

The Process of Transformation of *Natya* to *Attam* in Kerala

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Bharata had not included dance in his original scheme of performance. He did it on the advice of Lord Siva. It seems that his disciples were skeptic about this new addition, since dance does not convey definite meaning. Bharata pacified them telling that dance imparts beauty and splendor, it gives amusement, it is auspicious and above all people everywhere like to see it. Bharata uses the word nrtta for dance.

We get several descriptions of performances of dance in classical texts like Malavikagnimitra (1st c.CE) and Ratnavali in Kuttanimata (09th .c CE). In all the cases, the dance performed conveys intense emotions (Bhava). They are not nrtta but nrtya. But Bharata does not distinguish between the two. Kalidasa was the great dramatist close to Bharata in time, who faithfully followed the instructions of Bharata. Actually his dramas are the practical applications of Bharata's doctrines. Kalidasa is the best guide for us to learn Bharata. In his maiden play Malavikagnimitra, he has devoted the first two acts to illustrate the practices followed in the royal court regarding performance of dance. Proficient preceptors were employed in the court to train the princess in the theory and practice of nrtta. Kalidasa refers to them not as nrttacharyas but as natyacharyas and Abhinayacharyas. They are described as bhavaiva saririnau – emotion incarnated. The students' skill in performance determined the efficiency of the teacher.

The theme of the dance as also the bhava it communicates are important. In the present case disciple is asked to portray the emotions of the love-lorn Sarmistha through a beautiful song. The bhava depicted here is the longing for the lover. The judge evaluates the performance and pronounces the judgment. It is a fine piece of art criticism available to us.

Everything was without fault.

With the limbs eloquent with expression

She indicated the idea well,

Her footsteps were in tune with the melody and

the identity of emotion well delineated.

The dance as caused by the movement of

her hands and fingers was gentle and subtle.

The succeeding mood cancelled the preceding moods

While keeping the delight in tact.

(Aw-ssK-c'À \nlnX hNss\x kqNnXx kay-KA°x
]mZ-\ym-tkm- e-b-a-\p-K-X-kvX--b-Xzw -c-tkjp
imJm-tbm\ nx arZp-c-`n-\bx XZzn--l-ev]m-\p-hr̄u
`mthm- `m-hw-\p-ZXn hnj-bm³ cmK- _Ôx k G-h)

Kuttanimata (9.c.CE.) is distanced from Bharata by thousand years. It gives a detailed description of presenting the first act of Ratnavali in Benaras by a Kashmiri troupe. The preceptor here is called nrttacharya though what he presents is a natya. This means that the two words nrta and nrtya were interchangeable. The peculiarity here is that the male roles are also enacted by the female artists. The nrttacharya is eloquent about his art and also of his ability to train his disciple. There is also a sharp criticism of the degeneration of dance due to lack of patronage from the high ups.

Here also we get a detailed assessment of the performance of Manjari from the side of the audience. It is more technical in nature. The critic profusely uses the terms of Bharata to explain his points. Response in Kalidasa was from the point of view of an examiner (prasnika); here it is from the mouth of the critic, though the tone is highly appreciative.

The anubhavas in Karuna and viraha are similar. Yet she was able to show the subtle distinction between the two by her skillful presentation.

From these examples we can safely assume that what Bharata inherited from Lord Siva was pure dance of indigenous origin. This he added to the preliminary part, of course with his emendations and kept the inner text intact. He left his disciple Kohala to evaluate the distinctive features. He might have invented the name nrtya to distinguish it from nrta. Anyhow, the term nrtya had become popular by 5th century, since it is seen referred to in Amarakosa.

tandavam natanam natyam

lasyam nrtyam ca nartane

The beginning of the second millennium witnessed the emergence of regional identities all over the country. Prakrt dialects asserted their independent status. Bharata's rigid structure paved the way for desi forms like uparupakas and geyarupakas which were loose and elastic, but rich in music, dance and rhythm. The 11th century Dasarupaka mentions two streams-the desi and margi. He also formulates the characteristics of nrta (tala, laya), nrtya (bhava, padarthabhinaya) and natya (rasa, vakyarthabhinaya).

Natya will have Vakyarthabhinaya and it is rasa oriented. Nrtya will enact the meaning of the constituent words and present the bhava – Panchalarajatanaye.

There is a wrong notion among some scholars that nrta, nrtya and natya denote development of visual arts in the chronological order. There is no doubt that nrta is primitive. It is seen in every community in its early stage of development. The dance forms of tribal community can be cited as examples. But the next stage is natya. The former focused on angika and the latter on satvika. But padarthabhinaya is analytical and it can definitely be an expansion of vakyartha. The dances of Malavika and Manjari were rasa - oriented and they did not elaborate the word meaning. Hence the development of these forms can be traced in this order.

