

Theatre: Classical and Popular

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I

Three characteristics distinguish classical theatre from other forms of performing arts – i. it inherits the age-old Natyasastra tradition, ii. even in regional manifestations it preserves the national character and iii. the acting pattern is mostly stylized. In its functional part classical theatre strives to preserve the existing social order where as the other forms deliberately break it.

Classical forms emerged from the popular. Theatre prior to Bharata was mass-based. The Jathaka stories give the details of many popular entertainments. Performances were held in temporary cloth-tents or open stages. Thousands witnessed the shows. The audience laughed and rolled to express their ecstasy-*haseti remeti cha*. In those days there was a danseuse by name Janapadakalayani. As the name indicates she was the darling of the villagers. When she danced the audience applauded shouting ‘well done’, ‘excellent’ etc. The aim of all the performances was to cause merriment and laughter so that people forgot the worries of ordinary life. Even the monks went to see these performances. Thalaputa, who led a 500 strong theater-troupe from the South, raised an innocent question to Lord Budha-

‘Will not these artists who serve the public like this, attain a position equivalent to that of Gods in the other world?’

This pre-Bharatan theatre had a lot of shortcomings. Most of the presentations were rather crude; actors drawn from the lower strata of society were ignorant of the use of ornate language or stylized acting. The structure was rather loose. Yet it attracted the masses. Bharata refined the crude stage, confined it to well-built halls and prescribed a grammar for performance. Just like Panini refined the Sanskrit language from various prakrts, Bharata culled out from popular forms an elegant performing style. He elevated theater to a higher level. The first Natyagruha, with guards on all doors, was constructed to crush the voice of resistance. The classical stage will not tolerate any kind of revolt that upsets the existing order because it stands for the *sthavara* in society.

II

Kerala made, two daring deviations, in the 10th century, in the performance tradition of Natyasastra. The royal dramatist Kulasekhara wrote two dramas. He called his friends, scholars and actors and enacted himself the roles to show how he intended to present his dramas in a different way. He made two important improvisations—first, he introduced the device of *dhwani* which was accepted the soul of poetry, in theatre and developed sub-texts out of the dramatic texts-*dhvanipadha* from *grandhapadha*. The stage script thus prepared is known as *Vyangyavyakhya*.

The character in Subhadradhananjaya enters asking for alms. *Bhiksham datta*. The feminine gender in *Bhiksha* suggests a woman—a prayer to give Subhadra to Arjuna. Actors present this inner meaning with eyes alone (*netrabhinaya*).

Interestingly, Kulasekhara recognizes two levels among the audience—the learned and the layman—*prekshaka* and *nanaloka*. Suggested sense is for the former; *nanaloka* being satisfied with the outer meaning.

The other innovation of Kulasekhara was the introduction of *Purvasambhanda*—linking the past to the present. The stage direction in Sanskrit dramas for the entry of a character is *tatah pravisati* (after that he enters). The spectators have a right to know the past events, for which the story till the moment has to be narrated. Being a solo-performance the actor will have to transform to several roles in course of his narration. Also, the actor will have to indulge in imaginative acting. These two—*pakarnnattam* and *manodharmabhinaya* are the two major contributions of Kerala to Sanskrit theatre.

III

The past of puranic characters like Arjuna can well be traced from original sources; but other characters like vidushaka do not have such a history. It has to be invented. So Kutiyattam localized vidushaka and created a meta-world of illiterates for him. Using Malayalam language on a Sanskrit stage, soon, the jester came to occupy the center with his witty narratives. He prescribed parallel values of life. For the Brahmins the goal of righteous life (dharma) is eating; financial gain (artha) is through service to royalty; amorous life (kama) is through the union with prostitutes and the final emancipation (moksa) by cheating them.

The humor of vidushaka, at times, is innocent.

What is the difference between the creations of the potter (*kulala*) and that of Brahma? Vidushaka gives a simple answer-the former is put to fire before use and the latter after use!

