

Kūṭiyāṭṭam and Bhasa

D. APPUKUTTAN NAIR

To those who are used to seeing dramatic performances consisting of an oral rendering of the dialogue in the text of the drama, by actors dressed in costumes supposedly worn by the characters of the drama, on a stage which has been set to depict the venue by means of painted curtains, cutouts, furniture etc, a Kūṭiyāṭṭam performance would give a shock.

Why? Because,

1. Kūṭiyāṭṭam does not follow a system of imitation of the external appearance and behaviour for presenting a character. The costume, speech and behaviour are stylised, being symbolic representations. The stage is also blank and the scene of action is created by gestural representation.

2. The presentation is very elaborate, a single act in a drama taking five to forty one nights.

3. The Sthapana of the dramas is elaborated in such a way that it provides a strong base of story and character for the play. This is called Nirvahanam which itself takes several days.

4. The same performer takes the role of several characters.

5. There are items of performances which may appear repetitive.

6. Many of the characters in the drama do not appear on the stage. Either they are represented by a lamp or their roles are enacted by those taking other roles.

Imagine a full-length Ramayana Kūṭiyāṭṭam taking a year with performances on all the 365 nights in succession without interruption.

These apparently extraordinary features of Kūṭiyāṭṭam are justified, particularly in the case of Sanskrit dramas, where an oral rendering of the text is incapable of bringing out the poetics in the text of the drama, particularly the verse portions. Again, in keeping with the portrayal of concepts for which a form is imposed in the form of Rama and Ravana, the obvious human features are obliterated and symbolic stylisation is adopted in presentation. Thus *natyadharmi* is more dominant in Kūṭiyāṭṭam than contemplated by Bharata.

Again it takes into account the various qualities of *natya* enunciated by Bharata such as

1. *Nanabhavopasampannam*, enriched with creations of several kinds — that is transformation of abstract or unmanifest ideas into concrete or manifest forms and names.

2. *Nanavastantaratmakam*. The above abstract concepts are the 'antaratmakatvam' or inner spirit of various situations, contexts of events (*nanavasta*).

3. *Lokavrttanukaranam*. The story or conduct of everything which is perceived by the

human senses or by *manas* (mind) which has the function of *bhavana* or imagination.

Angika abhinaya or gestural representation is supreme in Kūṭiyāṭṭam, particularly in the descriptions of nature, living beings and actions. *Vachika abhinaya* is rendered in *natyadharmi* corresponding to Vedic recitation and far removed from human speech and song in ordinary life. In *aharya abhinaya*, the make-up and costume of the actor is not to resemble the supposedly external appearance of the characters who are mostly drawn from the epics and are non-human. Hence the personal human features of the actor are completely camouflaged by superimposing non-human features, which have the attributes of the *antaratmakatvam* or the inner spirit of the character, and the potentiality of facial and bodily expression is accentuated. The eyes and lips, the most expressive organs of the face are made prominent by a red colour against a background of dark green face and thick black eyebrows and eyelashes confined within a boundary of white. The blank stage is made living by representing the forms of things symbolically by gestures which give the impression of dynamic living beings as against static living beings on painted curtains and cutouts.

The *sattvika abhinaya* in full is found only in Kūṭiyāṭṭam and Kathakali. I say full, because *sattvika* involves three things.

1. *Pranan* (life-breath) of *Pranamayakosa*;
2. *Manas* (the mind) of *Manomayakosa*;
3. *Vijnanam* (wisdom) of *Vijnanamayakosa*.

