

Performing Histories of Abhyudayamu and Yakśagānamu: Reading Performance and Performative Literatures of Early Modern South India as Historiography

Swarnamalya Ganesh

Abstract

Scholars have established over the past decades that the tradition of historiography in South Asia was not altogether a Western import. This has allowed us to revisit South Indian vernacular literary texts in a new light. Historians A. K. Warder, Romila Thaper, Nicholas Dirks, and the trio of Sanjay Subramaniam, Velcheru Narayana Rao, and David Shulman have argued eloquently in their writing about seeing Indian literature as serious sources of historical evidence. For example, the trio identify sources such as Karanam-s (service gentry who were book keepers/accountants), Raya Vācakamū-s (chronicles of Vijayanagara Kings), and Tārikh-s (modern members of society who wrote history), all seemingly non-traditional sources authored by ministers, court chroniclers, accountants, army chieftains, and others as important materials. I further this argument to investigate the vernacular performative literatures of Abhyudayamu-s in the yakśagānamu style, from early Modern Tañjāvur. Raghunātha-abhyudayamu, a Telugu Yakśagānamu text written by Vijayarāghava Nāyaka in the seventeenth century, records the daily life of his father Raghunātha Nāyaka.

Abhyudayamu is in the versified prose format of dvipada (poetic metre). It enumerates the genealogy, lifestyle, events, people, and place, as well as the escapades of the King. It literally sequences the dawn-to-dusk life of the Telugu Nāyaka King. The Raghunātha-abhyudayamu, is written in the yakśagānamu genre and has a distinct performative quality with song and dance as its central modes of expression. Performing the yakśagānamu, which extolls Raghunātha's greatness through historic conquests, administrative prowess, warfare genius, processions, cultural and romantic alliances was a way to report history. It was also the assertion of kinship and identity by the Bahujan (historically serving class) Nayaka Kings. Performing the yakśagānamu daily in open court must be read as layered modes of embedding historic memory in public consciousness.

While some of the performative literatures have been brought to light in the past, through publications and discourse, it is in fact in the experience of performance that vestibules the past into the future that cultural memories are built. Parts of the performed rendition are embedded as videos in this article for illustrative purposes. This study, is therefore a reading of literature

complimented by embodied practice, that is rendered as performing histories: enacted literary performances imbuing the interpretive tools for cultural research.

Introduction

The performance of music and dance and the performance of text are discourses—verbal and visible representations of history. In the past few decades, many historians have argued emphatically to refute theories that assert that Indian society, in its past, is an unchanging consortium of villages ruled by despotic kings and all other theories based on the Hagelian dialectic. To counter the view, held by Orientalists and Indologists, that India lacked historicity, new evidence from archeologically-sourced reading materials, epigraphical data, as well as substantial historical data from literary sources such as *Kāvya-s*, *Itihāsa-s*, and *Purāna-s* was collected.

Scholars like Sheldon Pollock asserted that India's "ahistoricity" itself is historical (Pollock 1988) while the trio Sanjay Subrahmanyam, Velchuri Narayana Rao, and David Shulman established the firm presence of a historical consciousness among the early modern southern societies through readings of vernacular and local literary source texts as historiography (Rao, Subrahmanyam, Shulma 2003). In these readings, they persuasively argue to regard literary texts as intellectual history of the expansion of time and space—particularly, the time world. Although the two are inseparably connected, acquiring knowledge and accepting beliefs that enable people—not only historians—to find within it and be influenced by patterns of true or imagined events is key (Becker 222). Further they trace the components of historicity in literature via the following: (1) as the creation and activation of a regal, transcendental identity, (2) as the localization of this identity in time and space, and (3) as the aesthetic experiencing of this identity in court through poetic forms (Shulman and Rao 117).

