

The Tradition of Kuchipudi Dance-dramas¹

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The Historical Background

Of the many branches of learning which flourished in Andhra from very early times not the least noteworthy is the tradition of the *Natyashastra*, embracing the twin arts of music and dance. The *Natyashastra* mentions the Andhra region in connection with a particular style of dance in the context of the *Vritti*-s. Bharata refers to *Kaishiki Vritti*, a delicate and graceful movement in the dance of this region.² A particular *raga* by the name of Andhri was the contribution of this region to the music of India. The dance traditions in Andhra can be traced to various sources. The ancient temples, the Buddhist ruins excavated at Nagarjunakonda, Amaravati, Ghantasala, Jagayyapet and Bhattiprole indicate a flourishing dance tradition in Andhra. Of these the Amaravati *stupa* relics are the most ancient, dating back to the second century B.C.³ They reveal the great choreographic possibilities of group and composite dances called *pindibandha*-s, mentioned by Bharata and on which Abhinavagupta gives a detailed commentary in *Abhinava Bharati*.⁴

The history of dance, divided into two periods for the sake of convenience on account of the continuity of the Sanskrit and the later development of the vernacular regional languages, admits of two broad limits: from the second century B.C. to the ninth century A.D. and from the tenth century A.D. to the eighteenth century A.D. The latter period coincides with the growth of various regional styles and with the development of the tradition of Kuchipudi dance-dramas.

Treatises on the composite arts of dance and music were written from the eleventh century onwards by a number of Andhra kings and scholars. Important among them are *Saraswati Hridayalankara* by Nanyadeva, *Abhilashitartha Chintamani* or *Mansollasa* by Someshwara and *Sangita Chudamani* by Pratapa Chakravarti. The most important text on dance is, of course, *Nrittaratnavali*⁵ by Jaya Senapati, the commander of the elephant force under Kakatiya Ganapati Deva. Other works include Kumar Giri Reddi's *Vasanta Rajiyam* (1440 A.D.), *Sangita Chintamani* by Peda Komati Vema Reddi (1450 A.D.) and *Sangita Parijata* by Ahobala (1600 A.D.). The famous commentators from Andhra are Bhatta Lollata who wrote a commentary on the *Natyashastra*. Abhinavagupta refers to his work and so does Kallinath who wrote the commentary on Sharangadeva's *Sangita Ratnakara*. Singha Bhupala wrote *Rasarnava Sudhakara*, yet another commentary on the *Sangita Ratnakara*.

In Telugu literature, as it developed from the days of Nannaya in the eleventh century A.D., are found elaborate descriptions of dancing. As described in literary works,⁶ the thirteenth century A.D. is often regarded as the golden age of dance. Palkurki Somanath, Jayappa, Tikkana and Shrinath dealt with the subject of dance in their works. In *Basava Purana* and *Panditaradhya Charitra*, Palkurki Somanath cites innumerable references to music, dance and drama. *Parvata Prakarana*⁷ contains a resume of the technical terms of dance and also a description of the dances as a part of the Mahashivaratri festival at the Shrisailam

shrine. Somanath mentions the *Purvaranga* within the curtain and assemblages of manifold types of dancers and enactments of different stories. He also refers to *Pagativेशa* or *Pahala*, a tradition which is still prevalent in Kuchipudi and other villages of Andhra.

Tikkanna mentions, in his Telugu *Mahabharata*, many dances which are not found in the original Sanskrit work. In Shrinath's works there are references to *Sabhavandana* and *Vetrapani* (the guru or *Sutradhara*), who carries a crooked staff in his hand, a practice observed in Kuchipudi dance-dramas. Jaya Senapati's *Nrittaratnavali* includes a detailed account of various dance forms. It refers to both the *Margi* and *Deshi* styles. The *Deshi* or indigenous style is detailed in four chapters and in its description Jaya follows Matanga's *Brihaddeshi*. Great importance was attached to the art of dancing as is evident from the elaborate descriptions of various forms.

