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**Kārtikā Tirunāḷ Bālarāma Varma's
Self-portrait in the *Bālarāma* Varma:
King, Patron and Artist ***

ABSTRACT: Kārtikā Tirunāḷ Bālarāma Varma (r. 1758–1798) was the ruler of the South Indian state of Travancore and the author of a Sanskrit treatise on teatrology, the *Bālarāma* Varma. His reign constituted an important period of patronage of arts and literature, especially in the field of performing arts. The king was not only an outstanding patron but also an eminent scholar and an accomplished author. As the evidence of this great variety of roles, the paper proposes to analyse the opening passages of the *Bālarāma* Varma where Kārtikā Tirunāḷ Bālarāma Varma presents himself in a self-portrait of sorts: as a ruler, patron, scholar and poet. He inscribes himself in the patronage tradition of the rulers of Travancore as well as in the line of the continuators of Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra* while simultaneously showcasing his literary prowess and practical experience in the contemporary tradition of performing arts.

KEYWORDS: Kārtikā Tirunāḷ Bālarāma Varma, *Bālarāma* Varma, *nāṭyaśāstra*, Travancore

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Introduction

Kārtikā Tirunāl Bālarāma Varma¹ (r. 1758–1798) was the ruler of the South Indian state of Travancore (Mal. *tiruvitāṅkōṭṭū*, *tiruvāṅkōṭṭū*, *tiruvitāṅkūr*) in the southern region of the present state of Kerala, and the author of a Sanskrit treatise on teatrology—the *Bālarāmaḥarata*. His reign constituted a period of prolific patronage of art and literature, especially in the field of performing arts. The Rajah was an outstanding patron, praised and solicited by the artists of his time; an eminent scholar and an accomplished author. In order to provide evidence for this great variety of roles, the paper proposes to analyse selected passages from the *Bālarāmaḥarata*, with a special focus on the opening verses of the work. In those, Rāma Varma paints a self-portrait of sorts—as a ruler, patron, connoisseur of art, and artist—purposefully inscribing himself both in the patronage tradition of the rulers of Travancore and in the line of the continuators of Bharata’s *Nāṭyaśāstra*. Simultaneously, he demonstrates his literary prowess and practical experience in the contemporary tradition of performing arts. The very choice as to which of the earlier kings to mention in his work and how to portray them in his work defines Rāma Varma himself. The descriptions of the monarchs from the past form a rich and dense background against which he wants to be seen as a ruler—a background, however, that would let him shine. The brightest source of brilliance in this portrait of Rāma Varma seems to be his role as the creator of the space in which he himself and those he patronises create works of art and science.

¹ “Kārtikā” denotes the star (*nāl*) of his nativity—*kṛttika*; thus “Tirunāl” together with the name of the star is a part of an honorific used by the members of the Travancore royal family; and “Bāla” is a hereditary title denoting the submission to the tutelary deity of the Travancore royal family, Śrī Padmanābha (Sambaśiva Śastri 1935: 3–4), represented as Viṣṇu with a lotus (*padma*) growing from his navel (*nābha*). In the present article, Kārtikā Tirunāl Bālarāma Varma will be referred to as Rāma Varma.

Bālarāmabharata

Translations of Rāma Varma's Sanskrit² work presented in the paper draw on the edition of the *Bālarāmabharata* by K. Sambaśiva Śāstri—*Bālarāmabharatam* of Śrī Bālarāma Varma Vanci Maharaja, published in 1935 in the Trivandrum Sanskrit Series, no. 118 (Sambaśiva Śāstri 1935).³ The edition is based on a single manuscript belonging to the Palace Library of Trivandrum (today Thiruvananthapuram). Composed in Sanskrit, the manuscript is written in the Malayalam script and has been transliterated into *devanāgarī* by the editor of the book. K. Sambaśiva Śāstri dates the manuscript to the end of the 18th century (*ibid.*: 17), and according to E. Easwaran Nampoothiry, this single manuscript might be the original copy produced by the author himself (Easwaran Nampoothiry 1983: 74). The treatise is composed in the combination of verse and prose—the printed edition contains 2408 stanzas and numerous passages in prose, of different lengths, ranging from one line up to two pages.

The *Bālarāmabharata* is a theoretical work on theatrology (*nāṭya-śāstra*) dealing primarily with the *āṅgikābhinaya* or physical representation as the principal instrument of conveying emotions (*bhāva*) and leading to the aesthetic experience (*rasa*). The treatise considers also other aspects of the theatre theory such as music and musical accompaniment or the definition of *nāṭya* and its essence. But the bulk of the work, devoted to the *āṅgikābhinaya*, discusses the movements of the body and the uses (*vinīyoga*) of these movements.

The prologue of the *Bālarāmabharata* (*Bālarāmabharata* 1–42) opens with an invocation to the deities (*maṅgalācaraṇa*) (*Bālarāmabharata* 1–8): Sarasvatī, Gaṇeśa, Śiva and Pārvatī, Śrī Padmanābha,

² The whole of the *Bālarāmabharata* has not been translated into any other language; short fragments have been translated into English, see Easwarana Nampoothiry 1983. Several stanzas are also given in English translation in Gouri Lakshmi Bayi 2000: 415–416.

³ While quoting passages from the *Bālarāmabharata* I refer to the printed edition. The work was reprinted in 1991 by Chaukhamba Sanskrit Pratishthan in Delhi.

Viṣṇu and Lakṣmī. Subsequently, it presents the genesis of the work (*Bālarāmabharata* 9, 40–42) and praises the author—in his roles as a ruler, patron, and connoisseur of arts—as well as his dynasty and his kingdom (*Bālarāmabharata* 10–39).

Rāma Varma as a King

Rāma Varma was born in 1724 as the son of Kērala Varma Koil Tampurān, of Kilimānūr, and Rāṇi Pārvatī Bāyi (Sambaśiva Śāstri 1935: 4). In 1758, after the death of his maternal uncle Mārtāṇḍa Varma (r. 1729–1758), he inherited the throne of the kingdom of Travancore. In the opening part of his work, Rāma Varma emphasises his role as a king, not only by describing his achievements but also by claiming a connection with the ancient lineage of the rulers of Kerala.