- i. Nrtta (pure dance) which Bharata adopted from Lord Siva. It is a Pre-Bharata phenomenon.
- ii. Dance promoting the emotion of natya, with vakyartha as in Kalidasa
- iii. Natya, the full-fledged emotion, rasa.
- iv. Nrtya analysing the components of the sentence depicting several moods leading to the primary sentiment.

The Padartha – Vakyartha distinction developed in the second millennium when regional forms asserted their identity to become independent entities. This we see in forms like Kutiyattam, Kathakali, Mohiniyattam etc. in Kerala.

Mutiyettu is the earliest form of performance available to us today in Kerala. It has three parts-the figure of Mother Goddess drawn on the paddy field after harvest (kalamezhuthu), the recital inviting the deity (tottam) and the actual drama wherein the furious mother kills the demon Darika (Darikavadham). Mutiyettu heavily influenced all the later forms of Kerala's painting, dance, poetry and drama. Mutiyettu and Kutiyattam are the two forms from Kerala recognised as intangible heritage of humanity by UNESCO.

Sanskrit theatre came to the South rather late. Mattavilasa (7th c.) by the Pallava king from Kanchi seems to be the earliest. Rulers of the second Chera dynasty (800 -1120 CE) patronized the art and literature. The royal dramatist Kulasekhara was excited by the concept of Dhvani expounded by Anandavardhana for poetry. He applied this theory to theatre. His stage manual is known as Vyangyavyakhya. He made two innovations which revolutionized the existing theatre practices-

1. The actor has to convey the implied sense to the audience

and

2. Every character at the time of the first entry should introduce him/her by narrating his previous history and link it to the context.

These two innovations had far reaching consequences. It liberated the actor from the limitations of the text, provided ample opportunities for imaginative acting (manodharma) encouraged solo performance and above all, introduced the transformation of role (pakarnnattam) as an essential mode of acting on Kerala stage. All these are the essentials of nrtya. In short Kulasekhara transformed Bharata's natya to attam (dance) on the Kerala stage.

Pakarnattam is not part of drama. Natya adopted it from nrta.

Attam in Malayalam means dance. Bharata does not accept Pakarnnattam in theatre. The 15th century critic in his Natankusa, severely criticises the practice of Pakarnnattam in Kutiyattam. He even ridicules as to how the actor in his costume of monkey with a long tail can enact the role of Sita on stage.

Actually, Kutiyattam and Kathakali took the device of pakarnnattam from dance. Dance is mono-acting, it doesnot have change of costume for different characters and it can change easily from one role to another and from that to yet another. An anonymous verse attributes this ability to the skill of the dancer.

Gtl-\m£vWm {}hn-X-X-cpjm ho£tX thyma-kwØw
`mt\mÀ_nw-_w, kPeep-fn-tX-\m-]-tc-Wm-β-Im´w
AÓ-tOtZ Zbn-X-hn-cm-lm-i-i:n\o N{l-hmlo
Zzu k'ioÀWu cN-bXn cku \À¯-loh {}K-ev`m.

The Chakravaki looks the setting sun with anger in one eye and her lover with the other eye, tears falling. She thus mixes two rasas like a talented dancer. This is the technique of ekalochana which was immortalized by the kathakali artistes. The earliest illustration of this kind of acting is seen in the Ardhanareeswara performance of Parayur Chakayan in

Silappadikaram. It is a dance and not drama. In Uttarasvayamvaram Kathakali Duryodhana tells his wife –

tlmIn \n³apJw Ip N{μ-s\¶v Nn´n¨v
GIm´w hnc-ls¯ iin-¨n-Xm,
GI-tem-N-\w-slmv tlm]-tamSv \ns¶bpw
timl-tam-S-]-tcW t\mip¶p]Xn-sb-bpw.

The immediate effect of these changes was the emergence of Kutiyattam, an alternate model for the presentation of Sanskrit plays different from the national pattern. This was followed by Krishnanattam, Ramanattam(Kathakali) and Mohiniyattam. Nangiarkuttu evolved from Kutiyattam and Keralanatanam from Kathakali.

As is known to everyone the renaissance movements in the first half of the last century prompted by national spirit, rejuvenated our dance forms all over the country. The movement initiated by Rabindranatha Tagore in Bengal and followed by Rugminidevi Arundale in Chennai and Mahakavi Vallathol in Kerala brought a total change to the very concept of dance in India and produced some of the greatest dancers India has ever seen. Dance became an invocation for the youth of India rousing them to patriotism. They danced with Ravisankar singing sare jaham se achchha, the song composed by him. The process of classicization which traced every form directly to Natyasastra brought new life to the forms. Renaissance in the field of dance made the form more scientific systematized. Mohiniyattam was the greatest beneficiary of this process in Kerala. Today it has become the very symbol of Kerala Dance, along with Kutiyattam, Kathakali and innumerable indigenous forms.

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