

# TOWARDS A BETTER APPRECIATION OF KATHAKALI

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Although Kathakali is performed at various places in India and abroad from time to time, it will be an exaggeration to say that audiences everywhere understand and appreciate each and everything that takes place on the stage. Even in Kerala, which is Kathakali's homeland, at least a few portions are above the heads of some people; obviously it would be more so elsewhere. As in all subjects which bristle with technicalities, so in Kathakali full understanding is a pre-requisite to full appreciation. This includes a grasp of Kathakali's literary content, of the *agas* and *talas* of the *padas*, of the science of *hastamudras*, of the techniques of *abhinaya* and of other important ingredients. It is true that if one who knows Malayalam listens attentively to the songs being sung by the two musicians, he can get some idea of what is going on. Or, if one who knows the *mudras* watches them with attention, he can follow most of what the actor-dancers seek to convey. On the other hand if one has acquired detailed knowledge of each of the different factors which function in unison and together create the art form, he will be able to appreciate it more. Therefore, the question what could be done to promote a better understanding becomes relevant.

To begin with, there is great need to make available to the non-Kerala connoisseurs Kathakali's priceless literary content through translations. The meagre body of expository and critical writing on Kathakali in English as well as in Indian languages existing at present has, for some reason or other, paid scant attention to what is known in Malayalam as *Attakatha Sahityam*, meaning the literature of Kathakali. (Kathakali is also known as *Attakatha* in Kerala). One of the most important and immediate steps to be taken is the translation, into English to start with and into other languages thereafter, of Kathakali works. Staging performances, writing articles, giving lectures, publishing

reviews of shows, have all their use, but they would not mean much as long as the world is kept in the dark about the literary treasures which Kathakali holds within itself. It must be remembered that in Malayalam there are many big volumes which preserve in print a large number of *Attakathas* good, bad and indifferent. The best among them have been written by some of the most eminent poets in the long and unbroken history of Kerala's literature. *Nalacharitham* in four parts by Unnai Warriar; *Kirmeeravadham*, *Kalyanasaugandhikam*, *Bakavadham* and *Nivata Kavacha Kalakeyavadham* by Kottayathu Thampuram; *Dakshayagam*, *Uttaraswayamvaram* and *Keechakavadham* by Irayimman Tampi—these are but a few examples. Apart from the *slokas* and *dandakas* in the poets' words, the major portion of Kathakali literature comprises *padas* or songs in specific *ragas* and *talas*, written in the first person. It is a pity that circumstances have forced them to confine themselves to the limits of the Malayalam language without giving them a chance to emerge into the wider regions beyond. That in spite of this serious set-back Kathakali has achieved a measure of popularity in non-Malayalam areas is a pointer to the inherent appeal of the art form. How much more appealing it would be if its literature is made available to the world at large it is not difficult to imagine. One of the primary responsibilities of the propagators of Kathakali is, therefore, to bring out translations of the masterpieces of Kathakali literature.

Kathakali dancers who are non-Malayalees have also their own contribution to make in the popularisation of the art. In the course of my discussions with some of them I have found that they are not fully conversant with the meanings of the words and usages in the *padas* which they act and dance, and that they perform in a rather mechanical manner what they have learnt from their masters. They are therefore unable to integrate themselves with the roles they portray to the extent one could wish for. It would be very useful if they make an effort to acquaint themselves with the language in which Kathakalis have been written.

The position relating to non-Malayalee audiences is somewhat similar. Synopses in English of the *padas* coming within the purview of a particular performance—sometimes even literal translations—are often distributed to the audience in advance. A few persons go through them at a glance, while others do not even do that. If they take a little trouble to read the translated pieces, they will find it rewarding. It will be much more so if they have some knowledge of the Malayalam language.

With regard to *hastamudras*, too, the difficulties existing at the present time can be overcome to a considerable extent. Even if one can distinguish the twentyfour basic *hastamudras*—*mudras* as they are called in ordinary parlance—it may not help much in the context of a performance that is actually going on. It has to be borne in mind that out of the twentyfour are born a large number of *mudras*, more or less like the *janya ragas* derived from *melakarta ragas* in the Karnataka

system of music, and that they are not statuesque as in a still photograph but full of life and movement. One must have a good knowledge of all these, of the objects or ideas which each of them symbolises, and of their positions and movement etc. Organisations whose object is to popularise Kathakali must therefore do all they can to spread this knowledge. Preparation of charts and diagrams and other necessary information and their distribution will bring in good results.

It would be worthwhile at this stage to consider the possibility of a commentary while the performance is actually on. Cannot a person who is well-versed in all the different facets of Kathakali and who can speak extempore in good English describe minute by minute the meaning of the words in the *padas* sung by the musicians and the mudras shown by the actor-dancers? Of course there is a difficult hurdle, the loud noise, almost the thunderous din, jointly produced by the percussion instruments, the *Chenda* and the *Maddalam*, two essential ingredients of Kathakali. I have been asked by some non-Malayalee well-wishers of the art whether the abolition of the reverberating *Chenda* and *Maddalam* and the substitution of the softer *Mridangam* and *Tabla* would not be a step in the right direction. I hold that without *Chenda* and *Maddalam* Kathakali will cease to be Kathakali and become something else. In recent years the practice is mostly to play the *Chenda* and *Maddalam* in a subdued manner during the singing of the *Bhagavatars*, and when they stop singing and the dancer's *Kalasam* begins, to play them again in all their full force and vigour. The effect is that by and large the audience can follow the words of the songs. The commentator should be able to utilise such occasions and using the microphone kept exclusively for him throw in brief explanations and commentaries. I concede that serious problems will arise during such an experimentation, but perhaps it is worth a trial.

Properly conducted pre-views of Kathakali shows will also prove useful. Visualise a preview on the eve of the show at the same venue intended for the ticket-holders and invitees. The compere reads out the prepared translations of the texts of the *padas*. This enables the audience to get an idea of what precisely is to be enacted the next day. The basic background is provided thereby. The *Bhagavathars* sing portions from the *padas* to the subdued accompaniment of the *Chenda* and *Maddalam*. The compere explains the *ragas* and the *talas* and other details of their musical content. The dancers appear without make-up and act important portions, while the compere gives suitable expositions and explanations of *mudras* and other matters relating to *abhinaya*. They also provide the audience with glimpses of both the *tandava* and *lasya* varieties of dance including the *kalasams*, and also *ashtakalasam* if there is one. Finally, there is question-time which any member of the audience is free to use for seeking clarifications from the compere on any matter concerning *pada*, *mudra*, *nritta* and so on. The result of all this will be that the audience will get much information which they did not have before. Armed with this newly-acquired knowledge,

they attend the full-fledged play on the next evening and find that the preview has been extremely useful to them.

Though these and other steps which could be thought of will involve much effort, time and money, they have to be taken with a view to facilitating a better understanding, and through it a better appreciation, of Kathakali.

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