

# INDIA'S SINGING BEGGARS.

### RELICS OF COURT BARDS.

There is no country or nation that has not its wealth of popular songs and verses, and a folk song of a tribe or class is, indeed a reflex of its society, culture thought and civilization at a certain period, and a variation in the sentiment – moral, religious social – of a song is suggestive of the diverse phases the nation had to pass through at various stages. South India can boast of a vast collection of folk-songs that afford comfort and solace to many a wearied heart, and cheer the sometimes hard lot of the tiller of the soil. The folk-song may be a pastoral, lyrical, didactic or aphoristic poem, a historical piece of verse, an epic, a war ballad full of martial spirit, or a devotional song tinged with religious ideas and beliefs. The songs now current among the rustic population are the compositions of bards and minstrels that flourished in the Courts of ancient kings and princes. The race of bards is now lost to us.

In South India, today, the singing beggars who stroll about towns and villages are the representatives of the long-forgotten class of bards. They are to be found scattered all over the Presidency, speaking the four important languages, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam, and inhabiting the plains of the Carnatic and the Coromandel Coast, the uplands of Mysore and the low lands of Malabar. They are known as *Theruppatakaras* in Tamil, and *Vidhipatakalu* in Telugu, both signifying street singers. These “singers of the street”, as a rule, belong to the religious mendicant fraternities, who “make their chants subservient to their fortunes.” They know nothing of the art of song-making, nor are they experts in singing, but they pride themselves in their collection of songs which they consider a heritage by birth-right. They comprise many divisions, the most important of them belong what are known as *Dasaris*, *Pandarams*, *Satanis* and *Jangams*. They are more or less religious beggars, with no houses to dwell in, no life's cares and no anxieties to undergo. They are to be seen everywhere and on all occasions, but especially in the various centers of sanctity, in the holy shrines, on the banks of sacred rivers, in chuttrams and in choultries. The religious mendicants of the Dasari and the Pandaram classes go through the streets in the early hours of the morning in the month of *Margali* (December-January) and rouse the inmates of the houses by singing songs in praise of Krishna, by blowing conch shells and by beating dongs.

#### *The Dasaris.*

The *Dasaris* are the most innocent of beggars and are known as gong and tabret beaters, speaking Telugu, and following the Vaishnavite cult; and the Tamil equivalent for *Dasari* is *Tadan*. They are supposed to be the descendant of a rich landlord, a *Sudra*, who took a vow to the effect that he would devote himself to the service of God. He would bless him with children. The boon was granted, and his first-born was placed at the service of God. Henceforth the descendants of the son assumed the name of *Dasan*, and began to follow the begging profession.

A “vow to God” is the only passport for admission to the order of *Dasaris* and any people can become *Dasaris*, provided they get themselves purified by being branded by the

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caste Guru (priest). They have to discharge a threefold function – abject poverty, devotion to God by singing and freedom from the bonds of caste. Mr. Cox describes a *Dasari* as a wandering beggar singing hymns to a monotonous accompaniment upon a leather instrument called *tappai* (tabret). Many *Sudra* castes, Telugu speaking ones, engage him to chant in front of corpses at funerals; and many *Dasaris*, accompanying bands of pilgrims to Tirupati, stimulate their religious excitement by singing sacred songs in praise of Krishna. The following lines describe him better:- “At weddings and feasts, at fasts and funerals, at sowing and harvest, at full moon and *Sankranti* the *Dasari* must be invited, listened to and rewarded. At weddings he must sing of Krishna; at burnings, of *Yama*; before maidens, of *Kama*; before men, of *Rama*.” The *Dasaris* have sub divisions, and the more religious among them are distinguished by a garland of tulsi beads (*Ocimum sanctum*) round their necks. The well-known bull trainers, *Gengaddulvandu*, form a sub-sect, and they enact a small play at every street corner and pretend to celebrate the wedding of their bulls with singing and dancing. The bulls seem to understand all that they say and perform tricks at the word of command.

