Kathakali – Cultural Roots and Textual Traditions

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Kathakali, as all of us are aware, is a confluence of different traditions. What follows is an attempt to trace the cultural roots and textual traditions that influenced the inner structure of this art-form.

I. Cultural Roots of Kathakali

Kalamezhuthu is the primeval form of painting in Kerala. After a rich harvest the community invites the village-mother to share its fear and aspirations with her. They draw her in natural colours of white, black and red; later yellow and green are added. This indigenous pattern of colour synthesis contributed much to the amazing make-up of performing arts including Kathakali. The indigenous folk-forms of Kerala are the later developments of the mother-worship in *Mutiyettu*. Kathakali has inherited a lot from this tradition too. The battle and death- scenes of Kathakali have drawn their inspiration from *Mutiyettu, Theyyam* etc., which are prohibited on stage, as per Natya Sastra.

In *Mutiyettu,* Kali kills Darika and drinks his blood in great fury. Such scenes are common in Kathakali. In Duryodhana Vadham, Bhima at the end, the furious Bhima (*Raudra Bhima*) dips into the abdomen of Dussasana and takes out the entrails to drink his blood. Similarly, in Prahladacharita the man-lion (*Narasimha*) cuts with nails the stomach of the Asura and drinks his blood.

Another such scene is the *ninam* in Narakasura Vadham. It is the gory figure of the demoness after she has been punished by the hero for her aggression; a grotesque and bizarre sight. This is an adaptation of a smilar scene in *Kutiyattam* where in Lakshmana cuts the breasts of Surpanakha for her unwanted advances. The interesting point to note here is that classical Sanskrit texts do not mention Lakshmana's chopping off her breasts. They simply say that to teach her a lesson Lakshmana disfigured her nose and ears. Kambar in his Tamil Ramayana describes the chopping off the breasts. The actors followed this regional version and not the original epic version in presenting this horrible scene. All these instances go to prove that the local indigenous practices influenced Kathakali even while depicting puranic stories.

The visual forms of South India are also influenced by Sanskrit theatre. The sangham literature shows traces of acquaintance with the tradition of Natya Sastra (NS). Earliest Sanskrit drama from the South seems to be the Mattavilasa of the Pallava king in the 7 c. CE. Kancheepuram is the centre of action of the play. Sanskrit plays like Sakuntala were popular on Kerala stage during that time. The period of the second chera empire (800 - 1120 CE) was the golden age of Sanskrit in Kerala. Mahodayapuram, present Kodungallur, was the capital of the chera kings. King Kulasekhara of that lineage who calls himself the Over-lord of Kerala (*Keraladhipa*) was a dramatist who composed two plays drawing themes from the Mahabharata.He called the scholars and actors of his court and told them that he wanted to present these plays in a different manner implementing the principle of implied sense (*dhvani*). The method of acting prescribed by Kulasekhara in *Vyangyavyakhya* is an extension of the concepts of Bharata. Here-after Kerala followed the Natya Sastra traditions as modified

by Vyangya Vyakhya. This made the Kerala classical theatre unique and distinct from the performance-traditions of other parts of the country.

The innovations of Kulasekhara paved the way for the emergence of Kutiyattam in the 12-13 centuries of Common Era. What followed Kutiyattam in Kerala was Krishnanattam. This is a performance based on *Krishnagiti*, a Sanskrit composition by Manavedan Raja (17 c. CE) of Calicut modeled on the *Gitagovindam* of Jayadevakavi. Story of Srikrishna is described in eight parts in this text. The acting technique is not fully developed and the dances are simple. Bhakti is the dominant sentiment.Kathakali was the natural successor of Kutiyattam and Krishnanattam. No wonder, it owes much to these forms in its content and techniques of acting.

The development of Kerala's cultural history is also closely connected to its martial arts. The collapse of the central administration of the cheras in the 12 c. CE, gave birth to many small principalities under the protection of local chieftains all through the state. There were frequent quarrels among these rulers to grab power or to protect their own piece of land. Every chieftain had to maintain troupes ready to defend his village from the attack of the neighbours. Rigorous military training was imparted to the youth to keep the troupes ready for fight. The training was provided under the guidance of traditional *Gurus*. There were many such gurukulam-s which trained students from the early age of seven. Training included physical exercises, massage, use of weapons etc. The place where training was given is known as *kalari*. The physical acting pattern of Kathakali owes much to the training given in Kalaries. It is not surprising that the classrooms for teaching Kathakali is known by the same name – *kalari*. A student admitted to learn Kathakali at the early age of 12, gets up and starts his training in the *kalari* at 4.00 in the early morning. Meticulous training in the *kalari* for a long period makes the student a mature artiste.