In the second period, when the regional styles developed, the dance-drama form called *Yakshagana* flourished in Andhra along with the Sanskrit tradition of the *Natyashastra*, the development of the *Uparupaka-s*,⁸ and the codification of various minor forms which had predominant elements of music and dance. Though Kohala is mentioned in the *Natyashastra*, no work of his has come down to us, but he is credited with codifying the *Uparupaka-s*. By the time of *Karpuramanjari* by Rajshekhara, musical plays had taken firm root. Various *Natyashastra* treatises refer to and list the *Uparupaka-s*. Among them Bhoja's *Shringaraprakasha*, Sharadatanaya's *Bhavaprakasha*, Sagaranandin's *Natakalakshanaratnakosha* and other works deal with the topic of the *Uparupaka-s*. *Gita Govinda* (twelfth century A.D.) also exercised considerable influence on the development of the Kuchipudi dance-dramas. The tradition of the dance-dramas in Kuchipudi was part of a general trend toward regional vernacular theatre and the Bhakti movement also contributed in a large measure to its development. Inscriptions of the eighth, ninth and tenth centuries reveal that in Andhra, Tamilnadu and Karnataka a variety of theatrical diversions composed of music, dance and drama known as *Brahman Mela* existed. Though no conclusive proofs are available, it is, nevertheless, certain that prototypes of the *Bhagavata Mela Nataka* must have survived prior to the eleventh century. Even earlier, there existed another form of entertainment known as *Shivalilanatyam*. This seems to have been later on replaced by the introduction of Vaishnavite themes and eventually an altogether different identity emerged. *Shivalilanatyam*, describing the various activities of Lord Shiva in poetic form, was performed at Shiva temples and *Vishnulilanatyam*, depicting the ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu, was presented at Vishnu temples.

Of the many theatrical diversions prevalent during this period, the *Bhagavata Mela* dance-dramas originated from earlier forms of the *Uparupaka-s* and the *Yakshagana-s*. A traditional composite art form of Telugu folk *Yakshagana* is the musical play, sharing the characteristics of opera and ballet combined in one presentation.⁹ It originated in Andhra, was later adopted and patronised in Karnataka and Tamilnadu and enjoys an eventful history of more than six centuries. More than 800 works were produced by 465 authors. Of these 542 works are available, some in print and others mostly in manuscript.¹⁰

Although no specimen of the sixteenth century vernacular drama has survived, the names of the few plays such as *Tayikondanataka* and *Gangavatara* are preserved in inscriptions and literature. They seem to be the earliest represen-

tatives of the modern *Yakshagana*. The plays were enacted by the artistes of the courtesan community who banded into itinerant companies, staging plays usually connected with some Puranic story. A group of players constituted itself into a *mela*.¹¹ The plays were generally staged on important occasions such as festivals like Brahmotsava. Some interesting details of the stage are cited by a few writers of the time. The curtain was frequently used and the characters were said to emerge from behind it.

The Brahmin exponents of the art of *Nattuva Mela* or *Brahman Mela* shaped the *Yakshagana* into a more stylized form, conforming to the tenets of Bharata's *Natyashastra*. They gave a new life to *Yakshagana* performances of the succeeding generations and were responsible for evolving a new type of *Yakshagana* called *Kalapam*. It became a lyrical dance-drama presentation and had an abiding impact on *Yakshagana* texts and performances. The dance-drama form which flourished during this period, a century before the golden era of the Vijayanagar empire, appears to be the tradition of Kuchipudi dance-drama. Known as *Yakshagana* and *Nattuva Mela* or *Brahman Mela*, this form achieved its own individual character, imbibing the elements of classical and folk. In a climate conducive to the growth of the performing arts there must have been some commerce between the classical solo exposition, the temple dances and its exponents. Thus the two streams of solo exposition and the dance-drama forms developed, reaching a high watermark during the heyday of the Vijayanagar empire.¹²

The earliest reference to a performance of this category seems to be one found in *Machupalli Kaiiyat* of 1502 A.D. The local records were collected at the instance of Surveyor-General Mackenzie.¹³ According to the local records, a troupe of dancers-actors seems to have obtained audience with Immadi Narasa Nayaka, the ruler of Vijayanagar, and entertained him and his court with a dance-drama that artistically hinted at the sufferings of the people at the hands of Sammeta Gurava Raju of Siddhavatam, the local chieftain. The artists succeeded in impressing the king and enlisting his support in liberating them from the malpractices of the local chieftain. Sammeta Gurava Raju was defeated by the army and the artists were protected.