In many of these literary works, a publicly-ritualized, partly divine and partly human identity is constructed of the hero and his courtly characters, who become generative sources and who enact events that include artillery battle, military and political successes (and occasionally failures and betrayals), cultural experiences at court and in the kingdom, and erotic scenarios. These texts often also image the hero's habits as well as the

values and meaningful norms of his society which are made visible through the works (Shulman 1989). To read, perform, or spectate on the performance of such literary/performative texts means a recollection of such values and norms of the society in which the hero was idealized. As pointed out by many reputed scholars, taking the James Mill route and disregarding such texts as entirely opposed to ideas of "dynamic progress" and seeing them merely as couched in some traditional unchanging despotic rule was limiting the ways we read the past. However, it is equally limiting to regard such texts as a reservoir in which traces of the past are gradually deposited by some ongoing spontaneous process (Thaper 326). It is, therefore, more useful to see such works as historical products of cultural mnemotechniques and mnemotechnologies, which range from commemorative rituals to historical writing (Rigney 326). Yurii Lotman, one of the initiators of the "cultural memory" concept, had already emphasized in 1985 that "memory is not for the culture a passive depository, but part of its mechanism of textual creation" (Lotman 676) (Tamm 501). The trio historians mentioned above, while analyzing the historiographical attributes of early modern South India, have used a lens of Jan Assmann that propounds that cultural memory stays long after the actual event has faded, and lasts in the society through collective consciousness. Cultural memory, in Jan Assmann's definition, "comprises that body of reusable texts, images, and rituals specific to each society in each epoch, whose 'cultivation' serves to stabilize and convey that society's self-image." To further the argument that text and the performance of text embeds cultural memory, we shall use "reusable" as our operative word from the above definition and return to it in the section below.

Who Can Read these Texts?

Historiographical texts are written to invoke collective memory and consciousness and, without a sensible rooting to the culture, the narrative might just fade away. Therefore, in post-colonial India, invoking cultural sensibilities is often associated with the creation of a sense of nationalism. But in the case of many such texts, particularly ones that emerge from courtly traditions, these texts were meant to invoke a sense of pride, prestige, and belonging to pre-nation-state Kingdoms and the reader/viewer would experience his/her own identity through the reading/performance. In their modern reading, such identities and sense of belonging is often circled back towards nationalistic pride. However, we are interested in the question: In courtly worlds, in the time when such literatures were written, who could read these texts? As Shulman and Rao

point out, the hero or the central character (invariably the reigning King) would be compared to mythological figures whose virtues are superimposed upon the life of the living King, thus tracing his mythical genealogy to the race of the Divine. "He is divine and yet the paradigmatic devotee. The works showcase him playing these roles explicitly, for without such highly dramatized prescriptions, the poems cannot be truly brought to life" (Velchuru Narayana Rao 118). The reader/viewer is then called upon to see the connections to the mythic pasts inscribed on the present. The works of *Nāma-s*, *Kaifiyatu-s*, *Vāchakam-s*, and the *Abhyudayamu-s*, where liberties of expanding the scope of the past in ways that suited the present were taken, the reader was required to encounter the text as a continuation of the images, rituals, and values of their respective societies.

Often, such an enterprise was made possible to all members of the courtly world and the larger kingdom, not by the circulation of the work in text form, but as performance, a collective recitation and reading experience. Therefore, the readers of *Abhyudayamu* literatures were the actual readers, or the audiences who watched the work being performed every day, not the few who read it once or even a few times as a text. In watching, they participated in the culling of cultural memory. As Assmann points out, "via texts, images, and rituals, unique to their world and helping cultivate their society's self-image," the viewer became the reader. It is through such readers who were also viewers and to whom I shall reference henceforth in this essay as reader/viewer that works like the *Abhyudayamu-s* became subjacent portrayals of what counted as real and as potential cultural memory.

Raghunāthābhyudayamu

Raghunāthābhyudayamu, the daily life of King *Raghunātha Nāyaka* who ruled between 1600-1634 from *Tañjāvur*, was written by his son and successor, *Vijayarāghava Nāyaka*. This is the chosen work for this project. Much like his Telugu land predecessors, the *Kakatiyas (Pratāparudra etc)*, *Vijayarāghava* brought within the recollection of the reader/viewer, the classical aesthetic ideals extolled through the narratives of classical *Kāvya* characters like that of *Rāma* and *Krśna*. Further, he created an experience of this ideal as realities of the *Nāyaka* court. However, the loose distinction between patron, composer of the work, and the hero of the work makes for such memories of the classical ideals to be reinvented and actualized in vastly different ways from their original classical versions (Shulman 1989). The prestigious image of *Rāma* that *Raghunātha* plays, as seen in the *Abhyudayamu*, was almost always

more glamorous in comparison to the classical version of *Rāma*. Thus, he takes the credit for enhancing these divinations in a contemporary image of the self he portrayed. As a conceptual device, *Raghunātha* becomes the experience of an “exemplary character both divine and human, an idealized construct and not merely a breathing King” (Shulman 122). Cultural memory is governed by a logic of relevance that gives priority to certain aspects of the past and sidelines others. Therefore, *Raghunāthābhyudayamu* focuses on the multiple ways in which images of a *Nāyaka* King are communicated to and shared among the members of their community, highlighting the importance of remembering certain parts of their past as real, and forgetting or ignoring others.