While *angika*, *vachika* and *aharya* constitute the *annamaya kosa* or *sthula* aspect among the *pancha kosas*, the *sattvika* constitutes the *sukshma* (subtle) *pranamaya kosa*, *manomaya kosa*, and *vijnanamaya kosa*. The *pranamaya kosa* comes into play by the actor controlling life-breath by inhalation, exhalation and compression at various parts of the respiratory system for giving life to the expression of the various emotions, actions and speech. This is a very delicate and dangerous system of breathing which has to be practiced under very strict surveillance. The *manomaya kosa* comes into play in the actions of the mind which consists in the superimposition of a *bhava* or mental creation, endless *bhavana* or imagination. Mental creation is a speciality of Kūṭiyāṭṭam—how Ravana or Sankukarna creates the mount Kailasa before our mind's eye is to be experienced. And mental creation is superior to human creation. "Divyanam manas srstir", says Bharata. In respect of imagination (*bhavana*) the great heights to which the Chakravarthy takes you from the text of the drama to flights of imagination is obvious from the number of nights he takes to cover a single monologue of the third act of Bhasa's *Pratijnayaugandharayana*, 38 nights for a monologue! Such great *bhavana* is controlled by the *vijnanamaya kosa* which renders these extensive travels and great flights of imagination relevant.

I have given the above introduction only to convince you that Kūṭiyāṭṭam is something which is justifiably different from any conceivable performance of a drama—more so Sanskrit drama.

Bhasa's dramas on the Kūṭiyāṭṭam stage

Out of the twenty dramas in the Kūṭiyāṭṭam repertoire, thirteen are Bhasa plays, but out of the 35 acts in the Bhasa plays that were on the Kūṭiyāṭṭam stage, we are now left only with four.

The twenty dramas adopted for Kūṭiyāṭṭam are those of Saktibhadra, Kulasekhara Varman, Bhasa, Sri Harsha, Mahendra Vikrama Pallava, Bodhayana and Nilakantha. Please note that the great dramas of Kalidasa and Bhavabhuti do not find a place in the Kūṭiyāṭṭam repertoire. Even *Mricchakatika* and *Ramavali*, which were popular on the Sanskrit stage elsewhere in India, were not recognised for Kūṭiyāṭṭam.

Kūṭiyāṭṭam being an elaborate presentation, as I stated earlier, it takes several nights to perform even a single act of a drama. Hence a single act of drama alone was being presented at a time. We may probably think that a whole drama has to be performed to make it complete. But each act of the drama was made complete on the Kūṭiyāṭṭam stage by Nirvahanam which provided a consolidated strong base of Sthapana. In many cases this made the act more complete than the drama in the text, since the Nirvahanam took us back to the origin of the world or the origin of the Rakashasas or the Vanaras. In Balivadhankam, even the incidents before Bali's birth are all brought out in nirvahanam. This aspect of Kūṭiyāṭṭam brought forth a paradoxical situation. While the whole world of Sanskrit drama was searching for the plays of Bhasa, who is referred to with admiration by Kalidasa in *Malavikagnimitra*, they were very much alive and active on the Kūṭiyāṭṭam stage of Kerala, where the Chakyars were enacting them by the names of various acts without even knowing that the author of these dramas was Bhasa. Of course, unlike our scholars, they were more interested in the drama and its potential for stage presentation than the name of the author, his life or times. The Chakyars in Kerala were enacting:

1. Vicchinnabhisekankam; Vilapankam; Pratimankam;

Atavyamankam; Ravanankam; Bharatankam and Abhishekankam without knowing that they were the seven acts of Bhasa's *Pratima Nataka*.

2. Balivadhankam, Hanumaddutankam, Tornayudhankam, Samudratarankam, Maya Sithanakam and Pattabhishekankam without knowing that they were the six acts of Bhasa's *Abhisheka Nataka*.

3. Mahasenankam, Mantrankam, and Arattankam without knowing that they were three acts of Bhasa's *Pratijnayaugandharayana*.

4. Brahmacharyankam, Pantattankam, Puttadamkam, Sephalikankam, Swapnankam and Chitrphalakankam without knowing that they were the six acts of Bhasa's *Swapnavasavadattam*.