This historical record enables us to determine the period of the Kuchipudi dance-drama tradition as flourishing in Andhra at least a hundred years before this event, that is from the fifteenth century. The dance-drama tradition was shaped and nurtured by the *Bhagavatulu-s* and *Acharya-s*. It was also a period when the Bhakti cult spread to many parts of India. And the art of dance-drama became a vehicle for its expression.

Siddhendra Yogi, who according to a legend, is considered to be the founder of the Kuchipudi dance-drama tradition was a devotee of Krishna. An orphan, he was looked after by kind neighbours who had him married in his childhood. But when he came in close contact with the followers of Narahari Tirtha he was sent to Udipi for intense Vedic studies. After his training, he returned to Shrikakulam and was known as Siddhendra. When his identity was established by the elders of the village, he was asked to join his wife. Siddhendra set out to visit his wife's home. On the way he had to cross a river in full spate. Midstream he found it difficult to swim and prayed to the Lord that if he reached the other bank alive he would devote his life to the propagation of *Bhakti*. He then became

a *Sanyasi* and renounced all earthly attachments. Well-versed in the *Natyashastra*, he composed a dance-drama *Parijatapaharana* and came to Kuchelapuram, the presentday Kuchipudi village. He gathered Brahman boys round him and asked them to perform the work as a dance-drama and as a form of offering to Lord Krishna. He took a promise from them that they would perform the play once every year. They, in turn, assured him that their sons and descendants would preserve the tradition.

The descendants of the Brahman families, it is believed, continue this tradition of the Kuchipudi dance-dramas. The performers are all male and some of them impersonate female characters. *Nrittaratnavali* refers to *Brahman Mela* and *Nattuva Mela*, the latter being the dances of the female temple servants (*devadasi*-s). Jaya, the author of *Nrittaratnavali*, was a student of a Brahman dance-master Gundamatya. The Brahman artistes came to be known as *Bhagavatulu*-s in Andhra and as *Bhagavatara*-s in Tamilnadu. Although the tradition is known as *Kuchipudi* dance-drama, it can also be called the *Bhagavata Mela Nataka*-s as the plays are performed by the *Bhagavatara*-s and *Bhagavatulu*-s. But in order to distinguish these dance-dramas from the *Bhagavata Mela Nataka*-s of Tamilnadu, they are referred to as Kuchipudi dance-dramas after the village of Kuchipudi.

There is one more historical record¹⁴ which indicates that the tradition was supported by the rulers. In 1678, a Kuchipudi performance was arranged for Abdal Hasan Tahnishah, the Nawab of Golkonda, during his visit to Masulipattanam. He was pleased with the performance and announced on a copper plate the grant of the lands of Kuchipudi village to the Brahmans who took part in the dance-drama. Later on, a dispute arose among these members and the families regarding their share of the land. A partition deed¹⁵ was drafted by two agents of the Nizam of Hyderabad, Mosalkanti Kanoji Pantulu and Kandargulu Jogi Pantulu. According to that deed, the families who are entitled to a share of the land are Vedantam, Vempatti, Hari, Bhagavatulu, Pasumarti, Jyosula, Mahankali and Yelesvarapu. These families still live in Kuchipudi, perform dance-dramas and keep the tradition alive. Every artist in Kuchipudi dreams of playing once in his lifetime the role of Satyabhama in the play *Parijatapaharana*, which later came to be known as *Bhamakalapam*. The art of dance-drama is also practised in other villages like Shrisailam, Kappatrala, Alampura, Banganpalli, Marampalli and Mandapeta.

Bhamakalapam

The story of *Parijatapaharana* revolves round the Parijata tree in Indra's garden. Krishna offers a flower of the Parijata to his consort Rukmini, and Narada, the mischievous sage, reports the incident to Satyabhama, who insists on having the flower for herself. Krishna brings the Parijata tree from Indra's garden and plants it in Satyabhama's grove. The story is found in *Harivamsha* and there are other versions in *Vishnupurana* and *Bhagavatapurana*.¹⁶ *Parijatapaharana nataka*, if staged as a complete dance-drama, would require seven nights. In its present form (*Bhamakalapam*), it is a one-night performance. It has the quarrel between Krishna and Satyabhama for its theme. Krishna is visiting Satyabhama. He gazes in the mirror and asks her who is more beautiful—he or she? Satyabhama, in her vanity, declares that there is none as beautiful as she. Krishna returns to his palace and Satyabhama realises that she has forgotten her decorum and offended Krishna. She repents and begs her friend Madhavi—the role is tradi-

tionally played by the *Sutradhara* in the *natyadharmi* mode—to go to Krishna and bring him back to her palace. She writes a letter (*patralekha*) begging Krishna's forgiveness and sends it with Madhavi to him. Krishna relents and returns to Satyabhama's palace. After an interesting interlude of repartee, the two are united again.

