



KATHAKALI CLASSICAL ART FORM OF KERALA

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Abstract: Kathakali is an aesthetic blend of literature, music, gesticulation, dance and musical instruments. It is the visual expression of a poetic composition and is a pantomime in which the performers neither speak nor sing, but interpret the emotions through the medium of gestures, hand poses and vibrant facial expressions. The characteristic features of this dance are intricate facial make-up, distinctive headgear and costumes. A unique feature of Kathakali is the exclusive use of percussion instruments. The stories are usually derived from the epics and purāna-s. This paper mainly focuses on the eight sections of kathakali and other various aspects of Kathakali like Abhinayam, Sāhityam, Sangītam and Vādyam.

Keywords: Art-form of Kerala, kathakali, thodayam, vandanasloka, Aattakkatha, abhinaya, manavedan raja, ramanattam, vettathu raja

INTRODUCTION

The technicalities of Kathakali have their roots in Bharatha's natya sastra. Bharata is considered to have expounded his natya sastra earlier than the period of Sage Vyasa and Sage Valmiki. Dramas in Sanskrit set according to the natya sastra were enacted in Kerala in the temple premises and they were called as Koothu and Koodiyattam. The halls set aside for this were known as Koothambalam-s. It was a practice in the olden days to have such halls in the premises of eminent temples (mahakshetram) for staging such performances.

EIGHT SECTIONS OF KATHAKALI

Kēli, Araṅgukeli, tōtayam, vandanaśloka-s, purappātu, mēlappadam, kathabhinayam (enactment of the story) and Dhanāśi are the Ashtānga-s (eight sections) of Kathakali.

The performance of Kathakali includes an elaborate invocatory ritual followed by the enactment of the story.

Kēli: The purpose of this item is to inform people that Kathakali is about to be performed. This is usually performed at a location away from the venue of the performance, at a place of congregation of the public. The instruments used for this item are- Centa, Cēngila, Maddalam and Elattālam.

Araṅgukeli: This item is performed on stage after the ceremonious Kathakali lamp is lit. This is also called Suddhamaddalam and Kēlikkai. The instruments, the maddalam and elathālam, are played on stage facing the audience for a few minutes, after which the artists move to



the sides of the stage while continuing to play. The area of the stage behind the lamp is covered with a screen following this.

Thōtayam: This item follows the Araṅgukeli. It is similar to the Nāndi in Sanskrit dramas. This is the pūrvarangam of Kathakali, in which nruta is given more importance.

There are compositions by many composers for Thōtayam. The most widely used songs are those composed by Kōttāyatu Tampurān And His highness Kārttika Tirunāl.

Vandanaśloka-s: Following the Thōtayam, Vandanaśloka-s are rendered by the musicians. These śloka-s have been written by the composers of the attakathas at the beginning of each āttakatha. The frequently sung Vandanaśloka-s are those written by the architects of Kathakali, Kottārakkara Tampurān, Kōttāyatu Tampurān and Dharmaraja.

The raga Kedaragowla is rendered initially followed by a Vandanaśloka in the same raga. Then the musician renders the next śloka in some other raga of his choice or as a rāgamālika.

Purappātu: The Purappātu is an important item preceding the main Kathakali performance. It is generally performed by two divine characters –male and female in the northern style, two or four male characters in the southern style of performance of Kathakali. A śloka and a padam are usually written by the composers themselves as a preface to each āttakatha, which are used for the Purappātu. These padam-s are also called nilappadam-s. The Purappātu padam-s depict the qualities of the main character of the story.

Mañjutara or mēlappadam : Following the purappatu, a song from gīta gōvindam, Mañjutara, is sung by the musicians to the accompaniment of maddalam, cēnta, cēēṅgila and ilattālam. This item was initially sung as a prelude to the Kathakali performance by Gōvinda Dīksitar, Guru of Kōttayattu Tampurān. Subsequently, it has become an item of Kathakali. Six caranam-s of Mañjutara are sung in different rāga -s beginning with mōhanam and ending with madhyamāvatī. The whole item is set to campā tālam. Beginning with vilamba kālam and ending with druta kālam, each caranam is preceded by a cēnta and followed by a maddalam composition. Mēlappadam ends with the combined drumming (melam) of maddalam and cēnta. It offers an occasion for the musicians and drummers to showcase their individual skills.

Kathabhinayam: Following these invocative rituals, the Kathakali performance is staged. The artists, wearing elaborate and colorful costumes and headgear, effectively enact the story on stage. The enactment is through the medium of Nātyam, nrutyam and Nruttam, to



the accompaniment of music and instruments. Kathakali has been set to be enacted as a full night performance, starting at about 6.30 in the evening and lasting up to 5 in the morning.

Dhanāśi: At the conclusion of the story, a propitiatory dance is performed to the accompaniment of a few benedictory verses. This can be equated to the Bharatavākya (concluding part) of Sanskrit Drama.

VARIOUS ASPECTS OF KATHAKALI

Abhinayam, Sāhityam, Sangītam and Vādyam form the various facets of Kathakali.