### *The Pandaram and Satanis.*

The Pandaram comes next in importance to the *Dasaris*. He sings Tamil songs, which really inspire people with feelings of devotion to God, but like all beggars, he is only a bread winner and has his own ways of looking at things, which are not wholly desirable. The name Pandaram is suggestive more of an occupation than of a cause. Sir Harold Stuart rightly conjectures that the name Pandaram (Phandagaram) might mean a treasury wherein were employed those who had renounced the world, whose duty it was to serve God at all hazards. There is no distinction of caste, and the Pandaram classes adopt an “open door” policy. “They are said to be very lax in their modes of life, often drinking liquor, and eating animal food furnished by any respectable *Sudra*. They serve in Saiva temples, where they make garlands and blow brazen trumpets when offerings are made or processions take place.”

Corresponding to the Tamil (Saivite), Pandaram, the Satanis are a class of singing beggars devoted to the service of the god Vishnu. Like the *Dasaris*, they form a mixed sects, and all classes of people seek admission into the creed. They are clean-shaven and clad in white garments, and always present a far neater appearance than the *Dasari* or Pandaram. They are divided into three main groups, *Ekakshari* (one syllable), *Chathurakshari* (four syllables), and *Ashtakshari* (eight syllables). The first belong to a sect of recessionals from the idol-worship of the Hindus and do not, as a rule, adore the idols and images set up in Hindu temples. They assume that God is in themselves and address him as Aum. The second avow that an implicit faith in a Guru (medium between man and God) is a necessary qualification to secure union with God. Their mode of addressing him in Srimate Ra-ma-nu-ja-ya namaha (Hail Ramanuja!) The third, besides placing their belief in their Guru, appeal for their salvation direct to God by saluting him with Oh-na-mo-na-ra-ya-na (Hail Narayan!). They are very humble and spend their lives in doing service to Vishnu.

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### *The Jangam.*

Lastly, the Jangam classes claim our attention. They are better known as Jangamalingayats, owing to the fact that they always carry with them a movable lingam as opposed to a fixed one in Brahmin temples. They are the clergy of the Virasaivas and Sivacharas, who are the followers of Basappa, the founder of the Lingayat cult. The bonds of their caste are much relaxed, and this fact is well illustrated by a peculiar proverb:- "To the Jangam there is no caste, and for the lingam no impurity, no pollution." Telugu is their mother tongue, but in Mysore and other parts they speak Canarese. They are the only true representatives in the Telugu country, of the once renowned class of singers. Besides these there are other singing beggars who occupy a lower position in society. The Mahratta drummer is a common figure in South India. He plays upon his tabila, singing couplets from "Moropant" and other Mahratta compositions. He is patronized by Mahratta Brahmins at their weddings, and he belongs to the imported class of singers.

### *Their Songs.*

Having given an account of the manners of these classes, let me pass on to their song-craft. The subjects of the songs of the Jangams are some popular stories versified in simple metres, set to music in the form of a duet with an occasional chorus. The tales of the Bobbili Rajah, the romances of Lakshamma and Kamakshamma, local heroines, are the most important among them. The singing of the Pandaam savours more of religion than of revelry, and his favorite composers are Avvai, the female poet, whose poems are so well known for their grace and elegance; and Thiruvalluvar, her brother, the immortal bard that lisped in numbers under the generic name of Kural. Other songs that are equally popular with the Pandaram are those composed by Manikkavachagar and Pattinathupillai, who belong to the orthodox school of thought; and some hymns and religio-satirical poems of a devotional type, composed by Siddhars, who were the followers of a sect that advocated the worship of Siva, but strongly discarded idol-worship and the rites and rituals of Hindu temples. The poems are very simple in diction, and though deficient in refinement, they appeal to the fanatic instincts of the populace.

The singing of the epic poems of Kamba requires high culture, and as such they cannot find a place in the folk-songs. The Satanis find their songs from the collection of "Nalayira Prabhandam," a composite work of Alvars, Ramanuja, Manavala and other founders of the Vaishnavite faith. It is indeed a delightful sight in the Telugu Districts to see a wandering band a Jangam, enter a village during the hours of sunset, followed by the villagers who are eager to listen to his folk-songs. He takes his seat in the chavadi (the meeting place), and with his profound skill in singing folk-songs, he tunes his primitive lute, and his voice well spent, and the bard retires with a smiling face, having obtained his reward.

- *Madras Mail.*

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