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## KANCHARLA GOPANNA: A DEVOTIONAL POET OF TELANGANA

**M.DEENADAYAL**

Research Scholar, Dept. of History, S.V.U. College of Arts,  
Sri Venkateswara University, Tirupathi, (A.P)

**Dr. V.SUDARSHAN**

Reader, Dept of History & Tourism Studies,  
V.S.M College, Ramachandrapuram (E.G) A.P

### **Introduction:**

The Bhakti movement is a Hindu religious movement in which the main spiritual practice is loving devotion among the Shaivite and the Vaishnavasaints. The Bhakti movement originated in ancient Tamil Nadu and began to spread to the north during the late medieval ages when north India was under Islamic rule. The Islamic rulers were pressing public to convert religion from Hindu to Islam, the Bhakti movement was counter to the prevalent caste ideology which was dividing Hinduism. So, the Bhakti movement has its own importance to save Hinduism. There was no grouping of the mystics into Shaiva and Vaishnava devotees as in the south. The movement was spontaneous and the mystics had their own versions of devotional expression.

Unlike in the south, where devotion was centered on both Shiva and Vishnu (in all his forms), the northern devotional movement was centered on Rama and Krishna, both of whom are considered incarnations of Vishnu. Despite this, the sect of Shiva or of the Devi did not go into decline. In fact for all of its history the Bhakti movement co-existed peacefully with the other movements in Hinduism. It was initially considered unorthodox, as it rebelled against caste distinctions and disregarded Brahmanic rituals, which according to Bhakti saints were not necessary for salvation. In the course of time, however, owing to its immense popularity among the masses (and even royal patronage) it became 'orthodox' and continues to be one of the most important modes of religious expression in modern India.

During the 14<sup>th</sup> –17<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D, a great *Bhakti* movement swept through central and northern India, initiated by a loosely associated group of teachers or saints. Ramananda, Ravidas, Srimanta Sankardeva, Chaitanya



Mahaprabhu, Vallabhacharya, Surdas, Meerabai, Kabir, Tulsidas, Namdev, Dnyaneshwar, Tukaram and other mystics spearheaded the Bhakti movement in the North while Annamacharya, Bhadrachala Ramadas, Tyagaraja among others propagated Bhakti in the South. They taught that people could cast aside the heavy burdens of ritual and caste, and the subtle complexities of philosophy, and simply express their overwhelming love for God. This period was also characterized by a spate of devotional literature in vernacular prose and poetry in the ethnic languages of the various Indian states or provinces.

**KANCHARLA GOPANNA:** Kancherla Gopanna (1620–1687 A.D.)<sup>1</sup> popularly known as **Bhadradi Ramadasu** or **Bhadrachala Ramadasu** was a 17th century Indian devotee of Rama and a composer of Carnatic music. He is one among the famous Vaggeyakaras (same person being the writer and composer of a song) in the Telugu language, the others being Tyagaraja, Annamayya, Kshetrappa. He lived in the village of Nelakondapalli near Bhadrachalam, Andhra Pradesh during the 17th century and is renowned for constructing a famous temple for Rama at Bhadrachalam. His devotional lyrics to Rama are famous in South Indian classical music as Ramadasu Keertanalu. Even the doyen of South Indian classical music Saint Thyagaraja learned and later improved the style now considered standard krithi form of music composition. He also wrote **Dasarathi Shatakamu** with a '*Dasaradhee Karuna payonidhi*' a collection of nearly 108 poems dedicated to the Lord Rama son of Dasaratha.

Bhakta Raamadaas, was born Gopanna to Linganna Mantri (a surname he kept as a result of one of his forebears being a minister at the court of a king) & Kadamba (sister of Madanna, a brahmin minister to TaniShah), in 1620 in Nelakondapalli, a small village in Khammam district, Andhra Pradesh. Since childhood, he imbibed his family's interest in spirituality and composed several keertanas on Rama. His devotion to Vaikunta Rama at the temple of Bhadrachalam, a small village in the middle of the jungle on the northern banks of the holy river Godavari, earned him his name Bhadrachala Raamadaas. His guru was Raghunatha Bhattacharya.

