990, 107) The right hand meets the left hand of the other dancer at the top while the left hand of one meets the right hand of the other at the waist level. The dancers seem to be in kuncitha<sup>16</sup> position with the right leg and the other leg is in oblique position. Examples of Dandarasaka and Natarasaka. (Picture -2).

<sup>10</sup> A percussion instrument used in Indian stick dances

<sup>11</sup> Lord of love –synonym to kama,manmatha

<sup>12</sup> Stick dance

<sup>13</sup> A kind of graceful posture

<sup>14</sup> A prescribed stance

<sup>15</sup> Hall in front of sanctum Sanatorium in temples

<sup>16</sup> Toes bent at an angle aesthetically-prescribed standing posture

### **Hazara Rama Temple**

The Hazara Rama temple was built exclusively for the use of the members of royal family. Here, the main attraction is the eastern exterior walls with a neat display of kolata and Vasantotsava dance patterns. Here, the pairs of dancers are visualized shifting their hands and leg movements swiftly. The supple and flexible bends to reach each other in order to strike their sticks is very prominently sketched in stone (Picture - 3). The second row from the top is exclusively kolata sequences where the dancers have taken the movements to their opposite directions in Urdhvajanu chari and bent their body forming a beautiful arch. Their crossed hands meet with their sticks, thus forming a splendid pattern. The lady percussionists are indicating the rhythm (Ibid: 108). Further, on the northern walls, the second row shows more prominently the festivities of holi – mixing the colours in small containers. In this panel, musicians on either side are adding on to the celebration by playing their wind instrument. The setting seems to be in a garden. (Picture - 4)

### **Mahanavami Dibba**

Also known as the Victory stone, grand celebrations especially during Dasara were held here. Facing the Mahanavami Dibba, three tanks are located of which two are large and one is small. In the small tank, saffron-coloured water was prepared for Vasantotsava. The very first panel which catches the eye is of Vasantotsava. In this panel, dancers are mixing and sprinkling colour on each other. Two dancers enact as Rati and Manmantha, wielding floral arrows and announcing the arrival of season of love. (Pictures,5-6).

In the next panel, a male dancer accompanies two female dancers, which draws a parallel to rasaka. This rare sculpture portrays the male dancer in vaishkshaka sthana,<sup>17</sup> with a pot of coloured water in hand, which is indicative of the holi festival. Two differently dressed damsels flank him on either side in different poses, the one on the right more richly dressed than the other. Perhaps they are Rati and Manmatha characters involved in the enactment. (Picture - 7)

### **Vijaya Vittala Temple**

The Vijaya vittala temple complex is well known for its architecture. It houses the stone chariot, the Natya mantapa and the Kalyana mantapa. An ideal example of dandarasaka is found in the main Natya Mantapa<sup>18</sup>. Props like cloth, flower streamers, daggers and fly whisks in left hand and sticks in the right hand are held by the dancers as documented in the treatise Nartana Nirnaya. Kunchita in one leg and urdhvajanu<sup>19</sup> in the other leg seem to be the pattern followed. (Pictures 8 and 9) The Rati Manmatha panel is found on the southern side of the temple basements. The two are found riding parrots, with Manmatha wielding the bow and Rati with a fly whisk in hand. This shows the existence of Madana dwadasi or Madana Puja as part of Vasantotsava. (Picture -10). In this sequence, two women are found on either side of a water tub with a male member dipped in the colored water, a contemporary style of playing holi. (Picture - 11)

### **Huchapparaya Mutt**

In this age-old mutt, panels are engraved on the upper part of the mantapa. The panel shows the dancers following the pindibhanda pattern (shrinkala and lata). The dancers seem to be actively involved in the festivities of Vasantotsava. An animated, passion is expressed in the panels. (Picture -12).

## **IV. Conclusion**

The sculptures express the ethos and cultural richness of the Vijayanagar Empire. These sculptures portray the life styles and trends of the times. One can infer that the performing arts and visual arts were given importance in the society and was the necessary patronage was extended by the Vijayanagar rulers. As studied in the literary works, similarities were found between the attributes of Vasantotsava dances, props and the choreographed movements used by the dancers in the temple panels..

The variants of Vasantotsava were celebrated as Madanotsava, and the Holi festival, the prevalent festivities in those times, which are proved with the sculptural evidences identified in the temple architecture of Vijayanagar period. All the historians and travelers who have documented the Vasantotsava are in praise of the rule of the Vijayanagar kings as well as the grandeur of the festival. The Vasantotsava dances are indeed worth adapting on to today's stage.

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<sup>17</sup> A prescribed standing posture

<sup>18</sup> Dance Hall

<sup>19</sup> Prescribed leg posture –lifted in an angle aesthetically

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