

**THEATRE ART OF SOUTH INDIA: A DETAILED STUDY OF
DIFFERENT FORMS OF DRAMA**

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Abstract

Southern India has a rich theatrical tradition spanning over centuries. Ancient Sangam literature, particularly the epic Shilppadhikaram, gives clues to the rich theatre culture of south India. When the Sanskrit theatre began to decline in northern India, It travelled to the south and flourished there from 8th century until the present. Koodiyattam is the local style of staging Sanskrit plays that has been flourishing in the temple theatres of Kerala since the 10th century. It is considered to have been derived from a much earlier form known as Keota or chalkier Keota. The classical dramatic traditions remained confined to theatres called Koothambalams, while the folk tradition manifested in the ritualistic and non-ritualistic theatrical forms such as Teyyam, Kali dance-drama and Bhuta dances. Most often the classical and the folk forms mingled to create varied new forms such as Kathakali, Bhagwat Mela, Kuchipudi, Terukoothu, Yakshagana, Veedhi Bhagwatam and Chakkiyar Koothu. This paper is a research study of the theatre forms of south India

Key words: Sangam, Shilppadhikaram, Koodiyattam, Teyyam, Kathakali, Bhagwat Mela, Kuchipudi, Terukoothu, Yakshagana, Veedhi Bhagwatam and Chakkiyar Koothu.

Introduction:

Southern India has a rich theatrical tradition spanning over centuries. Ancient Sangam literature, particularly the epic Shilppadhikaram, gives clues to the rich theatre culture of south India. When the Sanskrit theatre began to decline in northern India, It travelled to the south and flourished there from 8th century until the present. Koodiyattam is the local style of staging Sanskrit plays that has been flourishing in the temple theatres of Kerala since the 10th century. It is considered to have been derived from a much earlier form known as Keota or chalkier Keota. The classical dramatic traditions remained confined to theatres called Koothambalams, while the folk tradition manifested in the ritualistic and non-ritualistic theatrical forms such as Teyyam, Kali dance-drama and Bhuta dances. Most often the classical and the folk forms mingled to create varied

new forms such as Kathakali, Bhagwat Mela, Kuchipudi, Terukoothu, Yakshagana, Veedhi Bhagwatam and Chakkiyar Koothu.

Karnatak music and dance still have strong bonds with Andhra. In traditional dance-drama, the Bhagavata Mela Nataka of some of the Villages near Tanjore in Tamilnadu are an off shoot or a craft from the Kuchipudi Bhagavata plays in Telugu country. Many of the technical terms of Bharata Natya and a considerable part of its compositions ...sabdas, varnas and padalure are in Telugu. The Kuchipudi tradition is the best known of Telugu dance-drama forms but this is not the only one. In drama and dance, from most ancient times, as the history of The Dasarupaka and Uparupaka traditions of Sanskrit with more complete forms. In Karnataka, where we have the Yakshagana, We also have the form taken from it called Tala-maddale in which without roles or make-up, the participants sit down and go through the play orally.

The Auditorium:

Acoustics was important for both the drama and the mono-act. The architects of Kerala arts were therefore commissioned to produce the perfect piece of acoustic excellence. That was how the koothambalams in the temples of Kerala came to be designed and built. Their acoustic excellence had to be experienced to be believed. And it was in these koothambalams that the famous plays Tapati Samvarana and Subhadra Dhananjaya of King Kulasekhara Perumal of Kerala of the eighth century A.D. were enacted. To present seven acts, it took them as long as two months. The introduction itself could take four days. There could be no more evidence of the existence of an extremely discerning, leisure-loving class and the dominant place the drama occupied in the cultural panorama of Kerala from ancient times.

Krishnattam:

As the centuries rolled by, another addition to the theatre was Krishnattam. Those were days when the Zamorins ruled the northern half of Kerala with their capital at Calicut. Sometime in the first half of the sixteenth century, the reigning Zamorin was one Manavedan, a great scholar and patron of arts. He wrote a drama based on Krishna's life and choreographed it into an elegant art form, called the Krishnattam (the play of Krishna). He also gave it a dance base. The script was in Sanskrit and the artists, Chakyars. Krishnattam, became quite popular very soon. It copied the costumes of Koodiattam but improved upon them. For certain characters, it also used masks. Being a new art form directly promoted by a powerful rulership. Krishnattam became a regular feature in important festivities. Its novelty drew to it many people away from the Koodiattam stage. The rasikas who patronized Krishnattam and Koodiattam Were the same, the elite members of society who had learned Sanskrit and could appreciate its literary depths.

Ramanattam:

“The ink had not dried on Valmiki's manuscript, as it were, when the Lord Brahma, is said to have appeared before him and pronounced:

As long as in this firm-set land the streams shall flow, the mountains stand, So long throughout the world, be sure, the great Ramayana shall endure.” - MOHAN KHOKAR.