At times his words will be critical and sarcastic-

A poor Brahmin lived in a farm with his pregnant wife. The washer man in the village had a donkey to carry cloths to the river. One day the donkey entered the farm and destroyed the crops. Brahmin's wife tried to drive the donkey away. She threw a sickle, which hurt the leg of the donkey and made it unable to walk. The furious washer man dashed to the Brahmin's house to retaliate. Seeing him, the lady ran in fear and fell down which caused abortion to her. The case came to the king. After hearing both sides king pronounced the judgment. The Brahmin should carry the clothes until the donkey recovers because he was responsible for its injury. The washer man also deserves punishment since he caused abortion to Brahmin's wife. The washer man, therefore, should impregnate the Brahmin's wife!

This is a strong indictment to the prevailing judicial system. Vidushaka provided eyes, ears and tongue to a mute, closed society. He was the forth estate in a totalitarian society for several centuries.

Kutiyattam is like a wall-clock. The face of it represents the rigid classical structure and the pendulum below moving sideways stands for the popular and the progressive elements. It is a mixture of two traditions that of Bharata and Vyasa, theatrical and narrative.

IV

The general perception is that Kutiyattam, being the performance of Sanskrit plays, follows Natyasastra. It is true, only partly. According to Natyasastra, the drama has a rigid frame, sophisticated structure with a beginning, development and denouement, the five junctures with their innumerable limbs for the plot and the actor imitating the historical character. All these go to develop the principal sentiment, either heroic or erotic. The *abhinaya* is predominantly *vakyartha* oriented. The multiplicity of characters on the stage gives room for interaction among the characters, which helps a lot in the development of action.

A close look at Kutiyattam would reveal that none of these requirements of Bharata is fulfilled here. Kutiyattam has a loose structure, the development of plot does not follow the accepted track, *abhinaya* is almost of the nature of a monologue with little scope for interaction and the elaboration centers around the *padartha*.

We have another stream, the epic tradition, which employs a different narrative technique. Here, the narrator moves from one incident to another, jumps from the present to the past and hither to the other world. It is a journey through the unlimited time and space. The structure is kept loose to facilitate this flexibility. Kutiyattam follows this epic tradition in its content and mode.

In Kutiyattam, the actor has a break not only from the structure of the play but even from the very stage itself. The actor gets himself transformed into a stage and characters, emotions and incidents pass through his face as though it were another stage erected for acting. He is liberated from everything around except from the lamp kept before him. Only the epic tradition permits an actor to be so liberated that he can fly through the space in imagination, assuming as many roles as possible.

Bharata's actor is an imitator, whereas a Kutiyattam actor is also a narrator and interpreter. These two additional roles are inherited from the epic tradition. He is akin to the *suta* in Naimisaranya than to the hundred sons of Bharata in the ancient lore. Even the learned fails to understand this difference and keep on asking about the imitative and identifying functions of the actor on classical stage.

Sage Vyasa is the first narrator. He got an excellent audient – Ganapati. The sacred bond between them was that the audient wanted uninterrupted narration; the narrator, in turn, demanded a careful understanding. This narrator-audient relation is key to the Indian aesthetics, be it literature or theatre.

These narrative techniques have been studied fixing them in different contexts. One thing is common to all-the interest of the audient is sustained. It is the sole aim of all narratives. The storyteller in Chakyar is a direct inheritor of this tradition. The verbal techniques translated to physical action provided the basis for *pakarnnattam*. Kutiyattam, therefore, is the fusion of Vyasa and Bharata, the narrator and the imitator. Kutiyattam, thus, represents a higher stage of progression from Bharata's concepts.

Natyasastra provided the classical rigidity to the acting in Kutiyattam; the interventions of Vidushaka gave it a popular base. This is derived from the narrative, epic tradition. In short, classical theatre is indebted to Bharata for its *sthavara* elements and to Vyasa for the popular and progressive aspects.

The contributions of Kerala actors are the daring deviations they made from the national pattern. They, in a way, regionalized national theatre and localization, as a form of resistance, itself is a progressive step.

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