The author refers to the legendary history of Kerala by comparing himself to Paraśurāma, Rāma with the axe, known also as Bhārgava (*Bālarāmabharata* 21), the mythological creator of the land of Kerala. The myth of Paraśurāma and the origins of Kerala are transmitted both in the oral tradition and literary sources, as Malayalam *Kēraḷōlpatti* or Sanskrit *Kēraḷamāhātmyam* (Galewicz 2015: 61–62; Vielle 2014).⁴ In the *Bālarāmabharata* (*Bālarāmabharata* 21), Rāma Varma mentions Paraśurāma while seeking blessings for himself:

*śrīrāmaḥ svayam eva kārmukadharo rudro 'stravidyāpaṭuḥ
śūraḥ śaktimatām gadāparicaye sāksātkṛto bhārgavaḥ |
bāhubhyām atimallavairikalahe śrīkr̥ṣṇa eva svayam
śrīmadvañcikulādhipo vijayate śrībālarāmaprabhuḥ | 21 |*

⁴ According to Vielle, the myth of Paraśurāma is not as old as it may appear, and the full version of the story may be found in literature from around the 13th century (Vielle 2014). Both *Kēraḷōlpatti* and *Kēraḷamāhātmyam* are even later compositions—the earliest compilation of the first may be dated to ca. 17th century and the second is seen by some scholars as having been drawn upon *Kēraḷōlpatti* (Galewicz 2021: 4).

[He is] Śrī Rāma himself, holding a bow, terrifying expert in the military art, who appeared [as] Bhārgava, a champion among the powerful ones during the mace trial, [he is] Śrī Kṛṣṇa himself, in the fight with both hands against a powerful enemy; may he win, this respectable lord of the Vañci dynasty, King Śrī Bālarāma.⁵

In his work, Rāma Varma claims to be a descendant of the Cēra dynasty, calling himself “the divine jewel adorning the royal Cēra dynasty, the wonderful diadem of the respectable rulers of Kerala” (*cerakṣitīśakulabhūṣaṇadivyaratnaṃ śrīkeralakṣitibhṛdadbhutamauliratnam, Bālarāma-bharata* 14a). In this passage, he refers to the dynasty of Kulaśēkharas, known also as Cēras of Mahōdayapuram, who ruled in Kerala from the 9th to the 12th century. Their reign is referred to as the second Cēra Empire, the first being the reign of the Cēra dynasty in the *caṅkam* period (Menon Shreedhara 2006: 142–145). The Kulaśēkharas claimed to be the descendants of the Caṅkam Cēra dynasty by using the title of Cēramāṇ Perumāl. Moreover, the capital of Kulaśēkharas, Mahōdayapuram (known also as Mahōdayapattana or Mākōtai), was called Vañci—name derived from the name of the capital of the first Cēra Empire (*ibid.*: 82–83). However, there is no evidence of a connection between the Kulaśēkharas and the Caṅkam Cēra dynasty, and the indigenous historical tradition, such as reflected in *Kēraḷōlpatti*, does not differentiate between a ‘first’ and a ‘second’ Cēra Empire, this distinction being made by modern historiography.

⁵ Mace (*gadā*) is usually one of the attributes of the god Viṣṇu; however, this fragment seems to refer to the story of the rivalry between Paraśurāma and Subrahmaṇya—more precisely to the mace-fight between Paraśurāma and Subrahmaṇya at Subrahmaṇyapura, as described in *Kēraḷamāhātmyam* and *Kēraḷōlpatti* (Janaki 1966: 67–68). Spear (*śakti*) being one of the attributes of Subrahmaṇya, the phrase “*śaktimatām*,” may be also translated as “among the spear-holders” and refer to Paraśurāma’s opponent in this battle. The second part of the stanza may refer to the episode of Kṛṣṇa’s subduing of the serpent Kāliya.

The last ruler of Kulaśēkhara dynasty, Rāma Varma Kulaśēkhara (r. 1089–1122) (*ibid.*: 145)⁶ moved the capital from Mahōdayapuram, ravaged by the war with the Cōḷa dynasty, to Kollaṃ in the southern province of Vēnāṭu. Alluding to the Cēra capital, the new capital was called ‘Ten Vañci’ (‘Southern Vañci’) (*ibid.*: 141). In the 12th century, after the war against the Cōḷas which lasted the entire 11th century and led to the collapse of the second Cēra Empire, the provinces, Vēnāṭu among them, gained autonomy from the central power, becoming independent kingdoms with their own ruling dynasties. In the 15th century, the kingdom of Vēnāṭu split into two, one of them being the kingdom of Travancore (Menon Shreedhara 2006: 198–215, Kunju 2007: 44–75).⁷

The royal family of Travancore established its capital in Trivandrum (or Thiruvananthapuram), and later in Kalkuḷam (or Padmanābhapuram).⁸ The title of Kulaśēkhara Perumāl used by the Cēras of Mahōdayapuram was maintained by the rulers of Vēnāṭu and later by those of Travancore who used it officially up to the middle of the 20th century. The last ruler of Travancore, who titled himself Kulaśēkhara Perumāl, was Śrī Cītra Tirunāl Bālarāma Varma (r. 1931–1949) (*ibid.*: 170). The name Vañci, as well as the title of Kulaśēkhara Perumāl, appear also in the *Bālarāmabharata* where Rāma Varma styles himself “the respectable lord of the Vañci dynasty” (*śrīmadvañcikulādhipo*, *Bālarāmabharata* 21) or “Śrī Bālarāma Kulaśekhara, the ruler of Vañci” (*śrībālarāmakulaśekharavañcibhūpaḥ*,

⁶ On the genealogies of the Cēras of Mahōdayapuram, see Menon Shreedhara 2006: 145–146.

⁷ According to a local legend, the partition of the Cēra Empire was brought about by the last Cēramān Perumāl before he embraced Islam and departed for Mecca. There is however no evidence to back up this account, and the story of his conversion to Islam may be the result of confusing him with a later ruler of Calicut (Nagam Aiya 1906: 210–229; Menon Shreedhara 2006: 17, 141–143; Kunju 2007: IX–XVI, 1, 45).

The assumption of the imperial titles by the Vēnāṭu rulers may have occurred as a result of marital unions, contracted within the matrilineal system followed by the ruling families, between the royal centre of Mahōdayapuram and the provinces (Vielle 2011: 374–375).

⁸ On the history of Vēnāṭu and Travancore, see Menon Shreedhara 2006, Ibrahim Kunju 2007, De Lannoy 1997, Nagam Aiya 1906.

Bālarāmabharata 13; and *vañcibhūpaḥ śrībālarāmakulaśekharabhūmipālah*, *Bālarāmabharata* 17⁹).¹⁰

Among his numerous ancestors, Rāma Varma mentions two figures—Cēramāṇ Perumāl Nāyanār, one of the Śaiva saints or Nāyanārs, and Kulaśēkhara Āḷvār, one of the Vaishnava saints or Āḷvārs—and refers to the legends relating to them.¹¹

Cēramāṇ Perumāl Nāyanār is said to have gone on a pilgrimage, together with his friend, another Śaiva saint, Sundaramūrti Nāyanār, to visit various Śaiva shrines. In the *Bālarāmabharata*, Rāma Varma mentions their last journey,¹² which they made to the Śiva's residence on Mount Kailāsa. Cēramāṇ Perumāl travelled on a horse and Sundaramūrti on a white elephant. When they reached Kailāsa, Cēramāṇ Perumāl recited his poem, *Tirukkaiyilaiñānavulā* (*ibid.*: 158; Sastri Nilakanta 1955: 352–353). Rāma Varma describes this event in the *Bālarāmabharata* (*Bālarāmabharata* 16):

⁹ The entire stanza (*Bālarāmabharata* 17) reads:

tadvamśabhūṣaṇamaniḥ sa tu vañcibhūpaḥ
śrībālarāmakulaśekharabhūmipālah |
śrīpadmanābhakarūṇām avalambya bhūmim
ācandratāramavatād agado 'navadyah | 17 |

“This ruler of Vañci, jewel adorning his dynasty, King Śrī Bālarāma Kulaśekhara, devoting himself to the compassion of Śrī Padmanābha, may he rule the earth, free from disease, as long as there are moon and stars [in the sky].”