Malayalam, as a distinct language, had come to stay by then. Ezhuthachan's famous works, the Adhyatma Ramayana and the Mahabharata, were household possessions all over Kerala. The language had arrived with its own distinct diction, rhetoric and imagery. Every Nayar household

considered it a matter of prestige and later, a matter of routine to get the children, both boys and girls educated. Earlier this was confined to Sanskrit works like Raghuvamsam and Sriramodantam, But after the emergence of the mellifluous master- pieces of Ezhuthachan, Manipravala, the judicious mixture of Sanskrit and Malayalam used by him to evolve a charming style of his own became a popular theme of study and emulation. Poets, who earlier had confined themselves to writing poetry in Sanskrit alone, took to composition in Manipravala. A new awareness of the seamier side of life was spreading among the middle classes. The highly Sanskritised Koodiattam and Krishnattam were too high-brow for them. They needed something lighter, something that could hold their enthusiasm. As it always happened at the time of such a need in the cultural history of any people, the Raja of Kottarakkara came forward with his new theme, the Ramanattam. Compared to the Zamorin, Kottarakkara was a lesser Raja. He was the chief of a small principality at a place about eighty kilometres to the north of Trivandrum, the present headquarters of Kerala State. He was a great scholar and had grasped the essentials of the drama extant then. He composed a play based on the Ramayana. As it took eight days to present a Krishnattam play, he too devised his play into one for eight days.

The essential differences between the two were that. While Krishnattam was all in Sanskrit and was enacted only by Chakyars, Ramanattam was in Manipravala style and performed by the Raja himself and his Nayar soldiers. That was the beginning of Kathakali, the classical theatre of the people of Kerala. Opinions differ on the exact dates on which these plays were composed by the Raja. Reliable research scholars place the period somewhere between 1575 A.D. and 1630 A.D. The Raja himself supervised the training of the actors who were all chosen from his army composed wholly of Nayars and led by their chieftain, Kittu Kurup. Costumes were improvised, the typical Kerala colours, bluish green, red and black dominating them in the facial make-up. The actors learnt their words by heart and sung them while acting. After a few performances, they got confidence to go as a troupe and give performances in different parts of Kerala. Dancing and a sense of rhythm came naturally to the Nayars as their training in physical combat and warfare conducted in the Kalaries (gymnasia) was imparted according to a tala (time beat). Religious rituals from the early days involved dancing accompanied by music and drumming. Over the centuries, music mostly in folk-song style, developed and acquired a distinct pattern of its own in Kerala. Music drew the Nayars to it and they wove it attractively into their ritualistic dances. So when Ramanattam was introduced by the Raja of Kottarakkara, it was easy for him to integrate an already existing style of music and pattern of dancing. Kathakali within the first two decades of the emergence of Ramanattam as a distinct form of theatre, it became clear that the actor could not do justice to music, dance and action at the same time. Dance affected one's breath; music demanded a steady breath. Vethu Raja, was ably assisted by his versatile army chief, Sankara Nayar. It was at their hands that Ramanattam got refined into Kathakali. They introduced many reforms, the most important of which was to provide a musician, to sing the entire dialogue so that the actors could be fully free to interpret it with gestures and movements. Thereafter, the actor could concentrate on specialisation in abhinaya (aesthetic expression) leading to the present state of stylised perfection. The Raja also improved the system of costumes and make-up. Masks used earlier by demons and monkeys following the practice in Koodiattam or Krishnattam were done away with. Instead, faces were painted with appropriate colours.

Veedhi Bhagvatam:

When Kuchipudi Bhagavata attained its high water-mark, it gave birth to a derivative solo performance called the Veedhi Bhagavata or Gollakalapa. The masters of Kuchipudi themselves thought of this new type and it evolved through women-artistes of courtesan families (Kalavantula) who were proficient in the solo dance-art of Nautch. The Kuchipudi tradition did not permit women to play female roles in its Bhagavata stories and the Nautch had its own repertoire of detached pieces and love-songs. By crossing the features of these two, the form named Veedhi Bhagavata or Gollakalapa was developed and a line of capable teachers and accomplished exponents refined it to a degree acceptable to the connoisseurs. In fact, it became for a time very popular over a greater part of Andhra. The credit of discovering the art in its last lingering phase goes to All India Radio, Vijayawada, and late Sri Y. Satyanarayana, who was with that station for some time. Later through the Music Academy, Madras and the Madras State Sangita Nataka Sangam, I had the opportunity of bringing it to a wider public and to the students and lovers of the dance in Madras. The artiste who expounded the art in Madras was Smt. Annabathula Venkataratnam of Mummdivaram, a symbol of ripe and masterly exposition, who, after some decades of retirement due to lack of public appreciation and support, had been persuaded to recapture the Accomplishment of her younger years. As already said, it is the Bhagavatas, those Brahmin scholars learned in Sanskrit and Natya Sastra who were responsible for originating this form and giving it a shape. Instead of young boys, courtesans versed in Bharata Natya were absorbed into the art. Instead of disconnected lyrics, as sustained Bhagavata-theme or episode was substituted. These women-artistes (Kala- vantula) had already behind them a heritage of music and dance and some knowledge of Sanskrit, puranic myths and the rhetoric of love and nayika-nayakbhava, It was now necessary only to strengthen their knowledge of Sanskrit and widen their general acquaintance with the tenets of religion and philosophy. In fact, if as evolved, this form would shed its dance and gesticulations, and follow more strictly the trend of a single devotional story.