A good example of this would be to consider their genealogy; the *Taṅjāvuri Nāyakas* were *adappam-s* (betel leaf box holders) and *vāsal-s* (door holders) for the Vijayanagara kings. It was from this position that they rose to the rank of military leader, ultimately winning the faith of the Telugu emperors to become feudatories— independent but subservient overlords (*Nāyakas*) in the Tamil lands. Different factions of the *Nāyakas* ruled from Gingee, Madurai, and *Taṅjāvur*. Though each of them trace their lineage to different Telugu-speaking communities, the seminal shift that happened for the Tamil country upon the arrival of the *Nāyakas* was the shift in the ruling class. Ruled by the *Cōla*, *Pāndya*, and their subordinate branches, all *Kśhatriya* (warrior clan) rulers and the Tamil country came into the hands of the Vijayanagara kings by the fifteenth century. The chief ruler of the Vijayanagara Kingdoms at this time, emerged from the *Sūdra* (service clan) Tuluva dynasty, a so-called low caste order considered historically ineligible to rule. . They, in turn, enabled the lineage of the Balija community leaders—through *Timma*, his son *Sevappa*, and others—to rule *Taṅjāvur*. In all of the official chronicles, epithets, and inscriptions of the *Nāyaka* kings, they proclaim themselves as “*çaturtha gōtra putra*,” sons of the fourth varna/*gōtra* or class. They also often refer to their Kingship as “*Mannāru gōtra putra*,” sons of the King of *Mannāru*. The King of *Mannāru* is the presiding deity of *Mannārgudi* in Tamilnadu-Sri *Rājagōpalaswāmy*, whose lineage is traced to the *Gōpala* or *Yādava*, cowherd community, again, of the *Sūdra* order. Through these assertions, the *Nāyaka* established the dominance of the bahunjan social, political, and aesthetic values in the society they ruled. Interesting is the fact that the performing artists who identified with the agrarian (*Isai Vellālar*) caste were a rung above the rulers in the *Nāyaka* court in caste hierarchy.

In the genealogical segment of the text *Raghunāthābhyudayamu*, *Vijayarāghava* is instructed by his courtier and *Guru Tatācārya* to invoke lineage from that of the divine as *Raghunātha*. *Raghunātha* was born to *Achutappa Nāyaka and Mūrtimāmba*, his consort, through the divine grace of God, who bestows upon this child great powers to rule the world. On one hand, *Raghunātha* is unapologetic about their bahunjan social status and on the other, *Raghunātha* is elevated through divination, to the status which makes him desirable and a divine blessing coveted by any woman. *Raghunātha*’s rise to fame and power and his military prowess and successes in the battle fields are literalized through metaphors that compare him to *Lord Rāma*.

One example, as seen in the Sanskrit work by the name *Raghunāthanāyakābhyudayamu* written by *Rāmabhadrāmba*, a celebrated poetess in *Raghunātha*’s court, where the author mentions the *yavanā-s* (Portuguese in this context) as *rākśasā-s* (mythical demonic figures) and *Raghunātha* as the savior of his subjects from these external forces (Shulman and Rao 120). This is a direct replication of a situation from *Bālakānda* of the *Rāmāyana*. *Rāma* and *Raghunātha* may be compared in the *Raghunāthābhyudayamu* at various instances, including *Raghunātha* being a paradigmatic devotee of *Rāma* by reading the *Bālakānda* every day and wearing the *Śrivaishnava symbols* on his body and forehead. But *Raghunātha* was portrayed as diametrically opposed to the image of *Rāma* who was considered a paragon of chastity. *Raghunātha* was the desirable king, a sight of beauty, and a promiscuous lover, much like another divine, *Krśna*, to whose lineage they trace him as *Mannāru gōtra*. “He was *Rāma* and *Krśna* in a de rigueur courtly form” (Shulman 122).

