Introduction : The Aesthetics of Kūṭiyāṭṭam

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What Kutiyattam Is and What it Is Not

Kutiyattam is often defined as the traditional presentation of classical Sanskrit drama on the Kerala stage. It is also frequently described as the only surviving form of the Sanskrit theatre tradition in the whole of India. Sometimes it is also claimed that it is the most authentic and pristine form of ancient Indian theatre. These statements are perhaps not wholly incorrect: but they tell us either too much or too little about Kutiyattam. They are at best partial definitions and imperfect evaluations. They do give us some ideas about Kutiyattam, especially what it appears to be on the surface. But they do not tell us what is distinctive and unique about this theatre. They try to give us the impression that Kutiyattam has existed for a thousand years or more in the same form in which we find it today. If "traditional," "Sanskrit," and "Kerala" are the operative terms, the first should refer to its long history, the second to the language used, and the third to the locale of the performance. One has to go beyond these parameters to get a more precise knowledge of this theatre style and its tradition.

The Malayalam word *kūṭiyāṭṭam* may be taken literally to mean ensemble acting. *Kūṭi* means "together" and *āṭṭam* refers to acting or dancing: rhythmic and stylized movement. But this literal meaning also does not go very far. It gives us very little information about the complexity and sophistication of this performing art. That it uses scenes and situations from Sanskrit plays is true. Often it confines its attention to single acts or scenes—not to a whole play. And even a single act may take as many as 20 or 30 or 40 nights. Many scenes are presented as solo performances, without many actors appearing on the stage together, but with the same actor impersonating several characters without change of costume or make-up. So if someone takes Kutiyattam to mean *kūṭiyāṭṭam*, that is, elaborate acting or extended performance, there is some justification for it. Actors are free to go beyond the verbal text of the play as written by the playwright and bring in related episodes from other texts. When the characters recite verses, whatever be their source, they do so in a very specialized and stylized manner. The movements of the body and the gestures of the hands are highly codified. *Netrabhinaya* or the movements of the eyes and eyebrows as well as facial expressions are endowed with a lot of significance. Make-up and costume as well as stage decor are conditioned by rigid specifications. There are ritualistic enactments which may not have any obvious or intimate connection with the text of the play concerned. Excessive stylization may at times obscure the connection between the actor's gestures and speeches on the one hand and the body movement and vocal utterances in real life on the other. Realism on the surface is thus kept to the minimum. The emphasis is thus shifted to imagined reality. And all the stage conventions are aimed at projecting this imagined reality. In other words, *natyadharmi* is allowed to subsume, though not to displace, *lokadharmi*. In the use of language too, except in the

case of the Vidushaka who uses mostly Malayalam, the *vachika* is subordinated to *angika* and *sattvika*. Malayalam prose is profusely employed by the Vidushaka. Female characters use Prakrit as given in the original text. The relationship between master and servant, king and courtier, senior and junior, husband and wife, is indicated by a predetermined code of postures and stances, gestures and vocal formulaic expressions. Every movement of every limb, every gesture, and every utterance is controlled by the rhythm of the percussion instruments, especially the Mizhavu. The entire choreography is closely linked to the beats of the drum. When a character has to speak or recite any verse, he has to show a special gesture with his right hand to stop the drumming, and that too to the accompaniment of the durm-beat. It is well within the very tight set of these checks and controls that the Kutiyattam actor has to appear to move with ease and freedom. The natural flow of rhythmic movement seems to hide from our view the strict discipline and rigour the actor has undergone to achieve this creative freedom. The synchronization of the actor's movements and the sound of the drums is of infinite importance. Freedom here is the gift of discipline. Any impression of staccato movement or jerkiness or failure to keep the *tala* will destroy the felicity and will not be forgiven by the *sahrdaya* or connoisseur. The beauty of the stylized movements of the body in consonance with the rhythm of the drum-beats arises from the precision in expression of the dramatic role.

The Theatre of the Imagination

From the point of view of what the performance communicates, Kutiyattam may be thought of as the theatre of imagined reality. What the imagination of the actor bodies forth is what the spectator has to look for. It is not just the translation of the meaning of individual words or sentences through gestures. The entire body of the actor and his *aharya* are involved in this process of aesthetic communication. The actor, with the active support of the drummer, has to rouse the imagination of the spectator so that the latter can catch up with the flights of imagination of the former while presenting detail after detail of a specific passage. When in Anguliyankam Hanuman presents the different situations of Ramayana through elaborate *angika abhinaya*, the spectator is spell-bound, and automatically extends his full co-operation to the creative imagination of the actor. This is not achieved solely through the correspondence between what the actor shows and what exists in the world outside as already known to the spectator: the actor by the power of his imagination visualizes, fantasizes, creates scenes or situations, and the experienced spectator follows every movement of the actor's eyes, hands, feet, even costume, in order to make that aesthetic experience his own. It is not reality as it exists outside the performance, but as it is created jointly by the actor and the spectator while the performance is on. The greater the gift of the actor, the greater the pleasure of the spectator. The "togetherness" implied by the word Kutiyattam seems to extend from the actors to the audience as well.