¹⁰ The epithet, “the ruler of Vañci” (*vañcibhūpaḥ*), is used also in reference to Mārtāṇḍa Varma (*bālamārtāṇḍavarmakulaśekharavañcibhūpaḥ*, *Bālarāmabharata* 23).

¹¹ Despite attempts to identify these figures with rulers of the Cēra dynasty—Kulaśēkhara Āḷvār with Kulaśēkhara Varman (r. 800–820) (Menon Shreedhara 2006: 157, Raja Kunjunni 1980: 1–2) and Cēramāṇ Perumāl Nāyanār with Rājaśekhara Varman (r. 820–844) (Menon Shreedhara 2006: 158)—there is no consensus on this identification or even on the fact that they correspond to any of the rulers of Mahōdayapuram (on the identification of Kulaśēkhara Āḷvār, see Anandakichenin 2018: 55–70). It should also be mentioned that the order of stanzas in *Bālarāmabharata* does not follow the chronology of this tentative identification, as in the prologue Cēramāṇ Perumāl Nāyanār is presented before Kulaśēkhara Āḷvār.

¹² This last pilgrimage of Cēramāṇ Perumāl and Sundaramūrti is narrated in Cēkkiḷār's *Periyapurānam* (12th century), relating the lives of the 63 Śaiva Nāyanārs.

*kailāsaśailagamane pathi saṁsmṛtena
bhaktena sundaravareṇa sa cerabhūpaḥ |
āruhya vāham adhigamya ca śailam īśe
śrīsundareṇa kathitaṁ caritaṁ cakāra || 16 ||*

This Cēra King, going to the mount Kailāsa together with the *bhakta* named Sundaravara, mounted a horse, reached the mountain and composed a story dedicated to Śīva, which was handed over by honourable Sundara.

According to the legend,¹³ Kulaśēkhara Ālvār, who at the height of his royal fame became a devotee of Rāma, used to listen to the recitation of the *Rāmāyaṇa* every day. Once, while listening to the passage narrating the battle where Rāma all alone faces the army of thousands of *rakṣasas*, Kulaśēkhara Ālvār jumped up, ready to depart with his army to Daṇḍaka forest to help Rāma. He was detained from putting his plan into practice by an ingenious plan of his ministers: they sent a group of men who met the king and told him that they were coming from the battle where Rāma had already defeated the demons. Calmed, Kulaśēkhara returned to his palace. Knowing the passionate temperament of the King, the royal reciter would emphasize the happy moments of Rāma's history and quickly pass over the difficult ones. But one day, the usual reciter had to be replaced by his son who, unaware of the situation, recited the entire story. When Kulaśēkhara heard about Rāvaṇa's abduction of Sītā, he immediately armed himself, rushed to the seashore with his army and threw himself into the water, ready to reach Laṅkā, kill Rāvaṇa and rescue Rāma's wife. As the King was swimming towards Laṅkā, Rāma himself appeared in front of him to turn him back to his capital. At the end of his life, Kulaśēkhara Ālvār

¹³ The story is narrated in a 17th-century hagiographic work, *Prapanna-mṛtam* of Anantācārya, which draws on *Divyasūricaritam* of Garuḍavāhanapaṇḍita (Uskokov 2014: 218). The account of Kulaśēkhara is also quoted in Govindāchārya 1902: 116–133.

retired to Raṅgakṣetra, or Śrīraṅgam, where he worshiped Viṣṇu as Raṅganātha. In the *Bālarāmabharata*, Rāma Varma narrates the whole incident (*Bālarāmabharata* 18–19) in these words:

*śrīrāmabhaktirasapūrṇamanāḥ*¹⁴ *smṛtaśrī-*
rāmātmabhāvasahitaḥ sa grhītakhaḍgaḥ |
rāmāyaṇaśravaṇarāvaṇakhaṇḍaneccchuḥ
sindhuṃ viveśa kulaśekharabhūmipo yaḥ || 18 ||
taṃ rāghavo 'pi karuṇānidhir etya tūrṇaṃ
dattvā karaṃ jaladhitīram amuṃ nināya |
dattvā varaṃ pratidinaṃ bhuvī raṅganātha-
saṃsevako mama tu bhaktajaṇeṣu mukhyaḥ || 19 ||
itthaṃ hi rāmavacanastutadīvyamūrtir
yāṃ bhūmim eva paripālayati sma pūrvam |
*tadvaṃśakīrtim*¹⁵ *amalāṃ paripātukāmaḥ*
śrīrāma eva sa kalau hi kṛtāvātāraḥ || 20 ||

The King Kulaśekhara, with his heart filled with devotion to Śrī Rāma, and unified with the nature of Śrī Rāma called to [his] mind, [became] willing to kill Rāvaṇa while listening to [the recitation of] *Rāmāyaṇa*, seized his sword and threw himself into the ocean.

He was approached by the compassionate Rāghava who gave him his hand, led him to the ocean shore and blessed him with the words: “Every day on earth [you are] the supreme servant of Raṅganātha among my devotees.”

In this manner, the divine figure, praised by Rāma’s words, desiring to guard the stainless glory of the dynasty of the world, which he was protecting in the past, appeared like Rāma in Kaliyuga.

The only modern ruler of Travancore mentioned by Rāma Varma is his maternal uncle, Mārtāṇḍa Varma.¹⁶ According to the rules of the

¹⁴ em. AW; ed.: *pūṇamarnāḥ*

¹⁵ em. AW; ed.: *kīrttim*

¹⁶ On the rule of Mārtāṇḍa Varma, see Ibrahim Kunju 2007: 175–192, Menon Shreedhara 2006: 282–293, Nagam Aiya 1906: 333–368, Velu Pillai 1940: 262–357.

matrilineal system of succession (*marumakkattāyam*), followed in Travancore, the throne was inherited by the son of the eldest sister of the ruler (Menon Shreedhara 2006: 165–166). Hence, Rāma Varma inherited the throne from his maternal uncle. Mārtāṇḍa Varma is mentioned in only one stanza. That is enough, however, to sum up the reign of the king considered to be one of the most illustrious rulers of the dynasty and the founder of modern Travancore (*Bālarāmabharata* 23):

*yanmātulo ripujayaṃ prasameya bāla-
mārtāṇḍavarmakulaśekharavañcibhūpaḥ |
cakre bhuvaṃ svakarasaṃstham ivātapatram
tadbhāgineyakulaśekharabālarāmaḥ || 23 ||*

Kulaśekhara Bālarāma was a nephew of his uncle, Bālamārtāṇḍa Varma Kulaśekhara, the king of Vañci, who defeated the enemy and made the world stay in his hand like a big umbrella.

