

Violence in Kutiyattam

Violence means the state or quality of being violent; rage, tumult, turbulence, intensity of action or question, vehemence, assault, rape or injury. Unruliness and wildness qualify violent behavior.

I. Bharata's stand

Hero's of Sanskrit dramas generally belong to the category of Dhirodatta. Primary sentiment is Vira or Srngara. So there is no space for violence directly in Sanskrit theatre. More over, Bharata strictly prohibits the presentation of death, war etc. on the stage. They are only to be hinted or verbally narrated.

But delineation of Raudra rasa gives scope for presentation of violence on stage. Natyasastra says that the sentiment of Raudra is produced by actions like the excitement in battles, striking, disfiguring, cutting and tearing. This is to be enacted in dramas through imitative actions like the discharge of various missiles and weapons, cutting of head, headless trunks and arms and so on. Thus the sentiment of Raudra is seen as produced by fierce words, actions of limbs etc. and full of terrible activities like the wielding of weapons and cruel actions.

According to Abhinava gupta violation of the modesty of women is one of the ensuants to rouse raudra¹. Raudra pertains to Rakshasas, Danavas and Udhata characters. In forms like Samavakara there is scope for violence, but they are not common.

In serious plays Venisamhara depicts war and revenge on the stage. It is allowed as Bhima, a Dhiroddhata hero, is the leading character in the play. But still Bharata's prohibition does not permit presentation of violence in a provocative way.

II Kutiyattam

Kutiyattam is an autonomous form developed in Kerala for the presentation of Sanskrit dramas. It is the only theatrical tradition that preserves the earliest performance techniques of Natyasastra and is declared the intangible heritage of humanity by UNESCO.

11th Century royal dramatist Kulasekhara wrote two dramas - Subhadradhananjaya and Tapati samvarana. He called together all his friends, scholars and actors and told them that there is a new device called dhvani in poetry and that he would like to employ it in theatre.

Dhwaniyuk kavyasaranih
Sasteti procyate budhah
Tasmat dhwaniyukta sa
racita natakadvayi

He then demonstrated how to present it and taught his actors. A scholar noted down the mode of acting presented by the author. This stage-script is known as Vyangyavyakhya, the first stage manual by he author himself².

The mode of acting prescribed for *Bhiksham Datta* in the introductory part of Dhananjaya illustrates the idea of Kulasekhara. According to him the feminine gender in *Bhiksha* suggests the entire theme.

Interestingly Kulasekhara divides the audience into two- the elite and the ordinary. Bharata's presentation can be all right for the common man, the scholar requires more. Dhvani is for the scholar. The actor enacts it through eyes. (Netrabhinaya)

This innovative move raises several problems on the stage-

- i. The actor does not have a text for suggestive sense. He can go on with his elaboration endlessly. This paves the way for imaginative acting.
- ii. During narration the actor will have to transform his imitated role to several other roles. This is the technique of *pakarnnattam*. This encourages mono acting (solo) in a multi-charactered drama.

The net result of all these was that the actor was liberated from the text of the dramatist. Kutiyattam thus became an *actor's theatre*.

Imaginative acting and transformation of roles are the two contributions Kerala has made to Sanskrit theatre. To Bharata the actor was an imitator *anukarta*; Kerala added two more functions as narrator (Akhyata) and interpreter (Vyakhyata). Kutiyattam, thus is an improvisation on Bharata's theatre.

III Violence

Violence presented in Kutiyattam stage can be classified under the following heads;

i. Exoneration of anti-hero

Kerala theatre does not strictly follow the tradition of Natyasastra in the matter of presentation of Violence. One reason is the tendency of Kerala Theater to extol the glory of the anti heros. Bhasa, not Bharata influenced the Kerala psyche in this matter. Anti-heros like Bali, Ravana, Karna etc. occupy the central stage in classical forms. Real hero's like Srikrishna, Srirama or Dharmaputra are pale and they have only minor roles. This gives lot of space for the enactment of violent actions on the stage.

Many of the popular plays in Kutiyattam like *Balivadha* ends in the death of the leading character. Kerala has employed a clever device to transform death to salvation-*vadha* to *moksha*. Putana dies but attains *moksha*. Hence the story is Putanamoksha.