During the reign of Abdul Hasan Tana Shah, (the nawab of the Qutub Shahi Dynasty at Golconda), Ramadas (Gopanna), thanks to his uncle Madanna, was appointed as a Tahsildar<sup>2</sup> for Palvancha Paragana which included Bhadrachalam, a pretty and picturesquely situated temple town on the Godavari river. Ramadas was always distracted and his intense love for Lord Rama compelled him to build a temple at Bhadrachalam. He collected money for the construction of temple from the citizens, but was not enough.



So he borrowed from the tax revenue of the nawab and gave his god a worthy abode, vowing to return the money. However, the nawab was furious and sentenced Ramadas to 12 years in prison. Raamadaas thus earned the name Bandikhana Raamadaas (meaning imprisoned Ramadas). Frustrated at god's indifference to his pleadings, Ramadas composed some of the finest keertanas in his prison cell (reminding Rama of his services in Ikshvaku Kula Tilaka).

It is said that Rama & Lakshmana in the guise of two youngsters paid up his dues and got his release papers. The golden coins paid by Rama are known as Ram Tanka coins. They can be seen even today. These coins have the Pattabhishekam scene on one side and the picture of another Rama Bhaktha, Hanuman, on the other side. The nawab was moved and recognized the greatness of Ramadas and released him immediately and gave him land around Bhadraachalam to continue his dedicated service to Bhadraachala Raama. Ramadas spent the rest of his life on these lands and composed further moving poems that were to inspire Tyaagaraaja: in ksheera saagara sayana in Devagaandhaari, he says "Dhirudau Ramadasuni Bandhamu dirchinadi Vinnanura Rama?" (O Rama! I have heard how You obtained the release of the bold Ramadas from his prison life); in brindaavanalola in todi, in kaligiyunde gada in keeravaani, in Emi dova balkuma in saaranga and in Prahlaada Bhakti Vijayam he says "kaliyugamuna vara bhadra calamuna nelakonna raamacandrani pada bhaktula kella varudanandagi velasina shree raamadaasu vinutintu madin" (I praise Sri Raamadaas, who shines in this world as the supreme devotee of Sri Raamachandra, who shines forth from his seat at Bhadraachalam in this kali Yuga).

Other compositions are positive invocations, favored by traveling minstrels, including the Tondaiman rulers of Pudukottai in Tamil Nadu, who popularized his songs. Among his other accomplishments is the creation of the whole Ramayana story in the form of a prose-poem, a Choornika. Ramadas described himself in this way in the last verse of his Dasarathi Satakam: "*Allana Linga Mantri Suthudu (son), Atreya Gothrudu, Adi Sakha, Kancherla Kulothbhavudu, Gopakavindrudu.*" *Bhadraachala Raamadaas*", he was lived on this earth for 68 years.

THE TEMPLE OF BHADRACHALAM : Ramadas, who renovated the holy shrine on the hillock near by the banks of river Godavari. It has gained great importance all over the Nizam State. The Tanisha endowed properties for its maintenance. An annual cash grant of Rs. 20,000 was made by him<sup>3</sup>. That the temple was not conspicuous one till the Ramadas undertook its



improvement and organize of regular Poojas and festivals is evidence by several authorities.

In the list of ancient Hindu temples which are the principal sacred ones consecrated to Vishnu and which are daily repeated by Vaishnavaites Hindus, Bhadrachalam does not find place. None of the Alvars visited it. Among the 108 Divya Kshetrams of Lord Vishnu which were hailed by the Alvars, Bhadrachalam is not included a few like Ahobilam and Tirupathi only located in Andhra.

In 1687 A.D. Aurangzeb and his son Azam seized the fort of Golkonda. The entire region came under the Moghal rule in 1726 A.D. **“Thanisha”** invaded Bhadrachalam temple and town, looted its pious and peaceful citizens and plundered the holy shrine. Sensing before hand the invasion, the priests of the temple removed the idols to a safer place by boats. Sri Rama with his consort and brother had to remain in exile in Veerabhadra’s temple at a Island called Pattiseema in West Godavari District about 23 KMs from Rajahmundry. It symbolizes the unity of Hindus at that time.