By calling himself a “vessel of compassion of Śrī Padmanābha” (*śrīpadmanābhakarauṇārasapātrabhūto*, *Bālarāmabharata* 12) or by stating that he is “filled with the devotion at the feet of Śrī Padmanābha” (*śrīpadmanābhapadabhaktirasaikapūrṇaḥ*, *Bālarāmabharata* 25), Rāma Varma refers to an important project undertaken by Mārtāṇḍa Varma which was the dedication of his entire kingdom to Śrī Padmanābha, the tutelary deity of the Travancore royal family. As a result of this dedication, Śrī Padmanābha, titled now Śrī Padmanābha Perumāḷ, became the ruler of Travancore, and the king and all his successors, assuming the title of Śrī Padmanābhadāsa,¹⁷ became the servants of the deity and ruled the kingdom on his behalf. Rāma Varma addresses the Travancore deity in the benedictory verses of his work (*Bālarāmabharata* 6):

¹⁷ However, according to Gouri Lakshmi Bayi, the title was already used by the Travancore rulers before this time and is found in the temple archives as a title conferred on a male child born in the royal family (Gouri Lakshmi Bayi 2000: 85–86, 91–92, 119).

*śrīmadbhānusahasrakotiśaḍṣaḥ pītāmbarālaṅkṛtaś
cañcatkuṇḍalaśobhitagaṇḍayugalaḥ śrīvatsavakṣo hariḥ |
lakṣmībhūmikaṭākṣavikṣaṇālasacchr̥ṅgārabhāvōjjvalaḥ
pāyāt pannagarājabhogaśayanaḥ śrīpadmanābhāḥ sadā || 6 ||*

May Śrī Padmanābha always protect us, reclining blissfully on the king of snakes, Śeṣa, blazing with love arising from the sideway glance of Lakṣmī and Bhūmi; Śrī Hari, dressed in a yellow garment resembling thousands of golden rays of sunlight, whose cheeks are adorned with dangling earrings, and whose chest is marked by the *śrīvatsa*.

An important part of the opening verses of the *Bālarāmabharata* is dedicated to Rāma Varma himself and his achievements in his role as the ruler.¹⁸ He mentions his education received under the guardianship of Mārtāṇḍa Varma, who prepared him, his nephew, for his future accession to power. Rāma Varma was instructed in the domains of administration and military art but also in the field of arts and science. He excelled in literature, music and dance, and spoke several languages. In the *Bālarāmabharata*, he calls himself an expert in the field of *vedānta* (*ātmavidyāpravīṇa*, *Bālarāmabharata* 30), and talks about his wide-ranging education (*Bālarāmabharata* 28):

*sakalanagarabhāṣābhāṣaṇe lekhane ca
pragūṇitamatiṛ ātmajñānaśāntasvabhāvaḥ |
vidītasakalāśāstro yogamārgaprovīṇaḥ
bhaṇīti¹⁹ kuśalabuddhir bhāratīpūrnadehaḥ || 28 ||*

Whose mind is prepared to write and talk in the languages [used] in the city, whose character is calmed by the knowledge of the *ātman*, versed in all the *śāstras*, an expert in the path of yoga, whose mind is capable of discourse, whose bodily form is filled with eloquence.

¹⁸ On the rule of Rāma Varma, see Nagam Aiya 1906: 369–416, Sambaśiva Śāstri 1935: 1–17, Velu Pillai 1940: 357–446, Easwaran Nampoothiry 1983: 26–28, Menon Shreedhara 2006: 293–298, Ibrahim Kunju 2007: 192–209.

¹⁹ em. AW; ed.: *phaṇīti*

Rāma Varma praises himself in his role of the king by describing the prosperity and security of Travancore, as well as by pointing to his territorial conquests (*Bālarāmabharata* 10):

*sakalanṛpatiramyaṃ sajjanair āvṛtaṃ yat
sakalavibudhagamyam puṇyapūrṇam purāṇam |
tridaśanagaratulyam devatābhiś ca pūrṇam
vijayanṛpatilakṣmyā sevitaṃ viśvasāram || 10 ||*

The ancient [kingdom] pleasing to all the rulers, chosen by the virtuous men, suitable to be the home of the sages, filled with purity, full of deities like a celestial city, the abode of Lakṣmī of the triumphant king, and the treasure of the universe.

He also praises his ministers—the most renowned being the *daḷava* Ayyappan Mārtāṇḍa Piḷḷai and the *dīvān* Kēśava Dās, neither mentioned, however, by name—who helped him carry on reforms started by his uncle (*Bālarāmabharata* 32):

*parijanaparivītā mantriṇas tatra tatra
prabhusamayam ajasraṃ bhāvayanto bhajantaḥ |
nṛpabhavanavarasya dvāri nityam carantaḥ
sakalajanapadebhyo rājatantrasvatantrāḥ || 32 ||*

The devoted ministers, surrounded on every side by attendants, working constantly on the alliances of the rulers, arriving always at the door of the royal palace, for the good of the country and the sovereignty of the royal power.

Besides these references to Travancore, the *Bālarāmabharata* mentions an important event from the period of the reign of Rāma Varma—the Mysore invasion of Malabar in the second half of the 18th century, first by Haidar Ālī, in 1766 and 1774, and later by his son and successor, Tīpū, in 1782. Travancore remained one of the few states

that escaped being conquered by Mysore, and numerous refugees from the other kingdoms of Malabar sought shelter in the kingdom of Rāma Varma, who in the *Bālarāmabharata* praises his military victories and speaks of refugees fleeing from the dreaded Mysore sultans (*Bālarāmabharata* 35):

*kalibhayacakitā ye deśadeśaprasiddhā
nṛpabhayacakitā ye sādhaveḥ sādhuṣṛtāḥ |
aśaraṇam iti matvā deśato gantukāmāḥ
śaraṇam upagatās te vañcibhūpāladeśam || 35 ||*

Virtuous sages, famous in all lands, frightened of war and trembling with fear of the king [Haidar Ālī or Tīpū], aware of having no protection and wishing to leave their country, went seeking shelter in the kingdom of the Vañci ruler.