Text versus Performance

Kutiyattam seems to prefer a minimal text to one that contains detailed descriptions of what the actor has to do every moment of the play. It makes its own *attaprakaram* or performance manual for each unit of the text. The playwright who specifies in advance what the character has to do before or during or after a piece of dialogue or monologue is

not the ideal playwright for the Kutiyattam theatre. Hence Bhasa with his under-worded laconic text or minimal verbal structure is preferred to Kalidasa who seldom forgets to tell the reader/spectator what each character at any given moment is thinking or doing. He leaves little space for the actor to improvise. This may be because Kalidasa is taken primarily as a poet and his text as more narrative than dramatic. Working with a minimal text the Kutiyattam player can find occasions to add his own imaginative elaborations. This is probably the reason for Bhasa's popularity on the Kutiyattam stage. The attempt to present imagined reality taxes and teases the imagination of the actor as well as the person who prepares the *attaprakaram*. Ideally there is no text without performance: in fact, it is the performance that determines the text. In Kutiyattam it seems the performance is the real text. An over-written or verbose text is often a hindrance to performance. The elaboration is the contribution of the performer. It is achieved in a number or ways. One of them is the narration of the events starting at some point in the past and leading up to a particular point in time. Another device is the narration in reverse: from the present moment back to some point of time in the past. A third is the narration entirely through gesticulation without the actor or actress speaking. A fourth means of elaboration is the explication or illustration by narrating an implied story within a story. The purpose of all this elaboration is to dramatize an interesting event or anecdote which may be interesting in itself, although it may not be an integral part of the main plot. In fact, Kutiyattam is seldom concerned with the mere telling of a particular story from beginning to end, so as to entertain the audience with the whole play at one sitting. It delights in delaying, deferring the end. Invented episodes are dwelt upon by the Vidushaka, for instance, like an inveterate storyteller, using all his inventive skill to bring in stories from outside the puranic context of the play, which he is supposed to be presenting. The author of *Natankusa* objects to all these types of elaboration, which are of the very essence of Kutiyattam. Just as the Kutiyattam spectator accepts the convention that Ravana or Hanuman or Jimutavahana has to move in a stylized way, recite his speech in the raga or swaras assigned to it, wear a costume that is most unrealistic, and has to keep to the tala of the drumbeats, he also accepts the technique of elaboration and derives pleasure from it. The minimal text is thus made maximal: the actor collaborates with the playwright, the playwright with the drummer and the costume-designer, in producing the performance text. When the actor pretends to look at the sea which he imagines to be in front of him, the spectator should concede the experience of the pretence, instead of saying there is no sea on the stage. The actor's role implies four types of *abhinaya*, a term more potent than *acting: aharya, vachika, angika* and *sattvika*. The text of a play supplies only the material for *vachika*, which is only one-fourth; three-fourths of a performance constitute the contribution of the performer. Kutiyattam is the actor's theatre per excellence.

Actor versus Character

One of the most distinctive features of Kutiyattam is the provision for multiple impersonation on the part of the actor without change of make-up and costume. The role-transformation or *pakarnnattam* makes a distinction between actor and character. The actor is a vehicle or a medium; he is never totally identified with any one role or single character. When the actor in the role of Ravana enacts *Parvativiraham* or separation of Parvati from Shiva, he narrates the whole episode in great detail by assuming the roles of

Shiva and Parvati alternately. The skill of the actor is to be judged by his ability to achieve this transformation. The lack of total identification between character and actor makes this possible. Hanuman, that is, the actor in the make-up of Hanuman, in *Anguliyankam*, assumes many fast-changing roles without change of costume. The experienced spectator sees beyond the make-up and costume and sees the projected character, be it Rama or Sita or Lakshmana. The assumption here seems to be that he is a superior actor who can project the character of Sita by means of his gestures and facial expression but without changing the make-up. What we have on the stage is not Hanuman, but the actor with the make-up and costume of Hanuman. Sita's grief when conveyed by Hanuman assuming her role has a peculiar appeal. This is the ultimate in artistic impersonation. It is the concept of *natyadharmi* that makes one character project another character. In Kutiyattam *natyadharmi* has precedence over *lokadharmi*, although both are employed.