After a temporary stay for about five years at Pattiseema the idols returned to Bhadrachalam, his permanent abode, with the help of Pusapati Vijayasyama Raju and Sitarama Raju of Vijayanagaram.

Some time Ramadas ascended to Vaikuntam (Ramadas of Bhadrachalam had the unique luck of flying to Vaikuntam with his mortal body after fulfilling his mission on earth), *“Tumu Narasimhadas”* of Guntur went to Bhadrachalam with Varada Ramadas of Kanchipuram. Both are stayed there for some time. The original Ramadas constructed or renovated temple and endowing properties Thanisha<sup>4</sup> to Ramadas for the maintenance of the shrine for continuous worship of deities was by then destroyed. Narsimhadas met the Nizam who was the successor of Tanisha and got the finance to renowned the temple.

About the three hundred years after Ramadas renovated the shrine and constructed Gopurams and again renovated in the last years of 20<sup>th</sup> Century main sanctum removed Vimana Constructed on it. Kalyana Mandapam (where the Seetharama Kalyanam performing every year on Sri Rama Navami day) constructed.

The construction of a bridge over the Godavari river near Bhadrachalam with good transportation facilities the temple has acquired



new dimensions. The holy shrine is popular all over the world today as “Sri Seetha Rama Chandraswamy Devasthanam” An icon of great saint Bhakta Ramadas has been installed on the temple premises.

**THE GURU OF RAMADAS:** The popular belief is that Ramadas received initiation from the famous North Indian Saint “Kabir”. When Kabir sought admission into the shrine at Bhadrachalam, is said that he was prevented from entering the Hindu Brahmins, he is being a Muslim. All these are stories because Saint Kabir was a disciple of Ramananda had created synthesis between Hinduism and Islam. Ramananda and Kabeer belongs to 15<sup>th</sup> Century A.D. Ramadas belongs to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century A.D. could not be his Guru . Gopanna (Ramadas) not declared that his Keerthanas he was a disciple of Kabir.

In his “Dasarathi Shathakam”<sup>5</sup> Ramadas describing himself as “Gopa Kaveendrudu” states that he had sought refuge in the feet of “Bhattararya Guru’s . He cleared that Raghunatha Bhattar was his Guru. In his Shathakam no name has been made of Kabir.

### **THE KEERTHANAS OF RAMADAS:**

Bhaktha Ramadas an ardent devotee of Lord Rama was a Saint – Composer, musician and great philosopher, he was a scholar in Telugu and Urdu. He was well-versed in Sanskrit also is evident from his compositions.

The language adopted by Ramadas in his songs is simple. In many of his Keerthanas some of Urdu and Persian words were freely used. These Keerthanas mostly sing by the Karnatic Music form. In his popular song

“Ikshvakukula Tilaka Ikanaina palukava Ramachandra.....” Ramadasu put forth before the Lord the details of the expenditure incurred by him for the word. Several ornaments and jewels were referred to in it “Chintaku Patakamu” is a necklace presented to Sita by Ramadas. The necklace contains golden leaves resembling tamarind leaves. A story is said about the special liking shown by Sita to tamarind leaves.

Another Keerthana:

“Annagaru Rama Bhajana Kanna Mikkilunnada Rama Chiluka Nokatipenchi prema matalada nerpi Rama Rama Rama Yanuchu Ramani Yekate.....” Is a popular one. The story of a parrot brought up by a woman who taught the bird to utter Rama - Rama. There is a story behind it in Satyayuga. There was a young widow<sup>6</sup> who turned out be a prostitute. She



brought up a parrot and taught her to utter the words Rama – Rama. One day the lady and bird both were died. Yama arrived also the Vishnu escorts also came both are sought to take into their courts a dispute arose between them. She spent immoral life so she must produced before Yamadarmaraja No. She uttered Ramanaama several times not only that she taught it to a bird also her place is in our Vishnuloka. At last Yama declared who recites Vishnunaama the Yama sent to Vishnuloka.