Abhinayam includes Āngikam, Sātvikam Vāchikam and Āhāryam. Āngikābhinayam is the artistic blend of the movements of the anga-s in a technically sound style. Āngikābhinayam includes Nātyam, nrutyam and Nruttam. A Kathakali artist predominantly uses nrutyam to portray the story, with the help of nātyam and nruttam. In Kathakali, 24 hastamudra-s or hand gestures are generally used. The aesthetic use of hastamudra-s in harmony with the movements of the angas, conveys to the audience the Sāhityam (literary aspect) of Kathakali Natya. Sātvikābhinayam involves the Satva or the mind. The artists imbibe the emotions of the characters and effectively portray them on stage.

Vācikābhinayam, in its actual sense, depicts the conversations between the characters on stage. Since Kathakali is a mime, Vācikābhinayam, in its true sense is absent in Kathakali. Āttakkatha, the Sāhityam of Kathakali makes up the literary aspect of this art-form.

Āhāryam in Kathakali includes elaborate costumes and intricately designed headgear. The facial make-up, called cutti, a unique feature of Kathakali, varies according to the nature of the characters. Cutti involves complicated designs and is a laborious task, taking a minimum of 3-4 hours for completion.

Āttakkatha makes up the literary aspect of Kathakali. The composers of Āttakkatha-s have paid great attention to the visual impact of the literature while being enacted on stage. An āttakkatha is a story composed of verses set to rāga and tāla.

Kathakali literature (āttakkatha) includes śloka-s, dandaka-s, curnika-s and padams.

Śloka-s: Kathakali literature has made use of śloka-s to describe the scene of enactment of the story. The use of śloka-s at appropriate occasions brings to life a brief description of the scene.

Dandaka-s: In āttakkatha -s, dandaka-s are used for an elaborate description of the scene. When the description is too elaborate to be set to the meter of a verse, the composers have resorted to the use of dandaka-s which are compositions in prose form. Dandaka-s are also



used as links between two incidents in the story. The actors gesticulate in accordance to the dandaka-s. The first dandaka to be composed in āttakkatha-s is said to be in Kālakēyavadham, where Arjuna, on a celestial visit to heaven, becomes spellbound by the opulence he comes across. The awe-inspiring sights that he encounters and his experiences have been described in detail in this dandaka. (nivathakavachakalakeyavadham – Kōttayattu Tampurān-commentary by G.Ramakrishna Pilla – pub-Sahitya pravartaka co-operative society ltd, Kottayam.)

Cūrnikā-s: Cūrnikā is a very long sentence used in āttakkatha-s, in Malayalam or Sanskrit, composed like the cūrnikā in Sanskrit literature. For example the cūrnikā we come across in Nalacaritam at the end of the third day's play. (ityeva vaikamatya.....) (nalacaritam vyākhyānam Panmana Ramachandran nair)

Padam-s: Padams make up the main part of āttakkatha. While śloka-s and dantaka-s are used for descriptions and for depicting scenes where abhinaya is not possible, padam-s are used to depict conversations and soliloquies. They are divided into three parts- pallavi, anupallavi and caranam-s, though, occasionally, we come across padam-s which do not have anupallavi. In scenes involving two characters in conversation, one character portrays a complete padam following which the other character enacts his padam.

In some conversations, we come across two padam-s intermingling with each other where each character repeats his own pallavi.

Ex. Vijaya vijayībhava –kālākēyavadham. Here, in the scene where Arjuna meets Indrāni, the salutation of Indrāni by Arjuna is rendered as a śloka, following which the padam Vijaya Vijayī bhava is rendered. In this padam, the pallavi and the first three caranam-s are rendered by Indrāni. Then Arjuna enacts his padam- Vijayanaham itā kaitozhunnēn.... Here the pallavi and first four caranam-s are rendered. Then Indrāni proceeds with her caranam-s, concluding with her pallavi- Vijaya vijayī bhava. Such compositions are characteristic of āttakkatha literature.

(appendix Audio cd Vijaya vijayee bhava)

In some situations featuring heated arguments, like in Nalacaritam -2nd day's play, where Bāhuka is angrily accusing Kali of having cheated him , the pallavi Vañcaka nī varika... .is followed by anupallavi and one caranam. This is set to rāga Madhyamāvatī. Kali, in reply, renders the padam Kshamikka vēname... set to rāga Puranīr. Through the entire conversation, Bāhuka and Kali give vent to their feelings through two different padam-s. The



padam-s depict two different moods- anger on the part of Bāhuka depicted by the rāga Madhyamāvatī and set to Muriyadanta at a brisk pace, and apologetic mood on the part of Kali depicted by the rāga Puranīr and set to Cempata at a slow pace. The conversation thus proceeds with the two padam-s being woven together intricately preserving the beauty of the scene.

Padam-s can be classified according to the situations in the story they portray. Examples - vicārapadam, yudhapadam, pādipadam.

Vicārapadam : these padam-s depict the thoughts of the character on the stage. They are soliloquies.

Ex: Nirjanamennatheyullu....rāga Bēgada, Tāla Muriyadanta –nalacaritam- first day's play.