It would result in another form, still popular, active and effective, at least in Tamilnad, the Hari-katha or kathakalakshepa. In this, as in Veedhi Bhagavata, there is only one main exponent, usually a male though women are not unknown, accompanied by music and oral exposition. Supported by thematic songs and verses, this presents a devotional doctrine with illustrative stories of Prahlada, Dhruva etc.

Characters:

The Veedhi Bhagavata has a single female-artiste, the main dancer; she is supported by a secondary female-artiste. To put across the ideas more effectively, as much as to entertain, humour (hasya rasa) emerges; and for this a Brahmin, in more or less the Vidhushaka's role plays the interlocutor. It is this dialogue or argument in which the chief lady, representing a milk-maid (gwala), carries on with the Brahmin, that provides the Kalapam. The golla always scores. She cross-examines the Brahmin as to his real Brahminhood and expatiates on what a real Brahmin is according to the sastras and under the torrent of her questions and Sanskrit quotations from the sastras, the poor Brahmin is left breathless. The Vidhushaka-Brahmin may also come off in his role of a comedian and vehicle of wisdom. Wherever a song introduces a character, grandiloquently, the Vidushaka, starts off on a parody of the song, a comic technique which is found in a more sustained manner in the traditional Koodiyattam presentations of Sanskrit plays

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in Kerala. The Vidooshaka for instance may begin by parodying the nayaka and nayika. The Vidhushaka does not involve any new character; the player who began as Sutradhara and introduced the performance, himself takes on the Vidhushaka's role. He is a versatile and multi-purpose character, the constant companion of the lady and also her chorist.

The Performance:

The performance begins as with any traditional dance-drama. A curtain is held by two stage-hands and the main character performs behind it, her dance to the entrance-song as sung by the chorist. The classic ragas of Karnatak music are used in the songs. The mridangam supplies the rhythmic accompaniment. Jatis are orally recited and intricate rhythm patterns give the dancer's footwork sufficient scope for artistry. These songs are similar to the darus found in the dance-drama compositions and to each of these the gollabhama dances. She interprets the theme in the songs closely through abhinaya. The art of abhinaya is in full evidence, and by the very nature of the theme, the range of the ideas is wide, and there is greater scope for improvisation and interpretation (kalpana). With its elaborate display of nritta and nritya, the Gollakalapam takes its place among authentic forms of the Bharata Natya arts and possesses adequate potential for skill and beauty of exposition.

The Veethi Bhagavatam when it became popular was requisitioned for temple festivals, on occasions of marriage and other happy celebrations in the houses of rich patrons.

Pioneers:

Among the authors of compositions on Bhagavata-stories for this art, and among those who, as gurus, trained courtesan dancers as media for presenting this art form, may be mentioned Ravuri Kamayya and his brothers Noorayya, Venkayya and Satyamgaru, Vempati, Venkatanarayanagaru, Vedantarn Lakshminarayana Sastri, and Bhagavatulu Dasaratha Ramiah. The brothers trained the Chittazallu family of courtesans and other Kalavantulus of note. Over a dozen talented dancers of this class who spread and maintained this art and still remembered. The Veedhi Bhagavatam had to face the same dilemma as other traditional forms of dance and dance-drama in the recent past. It used to be performed for the greater part of the night and a full performance spread over three nights. This length of time is no longer feasible and the same neglect and unhelpful conditions which led to the decay of other traditional dance and dance-drama arts affects this art also. Kuchipudi dance-drama and Bharata Natya have been rehabilitated and it is hoped that lovers of art and institution which have been established in Andhra, as elsewhere, for reviving the local art-forms, will devote their attention and resources to the Veethi Bhagavata, or Bhamakalapa too.