Rāma Varma, who refused shelter to no one, earned the epithet of ‘Dharma Rāja’ for himself and of ‘Dharma Rājyam’ for his kingdom (*ibid.*: 295), facts that resonate in the following passage of the *Bālarāmabharata* (*Bālarāmabharata* 11):²⁰

*ripujanaduravāpaṃ rājanītiprasastaṃ
vividhamanujaśaṅghair āśritaṃ dharmarūpam |
agatikamanujānām ātmarakṣākaraṃ taj
jayati hi satataṃ śrīvañcirājasya rājyam || 11 ||*

The always victorious kingdom of the venerable Vañci King, unconquerable by the enemies, praised for the politics of the King, giving shelter to various people, ruled by the *dharma* and giving protection to those without resort.

²⁰ Rāma Varma’s epithet of ‘Dharma Rāja’ was later used by C. V. Raman Pillai as the title of his Malayalam novel, *Dharmaraja* (1913, translated in English in 2009 by G. S. Iyer).

In matters other than politics, Rāma Varma describes himself as a devout ruler, taking care of the religious practices in his country (*Bālarāmabharata* 26). Indeed, the Rajah is said to have conducted 16 royal ritual donations (*śoḍaśamahādāna*), prescribed by the *śāstras*, as well as the Vedic ritual of *yāga*.

*śrīpadmanābhapurataḥ sa hiranyagarbha-
dānaṃ tulāpuruṣadānaṃ ajasradīkṣaḥ |
vidhyuktaśāstrakṛtaśoḍaśadānaṃ ārya-
vidvadgaṇāya bhūvi vedavide pradattvā || 26 ||*

He, constantly undertaking religious practises before Śrī Padmanābha—*hiranyagarbhadāna*, *tulāpuruṣadāna* and [the rest of] sixteen donations accomplished according to the prescriptions of the *śāstras*, [and gifts] to the assemblies of respected sages, experts in the Vedas on earth.

Faithful to the notion of Travancore's allegiance to Śrī Padmanābha, he dutifully pledged each newly conquered territory to the deity (Gouri Lakshmi Bayi 2000: 137–138).

Rāma Varma died in 1798, at the age of 74, leaving as his successor the only male member of the family, his nephew Avitṭam Tirunāḷ Bālarāma Varma (r. 1798–1810), who ascended the throne at the age of 16. In the *Bālarāmabharata*, Rāma Varma mentions two other relatives: his younger brother, the prince Makayiram Tirunāḷ Ravi Varma, who died in 1786, and his nephew, the prince Aśvati Tirunāḷ Rāma Varma, who were to succeed Rāma Varma and was, in 1785, invested with the title of the heir apparent (*yuvarāja*), but who, unfortunately, died in 1794 (Raja Kunjunni 1980: 172, XVIII; Gouri Lakshmi Bayi 2000: 416)²¹ (*Bālarāmabharata* 24a):

*tadanujaravivarmā bhāgineyaḥ svanāmā
svayam api sa tu vañcīkṣmāpatīś caikabhāvāḥ | 24a |*

²¹ According to V. Nagam Aiya, in 1788 (Nagam Aiya 1906: 385).

His younger brother Ravi Varma and his nephew, who attained [high] reputation, and he himself, the ruler of Vañci, are of the same nature.

Rāma Varma as a Royal Patron

Rāma Varma, a personification of kingly qualities, gained equal renown as a patron of literature and arts, and this role is also highlighted in several passages of the *Bālarāmaḥarata*. The rulers of Travancore may, to some extent, be seen as inheritors of the tradition of the royal patronage that existed in the Caṅkam period, under the rule of the first Cēras and later continued under the Cēras of Mahōdayapuram. After the fall of the dynasty of Kulaśēkharas in the 12th century, patronage of arts was continued in the kingdoms of the independent local rulers. The political divisions and rivalries between the newly emerged dynasties did not affect the growth and exercise of patronage but rather encouraged competition between the rulers in their role as patrons, with the movement of artists and scholars not restricted by the existence of mere political boundaries.

Among the rulers of Vēnāṭu and Travancore one may find many famous patrons and artists such as Ravi Varma Kulaśēkhara Saṅgrāmadhīra (1299–1314), praised in the inscriptions as ‘Bhoja of the South’ (Gouri Lakshmi Bayi 2000: 71–72; Menon Shreedhara 2006: 173–175). Mārtāṇḍa Varma²² was another great patron—the most renowned court poet of Mārtāṇḍa Varma was Devarāja Kavi, the author of the *Bālamārtāṇḍavijayam*, drama celebrating the dedication of the kingdom to Śrī Padmanābha. Mārtāṇḍa Varma himself was described as a scholar but he did not leave any known work.

Rāma Varma’s court was an important centre of patronage²³ and the ruler regularly organized learned assemblies (*paṇḍitasabhā*) where

²² On the patronage of Mārtāṇḍa Varma, see Velu Pillai 1940: 351–353, Raja Kunjunni 1980: 168–170, Easwaran Nampoothiry 1983: 23, Gouri Lakshmi Bayi 2000: 409–414, Menon Shreedhara 2006: 419–420.

²³ On the patronage of Rāma Varma, see Velu Pillai 1940: 443–445, Kunjunni Raja 1980: 170–180, Easwaran Nampoothiry 1983: 23, Gouri Lakshmi Bayi 2000: 138–139, 414–416.

artists and scholars were honoured for their achievements. In the *Bālarāmabharata*, Rāma Varma presents himself as a generous and respected patron, “friend of the sages, respected by the assemblies of scholars” (*vidvatpriyo nikhilasūrigaṇebhya āryaḥ*, *Bālarāmabharata* 25). He depicts his court as a place where art and scholarship flourish (*Bālarāmabharata* 36):

*gahanapadapadārthajñānavijñānadakṣair
amaragurusamānair arthaśāstrapravīṇaiḥ |
sarasaguṇakavīndrair vākprasaṅge vidagdhaiḥ
pratidinam atiramyā śobhate rājadhānī || 36 ||*

The beautiful capital, adorned every day with experts, proficient in the difficult knowledge of words and their meanings, and equal to the teacher of the gods, Bṛhaspati, versed in the politics, princes among poets skilful in speech and the domains of *guṇa* and *rasa*.