On the particular day that the *Abhyudayamu* is chronicled, he wakes up in the morning at daybreak and starts his day with an elaborate toiletry ritual that includes looking at his own reflection in a mirror, gazing upon a couple of *brahmans*, and a golden pot filled with milk and the eagle *Garudā* for prosperity. The first half of the day is filled with horse riding and sword combat practice, followed by a ritual decking up for *darbar*, including fastening the *gandapendārā* (an anklet with gems extracted from the crown of the *Pāndya* King). In the *darbar*, *Raghunātha* watches dance performances and renditions of various theatrical works, including the *Achutābhyudayamu* he composed for his father. He then checks the treasury accounts and later is seen spending time in the ladies’ chamber. Although he is seen bathing, eating, and taking an afternoon nap, much attention is paid to the ritual prayers he offers,

the various scriptures he reads, the sanctimonious offerings he makes, and the devotion he shows in doing all of this. These activities are followed by a grand procession where *Raghunātha* mounts his royal elephant, *Airāvata*, to the accompaniment of various instruments and he processions the streets where he is met with the cheers of his courtiers and subjects. It is here that *Citrarēkha*, a courtesan in the *Taṅjāvur Nāyaka* court, becomes lovestruck with *Raghunātha*. Her pining love is expressed, *Raghunātha* concedes, and they unite that evening in passionate lovemaking and unabashed coitus. *Raghunātha* walks back to his palace at the crack of dawn, hand-in-hand with *Citrarēkha*. The interplay between the sexualized and divinized images of the hero reflects on multiple levels, the double consciousness around a non-*kśhatriya*, *bahunjan* ruler establishing his kingship through legitimate bloodline. Further, between ideas of devotion and desire, *bhakti* and *bhōga* are epitomized as the tropes and values of *Nāyaka* life that are on public display. *Raghunātha* is divine, devout and desirable, all at once.

All of this is a play at courtly, kingly life. “This configuration of a prestigious image is, in fact, an erudite game—with great passion and intentness—played by the rules, as done by many predecessors across kingdoms whom he emulates. *Vijayarāghava* places his father in a reverential deified mold in order to be able to write such explicit erotic exploits” (Shulman 1989). He also uses the significance of a performative literary style of *yakśagānam*, replete with song and dance—a genre he would go on to hone to perfection during his reign—as a powerful mnemotechnique. Through this mnemotechnique, he cultivates a collective cultural memory and a self-image that would cement his own succession through kingship amidst the *Nāyaka* society.

Excerpt I
Performing Histories- Excerpt I

Excerpt II
Performing Histories- Excerpt II

(Please refer to the description box of the video on YouTube for context and meaning of the above excerpts).

The *yakśagānamu*: A Performative Literature

The literary genre that details the daily life of a king and his personality and the courtly life ritualized performance of their political, social, and cultural life. This genre was a format adopted to cultivate a sense of collective memory of the present, invoking through literary metaphors and comparisons, a mythical, idealized past.

These texts served the purpose of enacting the past in a contemporary world. The subjects whose identities are depicted in the text also evoke the cultural memory of their collective lineages alongside that of their ruler (Shulman 121). *Raghunātha*’s *abhyudayamu* was written by two distinct persons in his court. One of the *abhyudayamu* in Sanskrit was composed by *Rāmabhadrāmba* (Ramabhadramba and T. R. 1934) and a second and third work titled *Raghunāthanāyakābhyudayamu* and *Raghunāthābhyudayamu* were written by his son *Vijayarāghava Nāyaka*. Both works were written in Telugu. The first among the Telugu works is entirely in the *dvipada* literary style while the second work in the manuscript is an *abhyudayamu* in *yakśagānam* style. (Nayaka, Raghunathanayakaabhyudayamu and Raghunathaabhyudayamu, No 334 DCTM n.d.).

