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KṢETRAYYA, THE POET-MUSICIAN

Kṣetrayya is one of the three illustrious Vāggeya-kāras, the other two being Annamācārya and Tyāgarāja. These three have given a new dimension to Telugu poetry by making it a spontaneous, overflow of powerful emotions. This emotional content is in the realm of *bhakti*.

Kṣetrayya, originally Mōvva Varadayya, comes of a cultured Niyogi family in Movva. Movva named after the great sage Maudgalya, in Krishna district, occupies a central position with Srikakulam - the capital of the first Andhra kings on one side, and on the opposite side it has Kuchipudi - the centre for Bharatanāṭyam. Kṣetrayya must have studied in Kuchipudi along with Mohanāngī, a *devadāsī*, dedicated to the worship of Movva Gopāla. She is a temple dancer, but well learned and Kṣetrayya develops a fascination for her and both happen to worship Movva Gopāla with implicit faith in him. They love each other because of their artistic sensibilities. Kṣetrayya composes songs and she sets them

to dance. This love of Kṣetrayya for Mohanāṅgī creates tensions in the village and it looks as though he has to leave the village. In his perplexity and puzzlement Kṣetrayya prays to Movva Gopāla. Revelation comes to him from Movva Gopāla instructing him to propagate *bhakti* and ennoble people through his *padams*. He is blessed by the Lord.

With great faith in Movva Gopāla Kṣetrayya starts his odyssey of life, even though parting from Mohanāṅgī becomes unbearable. He first visits Golconda then ruled by Abdulla Kutub Shah, a lover of music and dance and a patron of poets. The court intrigues, the amorous glances of Kamalā, the court dancer, no doubt displease Kṣetrayya, but he resists the temptations of the court and moves on to Kanchi.

Next to his worship of Movva Gopāla is his adoration for Kanchi Varada because he is named after him. One night he is locked in the temple and in the early hours of the morning he visualizes the great scene of the Lady leaving the Lord in the morning after having spent the night with Him. This is one of the glorious *padams* of Kṣetrayya, picturesque and imaginative.

His next visit is to Madurai and he is treated with affection by Tirumala Nāyaka. He writes nearly 2000 *padams* while in Tirumala Nāyaka's court. Finally he moves on to Thanjavur where he is received with pomp and ceremony by the ruler Vijayarāghava Nāyaka. Vijayarāghava becomes deeply attached to Kṣetrayya and treats him with great regard and esteem. Even though the court poets have been in his court for years and lavish rich praise on the king everyday, they are given only a secondary position. This hurt the court poets

for they cannot appreciate the naked Śṛṅgāra and the colloquial style in Kṣetrayya's *padams*. Nor can they understand why the king is so fond of him despite Kṣetrayya's address to the king in the first person and as a Vītarāya. This leads to an unhealthy competition and Kṣetrayya has to accept the challenge and offer a *padam* to be completed by the court poets. He leaves for Rameswaram and he is away from the court for three months. The court poets get into a frenzied mood for they are great scholars with no understanding of men and matters. What will be the reaction of a woman who expects her lover to come any minute, but finally gets frustrated because he does not turn up? She sees others enjoying the company of their lovers. The court poets cannot imagine the state of that woman. When Kṣetrayya returns they admit their defeat and he himself completes the *padam* in a simple, yet suggestive manner. Vijayarāghava becomes immediately pleased with Kṣetrayya and honours him as Kṣetrajñā, one who is identified with the Lord.

On his return journey with Mohanāṅgi, reunited to him in Thanjavur, Kṣetrayya visits Golconda only to get into a strange situation. The Nawab offers a challenge that Kṣetrayya has to compose 1500 *padams* in 40 days, as Tulasimūrti, the court poet, admits his inability to perform that formidable task. Mūrti and Kamalā try to divert Kṣetrayya's attention by giving him a love potion, but finally Kṣetrayya fulfils his obligation. Revelation is given to him again and he is commissioned by Movva Gopāla to return to Movva after visiting a few more sacred places like Srisailam and Tirupati. On a Kṛṣṇāṣṭamī day Kṣetrayya and Mohanāṅgī reach Movva. The celebration reaches its great heights when a

halo appears over Kṣetrayya's head and he becomes one with Movva Gopāla. Mohanāngī while dancing leans on him and becomes one with him. This scene reminds us of Milton's description of Adam and Eve in *Paradise Lost*, Book IV, where he says, he for God only, she for God in him. To Mohanāngī Kṣetrayya is God, and to him Movva Gopāla is the supreme Lord. I have followed this imaginative reconstruction of Kṣetrayya's life in my fourth novel, *The Bliss of Life* (translated into Telugu as *Kṣetrayya*). The bliss of life for Kṣetrayya is rapture divine and a mystic elation from a physical to a spiritual plane.