5. Mallankam without knowing that it was an act from Bhasa's *Balacharita*.

6. Vettankam and Bhismadutankam without knowing that they were two acts of Bhasa's *Pancharatna*.

7. Vasantasenankam without knowing that it was from Bhasa's *Charudatta*.

8. Anottankam, Dutankam, Abhisarikankam, Parvankam and Madamettankam without

knowing that they were acts of Bhasa's *Avimaraka*.

In addition to these, *Dutavakyam*, *Dutaghatotakacha*, *Karnabhara*, *Urubhanga* and *Madhyama vyayoga* of Bhasa were in the repertoire of the artistes of Kūṭiyāṭṭam stage.

Of the above, as I stated earlier, only four acts are now prevalent. Balivadhankam and Toranayuddhankam of *Abhishekanataka*, Mantrankam of *Pratijnayaugandharayana* and Swapnakom of *Swapnavasavadatta* are prevalent now. The real work to be done in the revival of interest in Bhasa line in salvaging the Attaprakaras and Kramadipikas (manuals for performance and stage direction) of these dramas and bringing them back to the stage.

That brings me to another question. What were the qualities of Bhasa's dramas that made them superior to those of Kalidasa, Bhavabhuti, Visakhadatta or Sudraka for performance on the Kūṭiyāṭṭam stage?

Through his dramas, Kalidasa gives us a bouquet of beautiful fully blossomed flowers spreading sweet fragrance. But Bhasa gives us only the seeds for those flowering plants. They are small. But when sown, and nurtured well, by a knowing gardener, they will become plants which will regularly give several fragrant and beautiful flowers. Kalidasa's full-blown fragrant flowers have only to wither because they have reached their highest level of attainment in beauty in the hands of Kalidasa. But the flower-seed given by Bhasa to the Chakya has to be sown in fertile soil, watered and nourished with care for a long time, before the flowers come. But this requires wisdom in growing the plant and a lot of patience and time. But then the results are rewarding.

I do not remember who it was that said "Bhasa is terse and sparse in his expression. He tells us more by the things that he does not say than by the things he says. He is the master of silence." This silence is pregnant.

An attempt was made to present Kalidasa's *Sakuntala* in the Kūṭiyāṭṭam style by Painkulam Rama Chakya and was presented in Margi for the first time in 1971. Again around 1982 or so Mani Madhava Chakya also tried it. But that also did not succeed. I also presume that the stalwarts Mani Madhava Chakya and Painkulam Rama Chakya might have been sceptical about its success but they did it under pressure.

I will give an example of a comparison between Kalidasa and Bhasa to project the probable unsuitability of Kalidasa's *Sakuntala* on the Kūṭiyāṭṭam stage. When Sakuntala leaves the forest to join Dushyanta in the palace, Kanva advises her in the famous *sloka*.

Susrūṣaswa gurūn kuru priyasakhī

Vrttim sapatnījane etc.

(You must respect the respectable people, consider the co-wives as your dear friends, do not dispute with your husband even if he is angry, show kindness to servants, do not be arrogant, etc.)

In such a case Bhasa would have said "Dear daughter, you do only proper things." Then, it is for the Chakya to decide what are the proper things and elaborate them with *sastric* injunctions, worldly experience, anecdotes etc.

As I stated earlier the text of the drama should be like a *sutra* or aphorism capable of development, wherein several things could be brought in such as teachings from Dharma Sastra, Artha Sastra, Sukra Niti, Barhaspatya, etc. (as in Mantrankam), or Grhya Sutra,

Purva Mimamsa, Buddhist religion, philosophy and monastic practices of Pantanjali Yoga Sutra and practice, etc. (as in *Bhagavadajjukiya* which is a Prahasana performed by Chakyars in 36 days).

But even more than Bhasa, the most successful drama on the Kūṭiyāṭṭam stage is the less-known *Ashcaryacudamani* of Saktibhadra.

*From Sopanam 1993, Trivandrum.
Translated from Malayalam by Sudha Gopalakrishnan.*