Both of these works deserve our attention because they establish an important link in the chain of historic chronicles of the period of *Raghunātha*’s court and courtly life. However, we are particularly focused on *Raghunāthābhyudayamu*, the performative *yakśagānam* text. *Yakśagānam* is a literary genre which developed to its pinnacle, during this era at the hands of composers like *Vijayarāghava*. The *dvipada* style, which is composed in two-line metrical units, can equate to long poems, giving much scope for the composer to bring in many different moods with a choice of diction and changes of tone. *Dvipada* also offers a collective reading/listening experience. Pandit N. Venkataramanayya notes in the copied volume of the manuscript of this work: “Song and dance were the principle preoccupations of the society that they (*Nāyakās*) ruled.” Therefore, *Vijayarāghava*’s *dvipada-s*, *padam-s*, and *daruvu-s* in this work have lyrical and poetic merit.

The work has a distinct performative quality as its mode of expression. Composed in many *ghana* and *rakti rāgāms* such as *bhairavi*, *sourāshtra*, *kalyāni*, *ghantāravam*, *sāvēri* etc the work begins with a *kaivāram* and then alternates between *vākyam-s* (dialogues), *daruvu-s* and *padam-s* (poetry sent to music and *tālam*). Let me redirect you to watch the two video excerpts shared with this essay, where you can listen to some of the exquisite poetry rendered in *dvipada*, *vākyam*, *padam* and *daruvu* in various *rāgams*. The first excerpt is the *Pravēśika daruvu* (entrance of *Raghunātha*) in *rāgam yadukulakāmbhōji*.

The *dvipada* which is a poetic, rhythmic meter and can be rendered as *vākyam*. It was considered a second-class literary meter as compared to say a *campu* and is often associated with non-brahmin authors (Rao 2016). Authors like *Palkūriki Sōmanātha kavī* rebutted with a

statement that “*dvi*,” meaning two, “*pada*,” meaning steps, is indicative of the reader/viewer’s assured place, one foot on earth and another to the door steps of heaven itself! Therefore, in authoring *Raghunātha*’s life history as a *dvīpada* and in composing it as a *yakṣagānam*, the *Nāyakā*-s were, yet again, stating their *Sūdra* lineage.

In the court of *Raghunātha*, the *Raghunāthābhyudayamu* has been reported to have been performed every day in his very presence. Unlike any other literary work which would be read typically by any reader in their private time and, perhaps not more than once, performative literatures are, by nature, meant for public, collective reading/recitation/enactment through the process of performance. Like the re-reading of scriptures or important documents that need to be memorized, and just as Jan Assmann notes, the text, image, and ritual are important, and the reuse of these every day, via performance, becomes key in turning them into agents of cultural memory.

Therefore, I put forth through in this research a theory to further the argument that, we must weigh Indian literatures and their historiographical merit by including performative literatures such as the *yakṣagānamu*-s, *nātakamu*-s as substantial works. These texts perform upon repetition, upon rereading. The essence of performative literatures is in the compositional qualities of musical genres like the *padam*-s, *daruvu*-s, composed in the text, and in the enactment of them, or rather, the repetitive re-enactment of them. Repetition can emphasize the value of performative literatures and, hence, the everyday repeated performance of *Raghunāthābhyudayamu* in the court of *Raghunātha* himself. This is a very important historiographical factor to note because repetition is an apparatus that helps construct the text in the minds of every viewer/reader as memory.

That said, a question of concern is: If the past or, in this case, a single day in the life of a single king is documented in literature, and if that is inscribed as memory which represents the entirety of the cultural and social life of the courtly world of his time, how accurate is such a construction as historical? After all, it is a rather small and carefully cultivated sample. So, is the performance’s job to reiterate and simply re-narrate the same set of events day after day? Is there a looping sense of re-living the same day through memory, each time the performance is repeated? Is that how cultural memory is built? These repetitions that are made through performance of such texts many times over

are not meant to be seen like a narration of a single sequence of events. Much like the beads of a rosary stacked upon each other (Benjamin VII), we have to see them as conceptions of the present, as the time of the “now”—a now of a particular recognizability when the cause (intuitive memory of their cultural ethos) was/is still there. Therefore, even after the reign of *Raghunātha* was long over, the “performance” of the *yakṣagānam* would hold for the viewer a telescoping of the past, in the present. This way, performance becomes the manipulation of the past, present, and the future. Performative quality is understood as ephemeral-in-the-moment. But I suggest that it is rather in the realm of such an experiential moment, as opposed to the principle of ephemerality by a viewer, where traces of the past and that of the future are repeatable in the present. The performative text and the very performance of it become semiotic readings of cultural memory. So, while I argue that performative literatures such as the *yakṣagānamu*-s, *nātakamu*-s must be considered historiographical materials, the performances of these texts, which is essentially a dematerialized corpus, also need our careful attention, both for their presence and their subsequent and apparent absence.