The preference to prati-nayakas provides ample opportunity for the actor to indulge in provocative action like calling for war, engage in duels or fight and killing on the stage.

ii. Towards women

Disrobing Panchali is a favorite theme in many performances. This is enacted to incite the sense of revenge in the mind of the hero, especially in Bhima. Recently the story of Draupadi is dramatically presented in Nangiarkuttu by Usha Nangiar in three parts where in the second part centers on the incident of *vastrakshepa*. The scene depicts the helplessness of women before the cruelty of power. Even her husbands fail to uphold her modesty. All the wisdom of the learned and others become futile before the arrogance of royalty.

iii. Blood-shed, Ninam

The most terrible act of cruelty and violence on Kutiyattam stage is seen in the presentation of Surpanakha. In the second act of Ascharyacudamani Surpanakha, in the form of a beautiful woman tries to enchant Rama and Lakshmana. She becomes furious when her attempts fail where upon Lakshmana cuts her nose and ear. This disfigurement is a symbolic act to insult her.

Following valmiki the dramatist Saktibhadra describes Lakshmana as cutting her ear and nose. But the Kutiyattam actors took this incident to the extreme and made a cut to her breasts also causing a horrible flow of blood all over the body. The screaming Surpanakha dripped in red blood presents a horrible sight. There are instances of children, seeing this horrible scene of *ninam*, fainting in fear.

This is not a Sanskrit tradition, but a different South Indian version.

It seems that Kamban, the Tamil poet who composed his Ramayana in about 11,000 stanzas was the earliest South Indian or Dravidian author to have treated the story. The date of Kamban's Ramayanam is uncertain although one of the prefatory stanzas refers to saka 807 corresponding to 885 A.D. as the year when the work was presented to a distinguished audience. While one school of thought fixes Kamban as a ninth century poet on this basis, there is another view that internal evidence points to the 12th century.

In this Tamil version, Laksmana's cutting of the breasts, ear and nose of Surpanakha is found recorded.

The 94th pattu of the Surpanakha Patalam of the Aranyakanda of the Kambaramayana the incident of the encounter of Laksmana with the demoness is described in detail. In order to save his own life from the dreadful lady Laksmana attacks her with his sword. The passage is as follows:

“Mukkum katum verm muran mulaikkankalum muraiyal pokki”

Meaning that Laksmana has severed the nose, ears and nipples of the breast of Surpanakha with his sword³.

One may conclude that the ancient actors of Kerala were influenced by the strong South Indian version of the incident in showing Surpanakha on the Kutiyattam stage. This incident can be seen only as an atrocity against women as also against the subalternate sections of society.

iv. World of Terror

We do live today in a world of terror. Does the presentation of horrific acts in classical forms encourage violence in life?

The answer seems to be not in positive. All the violent acts ultimately fail to achieve the objects the characters were longing for. And their end is miserable. Hence nobody will take them as models for emulation. Yet it is desirable for a matured theatre not to deviate from Bharata's principles so as to keep up the equilibrium of various elements in society.

Reference:

1. The sentiment called Raudra (the Furious) is produced out of the permanent mood Krodha (anger) and it usually takes its origin in Raksasas, Danavas and very haughty human beings resulting invariably in battle. It is generated by the ensuants like Krodhakarsana (to pull away in anger; A.G. reads as 'Krodhadharsana' meaning violation of the modesty of women (like wife) by others in anger), Adhiksepa (abuse), Avamana (insult), Anrtavacana (uttering falsehood), Upaghata (striking of household servants and the like). Vakparusya (use of harsh words as 'I will kill you' etc.) Abhidroha (desire to kill), and matsarya (jealousy). The actions by which it is presented is (harassing), Cchedana (cutting), Praharana (striking), Aharana (pulling away); [AG takes 'Prahara harana as one word and explaining battle'] Sastrasampata (striking with weapons), Sampraharana (wounding with weapon), Rudhirakarsana (shedding of blood) and so on.

[Natyasastra VI-71]

2. The author calls this stage-script Dhanajayadhvani and Samvaranadhvani; together later designated as Vyangyavyakhya.
3. Following Kambar later Malayalam poets included the cutting of breasts in their description. Ramakathapattu by Ayyapilla Asan (14c.AD), Ramayana Champu of Punam Nambudiri (15c.AD), Adhyatma Ramayanam of Thunchathu Ezhuthachan (16c.AD) – all follow this version. Kutiyattam actors might have adopted this on stage around 13-14 centuries since the 15th century Natankusa strongly criticizes this deviation from Sanskrit sources.

Saktibhadra has stated only as:

Nyastamastram nisacaryah kathamcit karnanasike.

(I have laid my sword on the ears and nose of the demoness).

Valmiki Ramayana (3.18.21) gives the version as:

Ityukto laksmanastasyah kruddho ramasya pasyatah

Uddhrtya khadgam ciccheda karnanasam mahadalah

(Drawing his sword, when spoken to in these words, the angry Lakshmana, who was possessed of great might lopped off her ears and nose while Rama looked on)

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