This analysis makes it clear that Kathakali as an art-form draws its vigour from three sources – the popular elements from ritual forms begining from *Kalamezhuthu*, the NS tradition as expanded by *Vyangyayakhya* and the local traditions of martial arts. Kathakali is a convergence of these three traditions. All the three streams follow the age-old *gurukula sampradaya* to transmit knowledge. Hence it is not easy to give textual testimonies to prove their influence on Kathakali, but they are the roots beneath the soil.

II. The Textual Traditions

The textual traditions of Kathakali available to us, can be categorised under three heads – the *attakkatha* (story for acting), the *attaprakara* (manuals regarding the mode of acting) and the scientific treatises.

 The story-line forms the body of performance. The literary compositions for Kathakali are known as *attakkatha*. The basic texts for Kutiyattam and Krishnanattam are written in Sanskrit. But for Kathakali the text is composed in Malayalam by the authors from Kerala. The earliest plays for Kathakali were composed by Kottarakkara Tampuran (1555 – 1605 CE), of the far South. He took eight episodes from Ramayana and composed the plays for performance.All the eight together were called *Ramanattam*, stories of Rama for acting. His intention, evidently was to express his devotion to Lord Rama. A story prevalent among the people attributes the cause of composition to his vengeance against the zamorin who refused to send his Krishnattam troupe on his request. Any how, Ramanattam delineates eight

episodes from Ramayana. Both the authors expressed their devotion respectively to their deities. Later Kottayam Tampuran (1645 – 1716 CE) wrote four plays based on themes drawn from the Mahabharata. They came to be known as the Kottayam Kathakal. The name Ramanattam became insufficient to denote the thematic change. A new name was invented – Kathakali (playing the story). The next important play is Nalacharitam by Unnayi Varier (1675 – 1755 CE), the story of Nala and Damayanti extending to four days. This is perhaps the best known and most popular attakkatha. The other important writer is Irayimman Thampi (1782-1856 CE). He has composed three plays for performance.

It is not possible to enlist all the plays hither-to published. A rough estimate shows that there are around five hundred plays written for Kathakali stage. Plays still continue to be composed. All the plays have not drawn their sources from the puranic lore. King Lear of Shakespeare is the best example.

The plays were composed by the authors for performance. The acting community preserved them for their use. 54 of them were compiled and published in a single volume in 1857. This was a land mark in the history of composition of Kathakali plays. Another serious attempt was made in 1933 wherein 101 plays were published. The latest in the series is the '101 Attakkathakal' published recently.

The structure of a play is intended to suit the performance. Most attakkathas start with benedictory verses. Basic textual units are the *sloka* and the *padam*. Sloka is a verse that narrates the situation at hand. Padam is the dialogue between the characters. It is highly poetic and filled with imageries so as to give scope for the actor for interpretation.

Though attakkatha forms the basic text for the performance, the actor is not satisfied with the story alone. Performance is an elaboration of the dramatic text. The elders have prepared extensive manuals explaining the mode of acting. These texts are called *attaprakaram-s*. Actually it was Kulasekara who introduced elaborations beyond the author's text. Till then actors faithfully followed the author's texts. *Vyangyavyakhya* insisted on elaboration and senior artistes prepared acting manuals for each play. Kathakali borrowed this technique from Kutiyattam. As a result senior actors have prepared attaprakaram for famous plays. Originally, they were in the form of class notes of great masters to guide students for their study in the kalari. Thus we get notes in the personal collections of great acharyas like Pattikkanthodi Ravunni Menon and Vazhenkata Kunchu Nair. These notes were not intended for the general public. We get systematically prepared interpretation for the text (*rangavyakhya*) from the great actor Kalamandalam Krishnan Nair. First, he wrote the mode of acting for *Nalacharitham*. This was well appreciated. There after he wrote attaprakaram-s for all the four Kottayam plays.

Sceptics belonging to the old generation doubted the need for attaprakarams for attakkathas. He made his intention clear that disciples cannot substitute the class with these manuals. They are intended for mature artistes to make their performance more effective. Actually, these interpretations help the spectator too to understand Kathakali more intimately.

Kalamandalam Padmanabhan Nair fulfilled the desire of the lovers of the art by preparing elaborate acting manuals for almost all the important plays in Kathakali. Kalamandalam Gopi, the celebrated actor filled up the gap left by his Guru by preparing an extensive attaprakaram for all the four days of Nalacharitham.The attaprakaram supplements the

attakkatha and both are complimentary to each other. Moreover, attaprakarams make the learning process in the *kalari* more rigid, disciplined and systematic.

III. Influence of Classical Texts

The classical texts of Indian theatrical traditions serve as the basic texts for the performance of Kathakali. Bharata describes *natya* as having five components – angika, vachika, satvika abhinayas, gita and atodya. Performance is a harmonious blend of all these elements. By the the beginning of the second millennium new texts were added to the NS tradition. Dhananjaya (11.c. CE) classified performances into *margi* and *desi*. He also categorised them into *nrtta*, *nrtya* and *natya*.