Breakage in the Performative Text

As in the case of many other performative traditions, the *Raghunāthābhyudayamu* had a breakage in its performance. That is, after the reign of *Vijayarāghava*—in confirmation that this text was performed every day in *Nāyakā* court at least until his reign—and the end of the *Nāyakā* rule, the performance of this text was discontinued. One cannot imagine why the succeeding *Marātha* rulers would have continued it. After all, they had their own *ṣarītram*-s to be performed. Hence, there was definite breakage. If indeed one is to argue that the cultural memory is embedded in the repetitiveness of performance, then what does or what did this breakage do to *Raghunāthābhyudayamu*?

By the time this text was found amidst a pile of vernacular literatures as corpus of *Nāyakā* rule, it had gained the notoriety of being part of the historical narrative of an India that was pictured as unchanging, with despotic kings spending far too much of their time in merry-making. Distanced from *Raghunātha*’s idealized, divinized images in the mold of *Rāma* or *Kṛṣṇa*, he was viewed as one of the last rulers whose extravagance and sensuous presence cost his descendants the throne. Ultimately, this later led to colonial capture and ruin. Secondly, works such as *Raghunāthābhyudayamu* in vernacular languages were not in print or translation

much after Independence. But by then, the torch to see texts under a parochial light, as belonging to different states with affiliation to a particular regional language, culture, historic, political, and aesthetic value, was ablaze. So *Raghunāthābhyudayamu* was tagged simply as a Telugu language literature written on a *Nāyaka* ruler of erstwhile Tamil country. Thirdly, and most importantly, the breakage was irreversible, even in the revival of *Raghunāthābhyudayamu* in print in later years, as it was permanently dismembered from its performativity. That is, in wiggling back into pages of a publication, an essentially performative *yakṣagānam*, it remained static. The dynamic, spontaneous embodied performative quality was lost as were its many meanings from the older cultural memories that laced it. Hence, the demise of its performative cultural histories cannot be fulfilled by print. Fragmentation of such performance disenfranchises the performative literature, disallowing a present experience in a manner that it can make its viewers aware of its past and imagine a future in the mind/experience of the viewer. After all, the essence of experience is not only about that moment, but is in knowing that it is possible for experience to repeat. Performance enables imagining a future for the historical text in a way that the decontextualized post-modern world cannot; the text stands alone.

Epilogue

In order to read *Raghunāthābhyudayamu* in its larger frame as cultural memory, the performance of the *yakṣagānamu* has been carefully restored with the expertise of hereditary singers of other *Taṅjāvuri yakṣagānamu* traditions such as *Prahlāda ṣarītram*, *Uśā Parinayamu*, and *Ruckmini Kalyānamu*, penned by *Śrī Venkatarāma Śāstri*. Musicians and experts of the *Bhāgavatamēla Nāṭya Nātakams*, *Śrī Narasimhan*, and *Śrī Venkatesan*—the *Tiruvaiyāru* brothers—have worked with me in the restoration of the musical rendering of the *Raghunāthābhyudayamu*.

The performative aspects of the text such as the rendition of certain *padam*-s, *daruvu*-s have been composed by R K Sriram Kumar, some by me, combined with my reconstruction of the dance aspects of *Pērani*, *Jakkini*, *Gōndhali*, and other dances that are mentioned in this text as performed in the *Nāyaka* court. The restored performative text is embodied in a production I have created titled, *My name is Citrarēkha* which, through narrative performance, renders the entire *Raghunāthābhyudayamu* as a dance, music, dialogue presentation in Telugu along with English commentaries to facilitate non-Telugu audiences to follow the narrative. In reactivating the performative elements of this text,

we negate *Raghunāthābhyudayamu* being a mere passive depository of culture production and see it as a mechanism to cultivate historical memory in the viewer/reader—through performing histories.

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