Kutiyattam and Kathakali

Both Kutiyattam and Kathakali are stage performances of puranic episodes and both are typical of Kerala. Yet there is a lot of basic differences between the two. Some similarities may be found in the stories, in the characters, in some of the costumes perhaps: but they are only superficial. Kutiyattam is essentially *natya* or drama, while kathakali comes under *nritya*. Kutiyattam used stylized movements, while Kathakali uses dance. Kathakali is based on *attakatha*, while Kutiyattam uses a dramatic text. The Kathakali actor does not speak or recite his dialogue; musicians standing behind render it on his behalf. The swaras or ragas employed are different; the percussion instruments are different, and their style of playing is also very different. Kutiyattam is more ritual-bound; more elaborate; perhaps even more stylized; and based on plays in Sanskrit. Kathakali uses a libretto in Malayalam; is more folk-oriented; commands a wider audience; and perhaps has a larger repertory. Kutiyattam is much older and more exclusive and more intimate. Both employ *natyadharmi* and *lokadharmi* styles; the *mudras* and gestures are considerably different; both require years of training, and have developed their own aesthetics and ways of appreciation.

The Critical Tradition

Kutiyattam has had its detractors. Some have suggested changes with full knowledge of its tradition and technique. But even people who have probably never seen it have gone on record as suggesting reform. Few of them remember that it has had a long and rich tradition and that what has sustained this highly sophisticated performing art is its very sophistication. The detractors are eager to destroy that foundation itself. There is a reference to something often identified as Kutiyattam in Ilango's poem *Chilappatikaram*. But it is believed that Kutiyattam came to have its fully-developed form at the time of Kulasekhara, the author of two Sanskrit plays, *Subhadradhananjaya* and *Tapatisamvarana*. *Dhananjayadhvani* and *Samvaranadhvani* are believed to be commentaries on the performances of these two plays. Although the history of its evolution is still a matter of dispute, Kutiyattam grew into a full-fledged theare art. *Natankusa* is perhaps the most sustained critique of Kutiyattam. It objects to many of the conventions of Kutiyattam. His proposals for reform go counter to the directions given in the *kramadeepikas* and *attaprakarams*. In the past Kutiyattam had been a temple art in

recent times it has come out of the temple premises. Formerly it was the exclusive preserve of two small castes, the Chakyars and the Nambiars. But now there are a few from other castes also performing in Kutiyattam. As time passes, further changes may occur; but it is difficult to forecast what they are likely to be.

Conclusion

When *kramadeepikas* and *attaprakarams* were first prepared, those who were responsible for them did visualize an art-form extremely serious in its purpose and procedure and capable of providing aesthetic enjoyment of a rare kind. Merely declaiming the verbal text of the play from the stage by actors in various roles was not their chief aim. What might have been a flourishing concern in the early days—the numerous legends about the great actors of the past are an indication of the high regard in which the art of Kutiyattam was held—appear to have suffered a decline. Are we now witnessing a rejuvenation? Will the various governmental and voluntary agencies be able to support and sustain this traditional art in this age of other forms of mass entertainment? To answer that question is beyond the scope of this brief introduction. Perhaps the articles that follow might provide the inspiration for concerned people to devise ways and means of preserving this unique art-form which can provide us exquisite moments of aesthetic pleasure.

All the articles are written by practising artistes in the field or expert connoisseurs who can give us authentic information about Kutiyattam. Mani Madhava Chakyar, Painkulam Rama Chakyar, Ammannur Madhava Chakyar and Kochukuttan Chakyar belong to the first category. P.K. Narayanan Nambiar is an expert on the Mizhavu, a specialist in many other aspects of Kutiyattam. D. Appukuttan Nair, K.P. Narayana Pisharoti, L.S. Rajagopalan, K.P.S. Menon and Ganesa Iyer belong to the second category. Somadas is a make-up artist. G. Venu is both a trained performer and scholar in the subject. V.S. Sharma is currently the Chairman of Kerala Kalamandalam and a well-known critic of fine arts. G.S. Warrier was the President of Margi, Trivandrum. K.G. Poulose is Principal of Government Sanskrit College, Tripunithura, and has translated *Natankusa*. It is hoped that these articles on the different aspects of this ancient theatre will be of benefit to art-lovers outside Kerala as well. Several articles had to be translated from Malayalam into English: this onerous task has been done with remarkable efficiency by Sudha Gopalakrishnan, P. Narayana Kurup, Rama Iyer and Jayasree Ramakrishnan. Three valuable items in the addenda have been prepared by Rama Iyer (Glossary), Sudha Gopalakrishnan (Bibliography) and Margi Madhu, Unnikrishnan and Rama Iyer (Directory of Artistes). The editor wishes to acknowledge his indebtedness to all the contributors mentioned above. He also wishes to thank Margi, Trivandrum; Kerala Kalamandalam, Cheruthuruthy; Kerala Sangeetha Nataka Akademi, Trichur, etc. for permission to reproduce articles from books and journals published by them. Thanks are also due to Vinay Behl and Parisar for permission to include the photographs. The editor's thanks finally go the Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi, especially the Chairman, the Vice-Chairman, the Secretary, and all the officers whose advice and co-operation has made this possible.