

Kathakali – Textual Traditions

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Kathakali has won international recognition as a marvellous form of performance. Theatre activists/students from far and near very often visit Kerala to know more about the subtleties of the art form, from its external exuberance to the minute acting techniques.

Kathakali has a history of over three centuries. Unlike the ritual forms, Kathakali was accessible to all sections of society, from its very inception. This made it popular among the general public. The actors were mainly drawn from the military class. The landlords patronized them. There used to have a *kaliyogam* (training centre) attached to the house of the landlords to promote the art form. But this societal structure crumbled in Kerala in the first half of the last century. Consequently, Kathakali was at the verge of extinction for want of patronage. Mahakavi Vallathol founded Kerala Kalamandalam in 1930 for the promotion and protection of the art form. The institution has now been elevated to the status of a deemed to be university. It serves as the nerve-centre of all the activities for the promotion of Kathakali.

I

Kathakali, as all of us are aware, is a confluence of different traditions. For the sake of convenience, we can identify three distinct stages of the cultural history of the state that influenced the inner structure of the art-form.

Kalamezhuthu is the primeval form of painting in Kerala, which traces its origin to the early days of the dawn of civilisation.¹ After a rich harvest the community invites the village-mother to share its fear and aspirations with her. The mother goddess is protective and benevolent. The community conceives her form and transfers the unconscious to lines and colours to form an image. They draw her in natural colours of white, black and red; later yellow and green are added. This indigenous pattern of colour synthesis is unique to Kerala. It has 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.

Ritual/popular forms have enriched the content also. The battle and death- scenes of Kathakali have drawn their inspiration from *Mutiyettu*, *Theyyam* etc. Bharata prohibits all these on stage.

In *Mutiyettu* Kali kills Darika and drinks his blood in great fury. Such scenes are common in other ritual forms also. In *Duryodhanavadha* in Kathakali, Bhima at the end avenges the humiliation inflicted on Draupadi by killing Dussasana. The furious Bhima (*Raudra Bhima*) dips into the abdomen of Dussasana and takes out the entrails to drink his blood. In *Prahladacarita* the man-lion (*Narasimha*) cuts with nails the stomach of the Asura and drinks his blood.

Another such scene is the *ninam* in *Narakasuravadham*. 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 similar 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.² 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 second stage in the cultural history of Kerala that affected the visual forms was the influence of Sanskrit theatre. *Natyasastra* (NS) seems to have influenced the South from very early period.³

The sangham literature shows traces of acquaintance with the tradition of 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 overlord (*Keraladhipa*) of Kerala was a dramatist who composed two plays drawing themes from the Mahabharata.⁴ 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*). He brought out two important changes in the existing mode of acting.

The important innovations of Kulasekhara over Bharata's scheme were :

- i. Every character on his/her first entry on stage shall narrate his/her previous history to the point of the dramatic context. While doing so he can resort only to two modes of acting - *angika* and *satvika*. During the long narration one will have to transfer himself/herself to different roles. This is technically known as *Pakarnnattam*. He/she will also have to use his imaginative faculty (*manodharma*) to make the narration convincing. The actor here turns out to be a narrator for the recapitulation of previous events. He/she transforms to several roles. Also the multi-character stage of theatre, for all practical purposes, became focused on a single actor.
- ii. Mere re-telling of a story does not satisfy the intelligent spectator. What he expects is a higher meaning – the implied sense. The actor has to convey the suggested meaning through the movement of his eyes (*netrabhinaya*).

These improvisations revolutionised the concept of Bharata's theatre. The method of recapitulation through pakarnattam brought the actor to the centre-stage. Solo-performances took prominence over the combined acting of several characters. Search for *dhvanipatha* (suggested sense) necessitated the creation of production manuals over and above the dramatic texts of the authors.

The method of acting prescribed by Kulasekhara in *Vyangyavyakhya* (VV) is not a negation of NS; on the contrary it is an extension of the concepts of Bharata. Here-after Kerala followed the NS traditions as modified by VV. 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.⁵

A third phase of the development of Kerala's cultural history is the dominance of 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 beginning from *Kalamezhuthu*, the NS tradition as expanded by VV 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.