In the brief and popular version (*Bhamakalapam*) of *Parijatapaharana*, there are only five characters: Krishna, Satyabhama, Narada, Rukmini and Madhavi. The character of Satyabhama overshadows all the other characters. The principles laid down in the *Natyashastra* regarding the expression of *vipralambha shringara* and *sambhoga shringara* are beautifully portrayed in the play: Satyabhama is separated from Krishna and in the end is united with him. In particular, the *vipralambha shringara* offers scope to the artiste to display his histrionic talent and suggest the pangs of separation. The *Natyashastra* enumerates a variety of ways of depicting love-sickness¹⁷: anxiety, weariness of the body, gazing vacantly at the sky, lassitude, sighs, speaking with a touch of pathos, fingering various items of jewellery, clinging to some support, etc. In order to help her bear the separation, the *sakhi* (confidante) attempts to fan the *nayika*, to apply sandal paste on her limbs, to play music, and engage her in other diversions. But nothing makes the *nayika* happy. She then sends the message with the *sakhi* to the *nayaka*. The artiste impersonating Satyabhama's role portrays all these emotions, following the *Natyashastra* tradition, to heighten the effect of *virahavastha*.

The Performance

The Kuchipudi dance-dramas are all-night performances held in the open. A make-shift stage is arranged and the audience sits on the ground. Formerly it was customary to perform in a narrow street in front of the Ramalingeshwara Temple. But nowadays performances are staged in more spacious grounds. A number of ceremonies and rituals are observed before the dance-drama proper begins. A prayer in praise of the goddess Amba is recited. Then enters a young boy who circles round the stage, holding a flagstaff, the Jarjara *dhwaja* of Indra referred to in the *Natyashastra*. Then follows the lamp and *dhupa* (incense) and the dancer offers *pushpanjali*. Soon a dancer enters carrying a pitcher filled with consecrated water. He sprinkles it on the stage. Then the *Sutradhara* with his *kuttilaka* (crooked stick) enters and conducts the performance. He announces the title of the dance-drama to be enacted. He keeps *tala* with the cymbals and takes his seat to the left of the stage with the other musicians.

Before the actual dance-drama begins, two stage-hands holding a curtain enter and, behind the curtain, a dancer with the mask of Ganapati shuffles his feet. The curtain is then removed and the dancer dances to the music of *Tandava Nritya Kare Gajanana*. The stage-hands hold torches in their hands and from time to time they sprinkle *guggilam* on the flames which flare up illumining the mask of Ganapati.

Before Satyabhama enters, the stage-hands bring the curtain on the stage and from behind is thrown a decorated braid (*jada*) as part of the convention. It is said that if any one challenges the artist playing the role of Satyabhama and succeeds in outshining him the braid is cut off and given to him as a trophy. Once in the past, when such an occasion arose, the challenge was averted when



it was discovered that both the artistes belonged to the same family. Nowadays it is only observed as a ritual.

With the rendering of the song *Bhamane Satyabhamane*, Satyabhama enters but stays behind the curtain. Once it is removed, the dancer who plays Satyabhama's role has an opportunity to display the full gamut of his talents. This item is called *patrapravesha daru*. *Daru* is derived from the Sanskrit word *Dhruva* which is explained by Abhinavagupta in his commentary on the *Dhruvadhyaya*.¹⁸ *Dhruva* means 'to establish'. Through this theatrical convention a character enters on the stage and establishes himself or herself. He describes himself either in the third person or the first person. This convention is also found in other dance-dramas and traditions like *Bhagavata Mela Nataka* of Tamilnadu, *Yakshagana* of Karnataka and *Ankiyanata* of Assam.