Rāma Varma patronized numerous poets—some artists from the reign of his predecessor, Mārtāṇḍa Varma, and many new protégés who arrived at his own court, among them artists and scholars seeking refuge from the Mysore invaders. A prominent figure, received in Travancore as a royal guest, was princess Manōramā Tampurāṭṭi from the Zamorin family, described as one of the most illustrious Sanskrit scholars in Kerala of her time. Manōramā and Rāma Varma used to exchange letters expressing their mutual respect, and the princess was believed to have helped the Raja in writing the *Bālarāmabharata* (Sudyka 2019: 54–59).²⁴

One of the most eminent poets at Rāma Varma’s court was his nephew, Aśvati Tirunāl Rāma Varma, who wrote in Sanskrit and Malayalam. He authored among others a Sanskrit drama, *Rukmiṇīpariṇaya*, and

²⁴ Selected stanzas of the letters exchanged between Manōramā and Rāma Varma are cited in Raja Kunjunni 1980: 116, and translated into French as *Billets gallants du Mahārājah Kārtika Tirunāl à Manoramā Tampurāṭṭi Princesse Malabāraise (XVIII^e siècle)* in Martin-Dubost 1983: 133–134.

five *kathakaḷi* plays in Malayalam. But above all, Rāma Varma was a patron of performing arts; he is considered to be one of the greatest patrons of *kathakaḷi*. In the *Bālarāmabharata*, Rāma Varma depicts his court as the centre of music, dance and theatre, a seat of tradition where the dancers and danseuses—compared in the following passage to the god of love Madana or Kāma, and his wife, Rati—developed their talents through daily practice (*Bālarāmabharata* 37, 38–39):

*śrutisukharasagītair veṇuvādyair manoḷṅṅaiś
ciraparicayahastābhyastavīṅṅāninādaiḥ |
kalaravakalakaṅṅaślāghyagandharvagītaiḥ
pratidiśam atiramyā śobhate rājadhānī || 37 ||*

The beautiful capital is adorned on every side with charming songs, pleasant to listen to, enchanting flute melodies, with the sounds of *vīṅṅā* played by the trained hands [of musicians], with sweet melodies of celestial musicians that would be envied by the cuckoos.

*nijakuladhanadharmasīlāghyanṛttapravīṅṅaiḥ
pratidinakṛtaśikṣābhāsataḥ prāptabhāvaiḥ |
madanaratisamānair adbhutākārapātrais
takatakatakaśabdais tālamārgānukāraiḥ || 38 ||
naṅṅanagativišeṣollāsacaṅṅcatkaṅṅākṣair
layagatim anusṛtyodghaṅṅṅitāṅṅhripracāraiḥ |
sarasakaravilāsair hāvabhāvaprakarsair
jayati nṛpasamājo raṅṅgalakṣmīnivāsah || 39 ||*

The royal court, abode of Raṅgalakṣmī, excels thanks to the experts endowed in wonderful bodies, similar to Madana and Rati, skilful in dance, praised as the pride of the tradition of their families, who earned their achievements by the daily practice and training; in the exceptional beauty of the sideway glances aimed at the dance steps following the rhythm, resonating with the sounds *ta-ka-ta-ka-ta-ka*, in the movements of bare feet following the speed of steps, in the beauty of hands conveying the *rasa* and in the perfection of emotions [expressed by] coquettish gestures.

According to Phillip B. Zarrilli, royal patronage played a key role in the formation and development of *kathakali* tradition which, under the patronage of the prince Kērala Varma (1645–1716)²⁵, emerged as a distinct art form sometime in the 16th and 17th centuries (Zarrilli 2000: 17–18, 24–25). In the 18th century, under the rule of Mārtāṇḍa Varma and even more so, Rāma Varma, Travancore became one of the main centres of patronage of *kathakali*. Rāma Varma founded a *kathakali* troupe, Koṭṭāram Kathakali Yōgam, and to popularise the form, organised *kathakali* presentations during religious festivals in the Śrī Padmanābha temple in Trivandrum. The Rajah patronised also the *kathakali* authors composing at his court (*ibid.*: 25). Besides *kathakali*, Rāma Varma supported other performing arts, music and dance. During his reign, the *kṛṣṇanāṭṭam* plays, which emerged at the court of Zamorin of Calicut, were staged in the Śrī Padmanābha temple in Trivandrum (Gouri Lakshmi Bayi 2000: 130). He is also said to have introduced to Kerala the dance tradition of *mōhiniyāṭṭam*, based on the *dāsiyāṭṭam* of the Tamil region (Raja Kunjunnī 1980: 172, Easwaran Nampoothiry 1983: 39). But even though the *Bālarāmabharata* refers to *mōhiniyāṭṭam* as *mohinīnāṭana*, it is impossible to prove that Rāma Varma was the founder of this dance form as the name *mōhiniyāṭṭam* already appears in earlier works. Nevertheless, as the patron of music, dance and theatre in general, he undoubtedly participated in the development of that dance form in Kerala.

Rāma Varma as a Scholar and Artist

Zarrilli, discussing the role of the first royal patrons of *kathakali* in the period spanning the 17th and the 18th centuries, notes that they were not only

²⁵ Kērala Varma (1645–1716), known also as Koṭṭayattu Tampurān or Vidvān Tampurān, was a patron and himself an author of four *kathakali* plays, still popular and performed on stage even today (Easwaran Nampoothiry 1983: 35, Menon Shreedhara 2006: 419).

patrons but also authors, connoisseurs (*rasika*) and artistic innovators (Zarrilli 2000: 19):

During this period in Kerala's history, 'patronage' was one multi-faceted role within a series of social roles constituting the 'role set' identifying a ruler as a ruler, with all the privileges, rites, powers, and responsibilities assumed by that position. The role of patron was not a passive, disinterested one but, rather, an active role in which the patron himself was often directly involved not only in providing the social and economic means necessary to realize the art, but also as author/composer of texts, ideal audience member, and, occasionally, performer.

This remark may be applied, without doubt, to Rāma Varma who as a ruler not only extended patronage to artists but was a connoisseur of art and a creative artist himself. As the author of the *Bālarāmaḥarata*, Rāma Varma may certainly be considered an expert in the field of the *nāṭyaśāstra*. The evidence of that is, of course, on view in the very subject and content of the treatise, but also expounded in several passages of the *Bālarāmaḥarata* where Rāma Varma confidently presents himself as a scholar and continuator of Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra*.²⁶

The most obvious reference to the *Nāṭyaśāstra* is the very title of Rāma Varma's work, the *Bālarāmaḥarata*, which combines his own name—Bālarāma, with that of the legendary sage and author of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*—Bharata. In its content, the *Bālarāmaḥarata* makes reference not only to Bharata (Bharata as Bharatācārya, *Bālarāmaḥarata* p. 10, stanza 75; p. 19), but cites other authors and later treatises on the *nāṭyaśāstra*, among them: Kohala (*Bālarāmaḥarata* p. 162), *Ādibharata* (*Bālarāmaḥarata* p. 7, p. 40), *Tāṇḍavam* (*Bālarāmaḥarata* p. 8), *Śabdaratnāvali* (*Bālarāmaḥarata* p. 7), *Sanḡitaratnākara* of

²⁶ The *Nāṭyaśāstra*, dated between the 2nd century B. C. and the 2nd century A. D. (Bose 1991: 7; Cieřlikowski 2016: 155) or not later than the 4th century A. D. (Byrski 2017: X), is the oldest preserved Sanskrit treatise on theatology, ascribed to the mythological sage Bharata.