These three terms are closely inter-related. Nrtta depends mainly on rhythm, nrtya adds emotional elements to it and natya is the culmination of all leading to rasa realisation. There is nothing that is not included in natya.

Some scholars have tried to trace a chronological order in these three forms and to trace the gradual development of theatre in that way – the simple and natural nrtta with more of folk elements as the prototype and its further development to stylised and classical nrtya and the final culmination in the perfect form of natya.

Natya presents the totality of a meaning *vakyaarthabhinaya* (acting the meaning of a sentence as a whole). But nrtya elaborates the meaning of words and images vividly. This is called *padarthabhinaya* (acting the meaning of individual words). For example if the hero addresses the heroine *pankajanayane* (*pankajam* – lotus, *nayana* – eye = lotus eyed; i.e, beautiful), the presentation in natya will be as of a beautiful woman. The mood of the actor will be erotic. But nrtya will present a budding lotus in all its charm, then the lovely eyes suggesting that her eyes surpass the lotus in beauty and so on.

The development of theatre might have been like this: rhythmic movements of nrtta in the beginning; then the meaningful ideas leading to emotional expressions in natya. This is the straight way. It was at a later stage that the techniques for more eleboration by way of expansion of the constituent words and images appear. This is the stage of padarthabhinaya and nrtya. It will be against our experience to trace a linear tract as nrtta, nrtya and natya. The more probable way would be from nrtta to natya (rasa) and then to nrtya (bhava). Classical forms like Kutiyattam and Kathakali illustrate this line of progression.

The Kerala tradition of *Vyangyavyakhya* gives an interesting notion about *bhava*. The word bhava stands for mental condition. But here it is used in a different sense. The receptive audience has to be pleased by the presentation of *bhava*

Bhava should be used until the receptive audience's face bloom and they shed tears of joy. This is the meaning of bhava. Bhava is a part of dance. There are six parts for it – the brightness of the lamp, unity of body movements, the beauty of the costumes, the cleverness or dexterity of usage, beautiful shape and music. By combining the six elements it attempts to make the receptive audience happy; to please and entertain the general audience through one's acting.

The angika abhinaya of Kathakali is a mixture of two traditions. The movements are codified mostly on the basis of the practices of martial arts and the gestural signs (*mudras*) drawn from the Sanskrit tradition.

In dance and dramas the poses of hands are essential and from days of antiquity various hand poses were made use of to give expression to ideas. The hand poses are discernible in Indian iconography and sculpture and they represent a well developed system. The Indus valley civilization knew the importance of hand gestures. Vedic texts like Vajasaneyisamhita employ various hand poses in connection with rituals and this practice is still continued in the tantric systems.

Bharata seems to be the earliest writer to codify the gestures (mudras) in relation to *natya*. In the Natyasastra as in most of the treatises on dramaturgy *hastamudras* are classified into three as *asamyuta* (single), *samyuta* (combined) and the *nrittahasta* (which are also used in Abhinaya in practice). Bharata describes 24 *asamyutahastas*, 13 *samyutahastas* and 29 *nrittahastas* altogether forming sixty hand poses. The whole of the ninth chapter of NS is set apart for the description of the hastas.

Kutiyattam and Kathakali extensively use the hand gestures to interpret the meaning of the words.They follow a text called *Hastalakshanadipika* supposed to have been composed by an actor around 12c. CE for training the Kutiyattam artistes. The anonymous Kerala author has dealt with 24 poses of hands which are mainly used in Kathakali and Kutiyattam performances of Kerala. The work is edited and published from several places. The terminology of the hand poses is almost the same as in Bharata's work, though the definition and application show some originality. The word '*mudra*' is derived as that which causes '*muda*' (happiness) to the gods and '*dravayanti*' drives away the demons, In the absence of a particular *mudra* one may assume *anjali* in a general pose that can be used on all occasions.

Hastalakshanadipika was composed at the point of the evolution of Kutiyattam distinct from the performance of Sanskrit dramas in other parts of the country. Kutiyattam, Kathakali and Mohiniyattam actors follow this text with slight changes to suit their particular form. There is an interesting work called *Kathakali mudrasastra* in Malayalam. It adds mudras from different sources to the traditional 24 of *Hastalakshanadipika.*

Another interesting feature of Mudrasastra is that the author has given a chart elaborating the mudras given in *Hastalakshanadipika* in comparison with those described in NS, *Abhinayadarpana and Balaramabharatam.* This is the contribution of Sri Vazhenkata Kunchu Nair.

IV. Conclusion

Kathakali as an art-form has enriched itself drawing materials from all available cultural roots sources. Along with this, textual traditions too further nourish this art-form. But what keeps it alive is the intimate relation between the teacher and the taught. This highlights the importance attached to oral transmission methods of this art-form based on traditional *gurukula sampradaya*.

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