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.⁶ 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.⁷ 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.⁸

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.⁹

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.¹⁰ 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. V V 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 acharya-s like Pattikkanthodi Ravunni Menon and Vazhenkata Kunchu Nair. These notes were not intended for the general public.¹¹ 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*.¹² This was well appreciated. There after he wrote attaprakaram-s for all the four Kottayam plays.¹³ Sceptics belonging to the old generation doubted the need for attaprakaram-s for attakkatha-s. 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.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ The attaprakaram supplements the attakkatha and both are complimentary to each other. More over, attaprakaram-s make the learning process in the *kalari* more rigid, disciplined and systematic.¹⁵

IV

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 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 elaboration 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 VV 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.

Now look at these pairs:

Receptive audience: *bhava*, to please

The general public: *abhinaya*, to entertain

What is meant by *bhava*?

Bhava = acting through the eyes + dance. This exactly is what we see in Kathakali.

Later theorists extended the scope of the ten *rupakas* to innumerable *uparupakas* (minor plays) based on regional variations. *Rupakas* have a rigid structure, where as *uparupakas* are elastic by nature and are oriented more in dance and music. All these changes in the traditions are seen reflected in Kathakali.

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.¹⁶

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.¹⁷ They follow a text called *Hastalakshanadipika* (HLD) 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.

HLD 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.¹⁸ It adds mudras from different sources to the traditional 24 of HLD. The text is in five chapters. The first chapter gives description of the hand-gestures in general. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 enumerate the mudras described in classical texts. The fifth chapter deals with the movements of the body, every part of it while presenting the mudras. This is a unique contribution of the author.

Another interesting feature of Mudrasastra is that the author has given a chart elaborating the mudras given in HLD in comparison with those described in NS, *Abhinayadarpana* and *Balaramabharatam*. This is the contribution of Sri Vazhenkata Kunchu Nair who has written the preface to this monograph.¹⁹

V

Kathakali is an ensemble of different art forms-the music, percussions and make up. Each of these enhances the beauty of the presentation. On stage they all focus on the actor, but each

of them has its own independent status. They follow great traditions, disciples learn from their gurus and the connoisseurs maintain their partiality for particular forms. Among the crazy admirers of Kathakli some may like acting more, others the music and yet others playing of the chenda/maddalam. These are also learned in the kalaries. Kerala Kalamandalam protects all these art-forms under its umbrella and provides facilities for learning to aspiring students.

Kathakali is a form of classical performance the knowledge of which is orally transmitted from *Guru* to *sisya* in the traditional *gurukula sampradaya*. It has enriched itself drawing materials from all available sources. This dynamism endears it to all the generations. Textual tradition nourishes, but what keeps it alive is the intimate relation between the teacher and the taught.¹⁹

Reference:

1. a) *Kalamezhuthu- Ritual Art practices of Kerala*
Ed. Satyapal, 2001, Kerala Lalithakala Academi, Thrissur
UNESCO has recognised Kutiyattam and Mudi yettu of Kerala as the Intangible Heritage of Humanity. *Mudi yettu* is the primordial form of worship of the mother- Goddess as the Village deity. It has three parts -
 - i *Kalamezhuthu* - Writing the image with powder. This is known as *dhoolichitra/ dhoolisilpa*.
 - ii. *Thottam* - Reciting devotional songs praising the deity. The deity enters into the image and gives life to it.
 - iii. Theatre - The fight with Darika and killing him.The *velichappadu* facilitates the communication with the Goddess. All the aspects of a theatre is visible in this ancient ritual.
 - b) *The Art of Keralakshetram* - Kapila Vatsyayan (1989), Reprint 2015, Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts, New Delhi.
2. *Natankusa - A critique of Dramaturgy*. Ed. K.G. Paulose, 1992 Govt. Sanskrit College, Thripunithura, Kerala.
 3. *Vyangyavyakhya* (10 c) begins with Salutation to sage Bharata
Natankusa (15c) another Sanskrit work on theatre pays high tributes to Natyasastra. The author claims that his intention in writing the book is to uphold the legacy of Bharata
 4. i. *Subhadradhananjaya* - the story of Subhadra and Arjuna
ii. *Tapatisamvarana* - the story of Tapati and Samvarana.
The acting manuals of these two plays are known by the name Vyangyavyakhya. See for details:

5. Kutiyattam, the only surviving form that preserves the Natyasastra method of acting has contributed much to the development of Kathakali in its later phase of development. The stylised mode of acting itself is drawn from Kutiyattam. Stories like *Thoranyuddham* and *Balivadham* have many things in common with the stories performed in Kutiyattam. Kathakali has adopted exciting acting sequences like *Kailasodddharanam*, *Ajagarakabalitam* etc. from Kutiyattam.
Kathakali is indebted to Kutiyattam for its focus on *netrabhinaya*. Kalamandalam Krishnan Nair learned netrabhinaya from the legendary Mani Madhavachakyar for three years. Elders used to comment that the Chakyar gave eyes to Kathakali.
6. Ramanattam – The earliest Kathakali plays based on episodes from the Ramayana; plays: *Putrakameshti*, *Sitaswayamvaram*, *Vicchinnabhishekam*, *Kharavadham*, *Balivadham*, *Toranayuddham*, *Setubandhanam* and *Yuddham*.
7. *Kalyanasaugandhikam*, *Bakavadham*, *Kirmiravadham* and *Kalakeyavadham*
8. *Kichakavadham*, *Uttaraswayamvaram* and *Dakshayagam*
9. *101 Attakkathakal* (in two volumes) Ed. P. Venugopal, 2017, SPCS, Kottayam, Kerala.
10. *Kathakali Attaprakaram* in three volumes published respectively in 1963, 1966 and 1970 by K.P.S. Menon gives the details of presentation of 27 plays. *Thekkan chittayilulla Abhyasakramangal* by Chengannoor Raman Pillai explains the mode of presentation of 11 plays in the Southern system of acting. Kalamandalam has brought out in 2015 the latest on southern system *Kathakali Thekkan chitta Attaprakaram* (two volumes) by Kalamandalam Rajasekharan.
11. *Natyacharyante Padamudrakal*, Kalamandalam Padmanabhan Nair and Njayath Balan, Current Books, Kottayam.
12. *Nalacharitham Attaprakaram* - Kalamandalam Krishnan Nair, 1984, Kerala Sangita Nataka Academi, Trissur. Sahitya Akademi, Delhi has published this in English translated by Dr. Sudha Gopalakrishnan
13. *Kottayathu Tampurante Attakkathakal*, *Rangavyakhyā* - Kalamandalam Krishnan Nair, Rainbow Book Publishers, Chengannoor.
14. *Cholliyattam* (two parts) - Kalamandalam Padmanabhan Nair, 2000, Kerala Kalamandalam, Cheruthuruthy, Kerala.
15. *Nalacharithaprabhavam*- Kalamandalam Gopi, 2017, D.C.Books Kottayam
The author has added separate mudras for Nala, Damayanti, Sarthavahana and Pushkara with the mode of their presentation
The list of Attakkathas and Attaprakarams given here is incomplete. Some names are hinted to illustrate the nature of the composition.
16. *Natyasastra* Part IV - Ed. N.P. Unni. 1998, Nag publishers, New Delhi.
17. Kutiyattam students study the mudras not from HLD. They learn it from the Ramayana samkshepa (RS).
‘The uniqueness of RS is that the learning of Mudras in Kutiyattam still makes use of the same methodology. Hence the mudras are not considered as mere techniques but as something that contains a unique energy of the expression of bhava-s. Such a system of acting especially that which incorporates the training to express emotions through the hands learned through the narration of a particular story exists only in Kutiyattam in the traditional Indian Theatre’

G. Venu, Ramayanasamkshepam, 2013, National Culture Fund, Ministry of Culture, Govt. of India. G.Venu has done serious research on the mudras of Kathakali too. In his book *The Language of Kathakali* he has given the notations of 874 hand gestures.

18. *Kathakalimudrasastram*, Katathanattu K. Kunjuni Varier with an introduction by Vazhenkata Kunjunnair 1972, Kerala Sahitya Akademi, Thrissur
19. The two basic texts the Kathakali Gurus mainly depend on are the Natyasastra and Hastalakshanadipika. Natyasastra is available in several forms including a translation in Malayalam. Hastalakshanadipika was first published in Malayalam script in 1892 by Katathanattu Udayavarma Thampuran. Madras University published in 1956 a text called *Kathakalimanjari* which contains relevant portions from Natyasastra and Hastalakshanadipika. The *Kathakalipravesika* by Mathoor Kunju Pillai Panikkar Asan published in 1922 with the introduction of Mahakavi Vallathol is the earliest text on Kathakali in Malayalam authored by a Natyacharya. This was followed by *Natyarachana* (1955) by Thekkinkattil Ramunni Nair and *Kathakaliprakaram* (1956) by Pannisseri Nanu Pillai. These texts by acharyas codify the basic principles for the instruction of Kathakali.

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