Satyabhama executes the footwork and *nritta*, besides enacting *abhinaya* to the song. Formerly the dancer used to sing. Nowadays the vocal support is provided by the vocalist in the orchestra. The *Sutradhara* then gets up and impersonates the role of Madhavi, the confidante. When Satyabhama asks her to go and bring Krishna, Madhavi feigns ignorance and asks who it is Satyabhama wishes to see. Then follows *uttarapratyuttara daru*, dialogue replete with humour, where Madhavi ridicules Satyabhama whenever she tries to suggest that it is Lord Krishna whom she wishes to call. Satyabhama explains her plight. The dance and music are in the nature of a rebuke to the moon and to Kamadeva (*Chandra-dushanam* and *Manmathadushanam* songs). Satyabhama blames both the moon and Kamadeva for harassing her when her beloved is away.

The *nritta* employed has a lilting quality. The undulating movements are typical of Kuchipudi and different from the technique of Bharata Natyam. The movements are more rounded and the tempo is quite racy, the effect quick and mercurial. Basic units, *adavu*-s, as in case of the Bharata Natyam, are also to be found in the Kuchipudi technique. But their execution is different.

The unfolding of the dance-drama proceeds with regular dialogues in Telugu sprinkled with humour, songs and dance. The literary devices employed are *vachanam*-s, *sisardham*-s, *kandam*-s and *kandardham*-s. The dance, *abhinaya*, dialogue and songs follow in quick succession carrying the action further. In the end, after Satyabhama and Krishna are united, Satyabhama brings *arati* and offers flowers and, with the *mangala shloka*-s, the dance-drama comes to an end.

The other dance-dramas favoured by the dance-drama troupes and popular with the audiences are *Prahlada Charitram*, *Usha Parinayam*, *Shashirekha Parinayam*, *Rukmini Kalyanam*, *Mohini Rukmangada* and *Harishchandra Nataka*. In recent times *Kshirasagaramathanam* and *Vipranarayana* have earned popular favour. The traditional dance-drama *Gollakalapam*, in which the milk-maid enters into an argument with a learned Brahman and defeats him on his own ground, is also performed frequently.

An interesting feature of these dance-dramas is the inclusion of the *tarangam*-s from the *Krishnalilatarangini*. During the *tarangam*-s the dancer balances on the rim of a brass plate and executes complex *tala*-s. Sometimes he also places a pitcher full of water on the head as he continues to dance. These *tarangam*-s appear at different junctures in a dance-drama as interludes and diversions.

The mode of *abhinaya* is both *natyadharmi* and *lokadharmi*, that is, stylised and realistic. The link with the *Natyashastra* tradition is clearly seen in the employment of various *daru-s*, the depiction of *vipralambha* and *sambhoga shringara* and the *samanyabhinaya*. During the dialogues, for instance between Satyabhama and Madhavi, the *abhinaya* is *lokadharmi*, with the emphasis on the comic element (*hasya rasa*). The music used is classical Carnatic and the most common *raga* in Kuchipudi dance-dramas is Mohana, whose combination of notes is appropriate for the expression of various shades of *shringara*. On the whole, the salient features of Carnatic music are present in abundance. The *tala-s* and *jati-s* employed in *nritta* are noteworthy for the handling of rhythm and embellishments. The singers employ various combinations of *jati-s* in different speeds while directing intricate and lively dance patterns. The musical instruments used as accompaniment include the mridangam, violin, flute, tutti, cymbals and the harmonium.

A special kind of light wood is used to fashion ornaments which are given gold-colour coating. Crowns, chest and shoulder-ornaments (*bhujakiritam-s*) are used for royal characters. The costumes are regal: a long coat, scarves, *dhoti* and other paraphernalia. The women wear Conjeevaram sarees and ornaments for the head, hands, nose, waist and ankle-bells. The *Sutradhara* wears a *pugree*, and necklaces of *rudraksha* beads. Since most of the stories are drawn from mythology, the characters are both human and divine and care is taken to devise appropriate costumes for both the categories.