Śārṅgadeva (*Bālarāmabharata* p. 7) and *Saṅgītasudhākara* of Haripāla (*Bālarāmabharata* p. 16). The author of the *Bālarāmabharata* cites these authorities usually to support his point of view, though at times also to disagree with them and present his own opinion. By doing so Rāma Varma demonstrates his knowledge of the previous theoretical works on the *nāṭyaśāstra*.

Moreover, the *Bālarāmabharata* presents traditional components of a work from the *nāṭyaśāstra* category. It pays customary tribute to the teachers of the *nāṭyaśāstra*, enumerating them in two stanzas (*Bālarāmabharata* p. 11, stanzas 84–85). The treatise includes a passage on the origins of *nāṭya*, considering Parameśvara, or Śiva, as its founder and supreme authority (*Bālarāmabharata* p. 11–12, stanzas 86–87a) and mentions the worldly founders of the *nāṭyaśāstra*—the sages (*muni*) and the royal sages (*rājarṣi*) (*Bālarāmabharata* p. 12, stanzas 87b–89a). Situating himself as a successor of the tradition founded by Parameśvara, and among other royal authors of the *nāṭyaśāstras*, Rāma Varma presents his work as the essence of the existing knowledge (*Bālarāmabharata* p. 12, stanzas 89b–90):

rājarṣipravaraiḥ proktaṃ prathitaṃ bharataṃ bhuvī | 89 |
tatsārasaṅgrahaṃ kṛtvā bālarāmamahīpatiḥ |
lokānām upakārāya kṛtavān bharataṃ mudā | 90 |

The greatest ruler Bālarāma, gathering the essence of what had been said and showed [in the field of] *nāṭyaśāstra* by the most illustrious royal sages on earth, for the sake of the world, with joy composed [a treatise of] *nāṭyaśāstra*.

Rāma Varma also portrays himself as a respected authority in the domain of the *nāṭyaśāstra* (*Bālarāmabharata* 13):

śrībālarāmakulaśekharavañcibhūpaḥ
saṅgītatālabharatāmbudhipūrnacandraḥ |
ādakṣiṇābdhihimabhūdharāṃ āttakīrtir
vidyākalāvinayabhūḥ parirakṣati kṣmām | 13 |

Śrī Bālarāma Kulaśekhara, the ruler of Vañci—the moon above the Bharata’s ocean [of science] of music, chant, dance and rhythm, famous from the southern ocean to the northern mountains, learned in art and science—protects the earth.

While explaining the circumstances of the genesis of the *Bālarāma-bharata*, Rāma Varma once again claims the role of a connoisseur of art and continuator of Bharata’s tradition (*Bālarāmabharata* 40b):

*rasikajanasahasraiḥ śobhitāyāṃ sabhāyāṃ
bharatam iha vidhātuṃ prārthito vañcirājaḥ* | 40 |

During the wonderful assembly, the King of Vañci was asked by the thousands of connoisseurs to assume the role of Bharata.

The choice of the two legendary ancestors referred to by Rāma Varma (*Bālarāmabharata* 16, 18–20) suggests that the Rajah wanted to highlight his role as a writer because Cēramāṇ Perumāl Nāyanār and Kulaśekhara Āḷvār were both considered to be authors of literary works—the first of a Tamil poem *Tirukkaiyilaiñānavulā*; the second of Tamil *Perumāḷ Tirumoli* and Sanskrit *Mukundamālā*.²⁷

The content of the *Bālarāmabharata* itself demonstrates its author’s practical experience of the contemporary tradition of performing arts. Like most theoretical works, the *Bālarāmabharata* follows the method of classification and description of Bharata’s *Nāṭyaśāstra*, but at the same time, it presents some differences. For example, the *Nāṭyaśāstra* divides the body parts into two categories of major and minor limbs, *aṅga* and *upāṅga*, the last being also called *pratyāṅga*. Later texts, the *Bālarāmabharata* among them, divide the body parts into three categories: major limbs (*aṅga*), minor limbs (*upāṅga*), and subsidiary limbs (*pratyāṅga*)—the last category classifying the

²⁷ However, the attribution of the authorship of the *Mukundamālā* to Kulaśekhara Āḷvār is not unanimously accepted (Anandakichenin 2018: 62–65).

body parts (neck, arms, belly, calves and knees) which are not taken into account in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (Vatsyayan 1997: 15). While describing the respective body parts, the *Bālarāmabharata* introduces new elements, often characteristic of the *kathakaḷi* tradition (Easwaran Nampoothiry 1983: 309–310). Thereby Rāma Varma's work combines the elements of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and the later regional theoretical works, like the *Hastalakṣaṇadīpikā*, a treatise popular in Kerala and followed by the traditions of *kūṭiyāṭṭam* and *kathakaḷi*.

Besides the Sanskrit treatise, the *Bālarāmabharata*, Rāma Varma had also authored seven *kathakaḷi* plays, written in Malayalam, of which six are based on episodes from the *Mahābhārata*: *Rājasūyam*, *Subhadrāharaṇam*, *Bakavadham*, *Gandharvavijayam*, *Pāñcālīsveyam-varam*, *Kalyāṇasaugandhikam* (*ibid.*: 40), and one is based on a story from the *Śrīmadbhāgavatapurana*—*Narakāsuravadham*, the last written jointly with his nephew Aśvati Tirunāl (*ibid.*: 34). But the lines of the *Bālarāmabharata*, too, demonstrate the poetic skills of its author and his familiarity with the *kāvya* tradition. For example, in the 12th stanza of the work, where Rāma Varma praises himself as a ruler, we find the standard metaphors (the lotus-feet) and images (the defeated rulers who pay tribute to the conqueror by illuminating his feet with the brightness of their crowns' diadems) (*Bālarāmabharata* 12):

śrīpadmanābhakarūṇārasapātrabhūto
bhūpālamaulimaṇirañjītapādapadmah |
diksundarīnavanavāmbarakīrti²⁸śālī
śrībālarāmanṛpatiḥ parirakṣati kṣmām || 12 |

The vessel of compassion of Śrī Padmanābha, the King Śrī Bālarāma, whose lotus-feet are illuminated by the diadems of the rulers, famous in more and more new directions of the world, protects the earth.

²⁸ em. AW; ed.: *kīrtti*

Furthermore, the description praising personality traits of Rāma Varma refers at the same time to the *rasas* or corresponding *bhāvas* (*śṛṅgārasa* or love, *kopa* for *raudrarasa* or anger, *dayā* for *karuṇarasa* or compassion, *adbhutarasa* or wonderment, *hāsyarasa* or humor, *bhaya* as *bhāva* corresponding to *bhāyanakarasa* or fear, *bībhatsarasa* or disgust, and *śānti* for *śāntarasa* or peace) which are going to be the subject of the treatise (*Bālarāmabharata* 22):

*śṛṅgāraḥ svaparigrahe ripujane kopo dayā yācake
krtyākṛtyavivecane 'dbhutagaṇo hāsyam naṭe 'ghe bhayam |
bībhatsaḥ parasundarīṣu parasantāpe ca dainyaṃ nija
śāntir vañcikulādhipasya satataṃ saṃśobhate bhūtale || 22 ||*

Love for one's relatives, anger for the enemies, compassion for those who ask, the wonderful capacity of discernment between the good and the bad, the joy of the actor, the fear of sin, keeping away from the women of others, the empathy for others' suffering, and peace on earth of the Vañci ruler—all are always shining.