Yudhapadam: In accordance to the name given, these padam-s are used in scenes involving a tussle between the characters. Here, the verbal fight is followed by physical altercation. Padam-s used for the verbal fights are yudhapadams. Though set to music, these padam-s are rendered on an aggressive note, often sounding like abuses as and when the situation warrants.

Ex: Mūdhamate, rananātakamatuka.... Utharaswayamvaram.

Nillata nillata Duryōdhanavadham.

Pādipadam: As the name implies, padam-s set to raga Padi are called padipadams. They are sung at a slow tempo (vilamba kalam). These padams offer the ideal backdrop for the portrayal of emotions with all technical finesse. Such padams are set to a disciplined frame. Hence they are also referred to as Chittapadams. (chitta- discipline) The srīngara rasa of Kathi vesham is portrayed by padipadams.(Kathakali vijnana kosam)

Ex: Malini ruchiraguna salini.... Keechakavadham

Kamaladalalochane.... Karthaveeryarjunavijayam.

Paarvanasasivadane..... Duryodhanavadham.

Sangeetham forms the basis which supports and nourishes the Abhinayam. The Attakathas have been composed musically. Though there are mild variations in the style of rendering, Kathakali sangeetham cannot be considered to be entirely different from Carnatic music. We also find a few ragas indigenous to Kerala which are used in Kathakali, but not in carnatic music.

The role of the musical instruments in Kathakali is to augment the music of the vocalists in creating the mood for the enactment of the story. The peculiarity of the usage of musical



instruments in Kathakali is that only percussion instruments are used here. Chenda, maddalam and edakka are the emparched instruments used in Kathakali and Chengila and ilathalam are the metal instruments used. Edakka is mainly used as an accompaniment for the female characters. It is also for auspicious and ceremonial occasions. The conch is also blown during such occasions.

The exclusive usage of percussion instruments in Kathakali is due to the fact that kathakali is an art-form which has evolved during an era when the usage of microphones was not prevalent.

Kathakali is an aesthetically blended art-form where there is an absolute synchronization between abhinayam, geetham and vadyam. Here, the story is expressed through the medium of music. This story is conveyed to the audience by the actor through nrithya, nritha and natya. The accompanying instruments skillfully support in this process.

The first step is the rendering of the attakkatha musically, to the accompaniment of the musical instruments. This assists the actors in bringing out the emotions of the characters in the situation being depicted in the story, with ease. The tempo is maintained by the tala rendered on the chengila by the main vocalist, called ponnani. The main singer is ably assisted by the second singer, called sangidi, who repeats the lines sung by him and also plays the elathalam. The instrumentalists play in accordance to the singing and also synchronize their playing according to the steps and mudras of the actors. The musicians repeat the lines of the padam till the actors finish the required abhinaya. This usually follows a set pattern and the co-ordination is maintained according to the mudras being performed. This enactment of the song is called cholliyattam. Occasionally, in situations involving an elaborate description of the scene, the only accompaniment to the abhinaya is provided by the percussionists, matching their playing to the actor's mudras and steps. This is called elakiyattam. Though there is a set pattern for this, the actor is given freedom to enact according to his manodharma. Another important aspect in the performance is kalasam, the dance part of Kathakali. The word Kalāśam denotes completion.

This is usually rendered at the end of each part of the song eg: pallavi, anupallavi etc. The steps can be compared to the steps of kalaripayattu. Kalāśam-s are set conclusions. There are different types of kalāśam-s in all the talas of Kathakali. Kalāśams.-show great variation in length and complexity. Sometimes, a Kalāśam is depicted in one to two cycles of tala whereas, at others, it may extend according to the wishes of the performer, adhering to the



tala. The situation in the story being portrayed and the meaning of the sahitya are very often conveyed through this nritha. For eg: Ashtakalāśam of Ravana in Ravanavijayam. Here, it depicts the jubilant mood of Ravana. It is due to this that this is referred to as anandanritham.

A normal Kalāśam is performed at the end of the pallavi, anupallavi and charanams and it is called Sadharana Kalāśam. In Chempada tala, along with the sadharana Kalāśam, the Kalāśam set to double speed rendered at the end of the anupallavi and charanams is called as Iratti.

The Kalāśam-s rendered by the female characters is in lasya (subtle mood) whereas the Kalāśam-s rendered by the male characters is in thandava (aggressive mood). The Kalāśam-s are set according to the fundamental (sthayi) disposition of the character and the ambient mood of the character according to the situation.

Ten types of Kalāśam-s have been described. They are vattamvechu Kalāśam, iratti, idak kalāśam, adakkam, thonkaram, eduthu kalasam, muri kalāśam, valiya kalāśam, ashta kalāśam and dhanasi Kalāśam. Details of these can be obtained from Kathakali vignana kosam- By Aimanam Krishna Kaimal.

CONCLUSION

The splendor of this art-form is brought about by the absolute co-ordination between the actors, singers and the percussionists. This is efficiently worked out by an effective, invisible communication between them which comes about through experience. The whole performance is ably controlled by the main singer who communicates his directions to the percussionists and actors through specific beats on his chengila.

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