The Present Situation

Among the contemporary artistes from the Kuchipudi village, Vedantam Satyanarayana Sharma is decidedly the most gifted. His portrayals of Satyabhama and Usha follow the *Natyashastra* tradition. The principles laid down for the *nayika-s* come alive in his performances. So vast is his range and so great his talent that he overshadows all the rest. The Venkatrama Natya Mandali (which he manages) travels throughout Andhra and other major cities of India. He was trained by Chinta Krishnamurti and by his own brother Prahlad Sharma. His two nephews Sitaramayya and Manikyal Rao, sons of Prahlad Sharma, are now following in his footsteps and specialize in female roles. Kuchipudi village in the Krishna District is nearly 35 kilometers away from Vijayawada and Siddhendra Kalakshetram houses an institution where training is imparted on the lines of the *gurukula* system, with facilities for residential accommodation. Nowadays girls have been permitted to perform Kuchipudi. But the dance-drama troupes have no female dancers in their troupes.

The emerging form, in terms of solo exposition on the lines of Bharata Natyam, has also become very popular. Vempatti Chinna Satyam's contribution in shaping the contemporary repertoire and lending the form dignity and sophistication is very significant. He heads the Kuchipudi Art Academy in Madras and has trained several female dancers in Kuchipudi. He has also choreographed dance-dramas like *Kshirasagaramanthanam* and *Padmavati Srinivasa Kalyanam*.

During the festival of *Janmashtami*, a series of dance-dramas is organised in Kuchipudi. Hundreds of spectators squat on the floor and watch an all-night performance in the open air. At times there is also audience participation. It is



Kurchela Brahmananda Bhagavatar in *Bhama Kalapam*.

customary to garland the artiste during the performance—after he has rendered *abhinaya* to a song or *ashtapadi*. A young girl or a boy from the audience walks up to the stage and garlands the artiste. The stories are all familiar to the audiences who watch the performance with rapt attention. Though the dance-dramas are also presented in the metropolitan centres, the impact is best seen in the various villages of Andhra, where the form derives its sustenance from appreciative audiences.

References:

1. This article is based on ten years of research and several field trips to Kuchipudi and its environs. The findings were submitted in 1977 in the form of a thesis ('The dance-drama tradition of Kuchipudi, Bhagvata Mela Nataka and Kuravanji with special reference to the *Rasa* Theory as expounded in Bharata's *Natyashastra*') for Ph.D. to the M. S. University, Baroda.
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3. Raghavan, V: *Nrittaratnavali* of Jaya Senapati. Punarvasu Publications, Royapettah, Madras. See Introduction.
4. *Natyashastra*, Part I. See relevant portions of Abhinavagupta's commentary on *Pindibandha*-s. Chapter 4 on *Karana*-s.
5. *Nrittaratnavali* of Jaya Senapati is edited by Dr. V. Raghavan and gives details of *Bhagavata Mela* and *Nattuva Mela*, the former being conducted by a group of Brahmans and the latter by the *Devadasi*-s.

6. Krishnamurti, A. Vaidehi: *Social and Economic Conditions in East Deccan* (1000-1250 A.D.), p. 179.
7. *Andhragranthamala*, 30. See also Sarma, M. S: *History of Reddi Kingdoms*, p. 425 ff. and the section on Telugu Culture in Volume III of the Telugu Encyclopedia, Madras University.
8. Kothari, Sunil: *The Dance-drama Tradition of Kuchipudi, Bhagavata Mela Nataka and Kuravanji with special reference to the Rasa Theory as expounded in Bharata's Natyashastra*. Thesis submitted to the M. S. University, Baroda (1977). See chapter on the *Uparupaka-s*.
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10. *Ibid.*
11. Venkata Ramanayya, N: *Studies in the History of the Third Dynasty of Vijayanagar*, p. 411.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.* p. XV, Sources; Appendix C, pp. 462-63. Telugu Text: *Viranarasimha and the Kuchipudi Mela*. Local records 56. The Kaifiyat of Machupalli, pp. 66 ff.
14. *Ibid.* This is another instance of a record of Kuchipudi performance.
15. The partition deed and other legal documents are in the possession of Mahankali Lakshminarasimha Shastri of Kuchipudi village and I was shown these documents while preparing the geneological tables of the various families who have inherited a share in the land.
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18. *Natyashastra*, Part IV. See Chapter XXXII on *Dhruvadyaya*. GOS. Oriental Institute, Baroda.

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