Similarly, Rāma Varma shows his literary skills in the *maṅgalācaraṇa* part of his work—the benedictory verses composed often of highly poetical fragments which traditionally begin a *śāstra* (Minkowski 2008)—addressing the deities and, at the same time, announcing the subject of the treatise. The *maṅgalācaraṇa* of the *Bālarāmabharata* begins with a stanza dedicated to Sarasvatī, the goddess of speech, referred to as Bhārātī (*Bālarāmabharata* 1). The next two stanzas address Gaṇapati, as Vināyaka, depicted in a dance pose (*unnatanṛtta*). Further the *maṅgalācaraṇa* mentions Śiva as Naṭarāja in his *tāṇḍava* dance (*Bālarāmabharata* 4) and Pārvatī in her *lāsya* dance (*Bālarāmabharata* 5). Finally, Rāma Varma addresses Viṣṇu as “the connoisseur of *rasas*” (*rasajñā*) and Lakṣmī as “the finest dancer” (*nāṭikā vararaṅgalakṣmī*) (*Bālarāmabharata* 8). As an example, I cite stanzas describing Śiva and Pārvatī (*Bālarāmabharata* 4–5):

*jhaṇajhaṇitakaṅkaṇaṃ takatakāṅghrisantāḍitaṃ
kvaṇatkvaṇitanūpuraṃ harahareti śabdojjvalam |
dhimindhimitadundubhidhvanighanākulaṃ maddalair
dhaṇaṃdhaṇadhāṇadhvanaj jayati tāṇḍavaṃ śāmbhavam || 4 ||*

Śiva's *tāṇḍava* dance excels with the sounds of bracelets: *jhaṇajhaṇita*, with the beats of feet: *takataka*, with the sounding of anklets: *kvaṇatkvaṇita*, with the beautiful words: Hara Hara, with the deep sounds of drums filling the dance: *dhimindhimita*, with the sounds of the maddala drums: *dhaṇaṃdhaṇadhāṇa*.

*navanavarasasārair nāṭyasaṅgītātālair
abhinayakuśalā sā cādbhutollāsabhāvā |
dinakararucibhāsā śobhitāṣṭādaśāṅgaiḥ
karaṇagatividagdhair nartiteśapriyāvyāt || 5 ||*

The wife of the Lord of the Dance, in great happiness, shining with the splendour of the sun, versed in acting (*abhinaya*), charms with the quintessence of nine *rasas*, with dance (*nāṭya*), rhythm (*tāla*) and music (*saṅgīta*), and with eighteen beautiful body limbs (*aṅga*) skilful in steps (*gati*) and positions (*karaṇa*).

The descriptions of the deities are related to theatre and dance. Verses focused on Śiva Naṭarāja and Pārvatī present two categories of dance—*tāṇḍava* and *lāsya*—and include many references to music, rhythm and musical instruments. There are also elements referring to the four types of *abhinaya*: for the *āṅgika abhinaya*—the eighteen body limbs (*aṅga*) of Pārvatī and the dance units as steps (*gati*) and positions (*karaṇa*); for the *vācika abhinaya*—Sarasvatī as the goddess of speech; for the *āhārya abhinaya*—bracelets and anklets of Śiva; and for the *sāttvika abhinaya*—mentions of joy and happiness. Finally, there are hints of the aesthetic theory of *rasa* in the depiction of Pārvatī who charms with the quintessence of the nine *rasas* (*navanavarasasāra*) and the image of Viṣṇu as a connoisseur of *rasas* (*rasajña*).

Conclusion

The opening part of the *Bālarāma Bharata* may be read as a sort of self-portrait, indicating what its author wanted to say about his person while presenting himself as a ruler, as a royal patron and connoisseur of art, and as a scholar and an artist. In the verses of his Sanskrit treatise on theatology, Rāma Varma praises himself in his role as king, describing the greatness of his kingdom and his military victories. He makes claims regarding his connections with the previous dynasties of Kerala rulers. However, the text should not be read as a historical account, for the great part of the dynastic claims are of a rather mythological nature; but one may see some poetical references to actual events from the reign of Rāma Varma. An important part of Rāma Varma's identity as the ruler of Travancore stems from his devotion to the royal family's deity, Śrī Padmanābha, mentioned several times in the opening lines of the *Bālarāma Bharata*. This attitude of total devotion to a god is exquisitely evident in the story of Kulaśēkhara Āḷvār. Rāma Varma could have portrayed this monarch in various ways but he chooses to depict him as a *bhakta*, for whom the story described in the *Rāmāyaṇa* and narrated by the royal reciter was unfolding there and then, and who was able to bring god into the here and now through the power of his devotion, thus obliterating the boundaries between the real and the narrated.²⁹ Boundaries also seem to be non-existent when it comes to the continuity of the centuries-old scholarly tradition. Rāma Varma joins the ranks of Bharata's predecessors and successors, continuing and, most importantly, enriching their work with elements of the local dance tradition. Moreover, Rāma Varma emphasises his role as a royal patron,

²⁹ See David Shulman's reflections on the nature of narrated stories in *More than Real. A History of the Imagination in South India*: "I'm not at all sure that the storyteller is not making Kaṃsa die yet again, in some quite factual way, just as a classical drama about the god Rāma may, at certain ritual moments, be seen as an arena in which Rāma does become entirely present and real. Or, to take a somewhat milder position, we could say that the storyteller presents the story in such a powerful way that he makes the death of Kaṃsa palpably real to his audience" (Shulman 2012: 52).

inscribing himself in the patronage tradition of the rulers of Travancore and depicting his court specifically as the centre of patronage for performing arts. Undoubtedly, Rāma Varma may be seen as one of those royal patrons of Kerala who were also active as artists and connoisseurs, as described by Zarrilli. Placing himself and his work in the line of Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the author demonstrates his profound knowledge of the previous figures of authority in the field of drama as well as his familiarity with the contemporary tradition of performing arts practiced at the Travancore royal court. The text of the *Bālarāmabharata* provides evidence of the literary prowess of Rāma Varma, known also as the author of *kathakaḷi* plays. Despite being a technical text (*śāstra*), the *Bālarāmabharata* proves not only the scholarly competence of its author but also his skilfulness as a poet, especially in the benedictory verses of the treatise; and leaves us with his individual portrait as drawn by Rāma Varma himself.

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