The one obvious feature in Kṣetrayya's *padams* is the Śṛṅgāra element presented in its most realistic manner. Śrīnādhā introduces Śṛṅgāra in his poetry. This is enlarged and overdone by *Prabandha* writers in the time of Kṛṣṇadevarāya. *Manucaritra*, *Vasucaritra* and other romances of the time describe elaborately and vividly the scenes of love making in the night time. So it is said that in the Telugu romances what the sun does not see, the poet sees. This is the usual comment made on these descriptive accounts of naked Śṛṅgāra or physical love in the *Prabandhas*.

Śṛṅgāra is of two types: *saṃyoga* and *vipralambha*, the first one describes fruition in love with all its pleasures, the second one refers to the suffering that comes to the lovers through separation. Kṣetrayya adds a new phase of Śṛṅgāra, devotional love or *madhura-bhakti*, where the poet becomes the bride and the Lord is the groom. The bride waits for her lover sometimes in hope and sometimes in despair. All the varied emotional experiences of lovers are given an imaginative expression and invariably this love transcends the limitations of

physical love for it does not figure at the human level. It is like the doctrine of the divine spouse in Christianity or like the bridal mysticism in the poetry of the metaphysical poets of the 17th century in English literature, where the poet is the bride longing for communion with the Lord, the groom.

Kṣetrayya follows the literary conventions of his day, partly based on Jayadeva's *Aṣṭapadī* and Annanācārya's *Śṛṅgāra-kīrtanas*. He presents the sublime, devotional love in a pure, simple, homely language. These *padams* are extremely musical, with a literary flourish and a dance potential. They can be sung rapturously and for the first time Kṣetrayya shows the innate quality of the *padams* being set to dance.

Kṣetrayya thus brings poetry to the common man and makes him enjoy the rich imaginative pictures gloriously intermixed with the spoken language. We are told that in Thanjavur even the milkmen going about the streets in the morning used to sing the *padams* of Kṣetrayya joyously. His *padams* reveal that he has read *Rasamañjarī* thoroughly. The kings and patrons naturally like the *śṛṅgāra* element and Kṣetrayya would have catered to the popular taste. But the poet has his sublime moments for every *padam* is a sacred offering to Movva Gopāla. He may be visiting Raṅganāthasvāmī in Srirangam or any other Lord any where else, but his *padams* remarkably take us to Movva Gopāla. We are in the world of devotional love, inspirational poetry for a divine spouse. We also get involved in the *śṛṅgāra* element in his *padams*. We are in two worlds, the mundane and the divine, as we listen to Kṣetrayya's *padams* or see them set to dance. Kṣetrayya never refers to his ancestry as the poets of his day invariably have done. He has

no identity of his own, he is a part of the *prapatti* tradition that makes him surrender himself to His will. This is sublimation of desires of the purest type. Kṣetrayya excels everyone else in Telugu poetry in his willing surrender to Movva Gopāla as his Lord Supreme. This surrender to the Lord, as envisaged in the *Gītā* or in Milton's *Paradise Lost* is the highest and noblest form of human existence. And this is Kṣetrayya's sublime love for Movva Gopāla.

Kṣetrayya's *padams* have a place in folk literature. The sweetness and the melody in these poetical compositions make them enduringly rich in their appeal to the common man as well as to the elite and the sophisticated. Kṣetrayya's *padams* especially have an immediacy and relevance for they insist on an unswerving loyalty to God, and as long as human nature believes in the rightness and the justness of God, these *padams* with their rich music dance potential and literary flourish will be a source of aesthetic pleasure and spiritual illumination.