In a lonely song sung by him

“Anni Janmamu Lettevaleno .....

How many more births are in store for me. How can be I bear all these my lord. He is not proper on your part to ignore me like this. He finally prays to Rama “I am your servant. I surrender to you”. The prayer in Choornika is a composition deserving special mention.

It is an elegant prayer address to Sri Ramabhadra of Bhadrachalam. The 24 conspicuous names of Bhagwan Srimannarayana are referred to in it. This keerthana contains a resume of the Ramayana.

A few songs of Ramadas are very popular among them.

- Nandabalam Bhajare Nandabalam Brundavana lola bhajase Nandabalami – O Nandalala \_\_\_\_\_ praying you O Brundavana lola Iam doing bhalan for you?
- Deenadayalo<sup>7</sup> Paripurna Krupalo Bhakthavatsala he parama Dayalo – O Rama you are the protector of those who are helpless and giving full blessings”.
- Idigo Bhadradi Gauthami Adigo Chudandi – “This is Bhadrachalam, that is Gowthami (Godavari) river and the Lord Rama with his wife and brother resided temple.

Ramachandraya Janaka Rajasa Manoharaya A Mangalaharathi (Closing of Pooja or Bhan) is a popular one in all over the Telugu country. All Lord Rama temples and Lord Hanuman temples recite every day even today.

In addition to the songs in Telugu, Ramadas composed over a hundred verses in Telugu called “Dhashardhi Shathakam”<sup>8</sup>, each of the verses end with the refrain “Dhaashrathree Karunapayonidhi. “Dhashrathee”



means ..... King Dhasharadha Son Rama. “Karunapayonidhi” means ..... Ocean of compassion. Telugu people are familiar with these verses. Most of the children in elementary schools of Andhra Pradesh can recite at least five verses of “Dasarathi Shathakam”.

This book is a master piece in Telugu literature dealing with devotion, morals, philosophy and introspection.

## **CONCLUSIONS:**

Bhaktha Ramadas left a profound legacy on the spiritual and cultural outlook of India, especially in Telugu literature. He used to celebrate Sri Ramachandraswamy Kalyanostavam at Bhadrachalam on Chaitra Shudha Navami (people called Sri Rama Navami) day. It is said that he used to go to neighbour villages on foot by signing his keerthanas and invite people to attend the annual Kalyanostavam.

Even today the “Hari Dasas” (A Community signing Lord Vishnu Songs every day in the village collecting money) some areas in Andhra Pradesh called “Dasaris” visit every house in villages particularly during the month of “Dhanurmasa” preceding the Makara Sankranthi festival sing the Keerthnas of Ramadas.

Kancharla Gopanna (Bhaktha Ramadas ) gave resurgence to the Vaishnava tradition of “Bhakti Yoga” (Devotional cult). This tradition was followed by later saints such as Mirabai and Sri Chaitanya prabhu in the 19<sup>th</sup> & 20<sup>th</sup> Century A.D. Bhaktivedanta Prabhu Pada Swamy popularized this (signing songs by emotional dance) form of Hinduism in the west.

Bhakta Ramadas gained a noteworthy place in the tradition of the galaxy of “Rama-Bhaktas”. His songs on Lord Rama spread all over the country by modern electronic instruments. His life, his sufferings and his obtaining in the end the blessing of Rama became a common story among the Telugu people.

## **Notes:**

1. G.V.Chalapatirao, Ramadas of Bhadrachalam This book is published with the Financial Assistance of the Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams, Tirupati, Andhra Pradesh, under the scheme “Aid to publish Religious Books”. 1980 P.14
2. Ibid.,P.17



3. Ibid., P.61
4. Cultural Leaders of India, Devotional Poets and Mystics Part-II  
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5. Cultural Leaders of India Devotional Poets and Mystics Part-I  
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6. Ibid.P.,76
7. Ibid., P.73
8. Ibid., P.82

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