THULLAL:

Kerala is rich in literary and artistic traditions. The celebrated classical dance drama, Kathakali, has placed Kerala in the forefront of the civilized countries of the world. Thullal is yet another Kerala art which is fostered, encouraged and taught in Kerala Kalamandalam. If we remember that the genius, traditions and temperaments of a people are most reflected in their traditional arts, we could without any hesitation say that the art form of Thullal is a mirror of our cultural life. It is more so, when viewed in the light of the statement, "The character of a people is often

learnt from their amusements, for in the hour of mirth, the mind is unrestricted and takes its natural bent.” Thullal is a most amusing and mirthful dance recital..

Thullal- Its Artistic Form and Technical Details:

Thullal literally means dance. But the term connotes a particular school of dance. It has a history which throws much light on the literary, artistic and cultural life of medieval Kerala. This art form is the cumulative product of all the traditional theatrical arts of Kerala, both folk and classical. In ancient times, the wisdom of the epics and mythology was conveyed to the people by different classes of story tellers. Chakkyar Koothu is perhaps the best example of the tradition which the highbrow class of society fostered and encouraged. And hence, that art form in its evolution attained a high degree of sophistication. But the medium resorted to by the folk for their self-expression, entertainment and propagation of mythology was art, especially narration, music and dance. Kerala, in ancient times, was very rich in the patterns of such theatrical folk art forms which had singing and dancing as their integral parts. The art of Thullal was evolved as a system out of the various singing and dancing art forms of the people incorporating apt features of classical styles so that by the harmonious blend of the folk and classical forms of arts it represented the accumulated aesthetic experience of all sections of the people high and low. The themes were drawn from the never failing myths and epics of India. As the main objective was the propagation of knowledge and enrichment of literature through the medium of art, spoken word and songs became the most powerful component of communication. The songs were sung to the accompaniment of acting and dancing with varying foot works. Based on different styles of narrative singing, rhythms of dancing, foot work and makeup of the dancer, three varieties of Thullal were evolved in course of time. They are:

1. OTTAN THULLAL:

It consists of a variety of rapid meters well suited for amusing narratives and it is vigorous in execution. The Thullal actor who presents this type has a fascinating costume. His face is painted green. With a round headgear of multi-colored tinsel and gold, a breast plate to match, a circle of jingles round his ankles and wearing a frilled skirt round his waist, he sings and dances to the sounding of the cymbals and beating of the drum. Along with singing and dancing, the player acts the incidents narrated in the songs.

2. SEETHANKAN THULLAL:

It has meters of medium cadence for the songs used and rhythm to suit. In contrast to the picturesque appearance of the dancer in Ottan Thullal, the dancer in Seethankanhas his face unpainted, except for a few black lines, on the eyebrows and eyelids to heighten the expression of the eyes. He wears a crown made out of the tender leaves of coconut palm, with frills of the same material adorning his wrists.

3. PARAYAN THULLAL:

This has a slow narrative style for singing, with slow graceful elegant steps, movements and hand gestures. The make-up of a Parayan is very simple except for an ornamental headgear and a red cloth round his waist. The dancer smears the whole body with charcoal paste.

More than two hundred years ago, there appeared in the arena of Kerala culture a most extraordinary poet, the like of whom is hard to be found. His name was Kunchan Nambiar. He belonged to a family of artistes who had hereditary functions associated with the performance of Chakkyar Koothu in Hindu temples. Striking the Mizhavu-a particular kind of drum to set

rhythms of the Koothu performance-was the main function, at which Nambiar also had his training during his boyhood. The Kerala stage patronized by the aristocracy Within the premises of the temples was dominated by the highly sophisticated art forms such as Koothu and Koodiyattam. The common man was left behind, unable to share the delights of scholarly poetry and drama and the spiritual enlightenment of religious literature. At the same time, Nambiar found a vast body of folk literature in the lower strata of society in the form of songs and ballads as also various types of folk arts which though low in standard were characterized by the qualities of spontaneity and naturalness undreamt of in the creations of intellectuals. He emerged as a performing poet-a unique event in the cultural field. Nambiar was a born poet with a marvelous command of words and versification. He was equally proficient in Sanskrit and Malayalam. The output of the poet has been prodigious. There are about fifty poetical works to his credit as Thullal compositions. All of them are on puranic themes. But the compositions have the unmistakable stamp of the poet's originality based on his worldly wisdom and outlook. He very cleverly adapted the puranic themes to the environment of contemporary Kerala life with a view to make those episodes serve him as a powerful media for social criticism. This local coloring is sometimes interwoven with interludes of allusive satire on popular morals and manners which have had their biting effect on society. And no wonder that the Thullal composed in the language of the people, replete with fun and humour designed as a theatrical art blending many streams of literary, musical, rhythmical and histrionic traditions of the people blazed out into popularity which they still enjoy.

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