

# IS KUDIYATTAM A MUSEUMPIECE ?

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I shall begin with a very personal note. When my research on the ancient Indian theatre was already well advanced, I once thought that if I ever meet a magician or a *tantrika yogi* of extraordinary power, I shall request him to show me an ancient performance of a classical Sanskrit drama in perfect classical surroundings. I did not realise at that time, that I myself should become my own magician and my own *yogi*. Some time later I heard for the first time about the Chakyars of Kerala. Very soon my encounter with their art took place at the famous Kalamandalam of Cheruthuruthy in Kerala. There I saw a fragment of one of the most often staged dramas entitled *Subhadra-dhananjaya*. Rama Chakyar was performing. This is how for the first time I heard the Sanskrit text being recited from the stage by an actor in the traditional costume and with the traditional *abhinaya*.

It was not difficult then to do what I expected a magician would do for me. When I was next in Kerala a year later, I met there another Chakyar, Sri Mani Madhavan whose *sishya* I was destined to become later on. It was at the moment of departure from his home at the village of Lakkidi that I thought about inviting a Kudiyaattam troupe to the North. The rest is a long story. I shall just tell how marvellous it felt to sit next to His Highness the Maharaja of Benares, in the court-yard of the palace of Ramnagar and to witness the *Abhisheka nataka* of Bhasa staged there by the Chakyars. My dream was fulfilled and the glitter of it was well indeed substituted by an uncontested reality of the whole event. In this way I became my own magician.

One may ask here why do I make such a bold "short-cut" through history and on what grounds do I believe in the identity of the ancient classical theatre of India with an obscure art of Kerala which, at a cursory glance, appears to be but a variety of the better known Kathakali? All the subsequent remarks will serve the purpose of proving that my "short-cut" is justified and even more, that Kudiattam as the least differing from its ancient ancestry offers us the best chance to understand the very concrete and practical side of "the wonder that was ancient Indian theatre"—if one may paraphrase the title of Prof. Basham's well-known book. So, to repeat, Kudiattam or a "group acting", as this word may be rendered in English, is the only direct successor of the classical theatre of India. The evidence for this is obvious enough.

First of all the Chakyars stage classical Sanskrit dramas and they do so in a manner which absolutely excludes a possibility of an 'ad hoc' improvisation. On the contrary, their art is a traditional discipline inherited by the present custodians of it from their forefathers or rather from their foreuncles, since the structure of the families in this community is matriarchal. Chakyars' tradition can in its own right be traced back to the 10th Century A.D. But may be it is an independent tradition which has nothing to do with the classical art of theatre? This doubt will appear unfounded to anyone who even for a moment will consider some of the aspects of Kudiattam on the one hand and some of the aspects of the history of classical Sanskrit drama on the other. It is certainly not by chance that the unique manuscript of the *Abhinavabharati*, i.e., the only available commentary on the *Natya Sastra* of Bharata written by Abhinavagupta, a Kashmirian, has been preserved in Malabar and was found there.<sup>1</sup> It is also not by chance that the *santarasa* portion of Chapter VI of the *Natya Sastra* has been found only in the Malabar manuscript of this treatise, while Kudiattam performers to this day stage the *Nagananda* of Harshavardhana which is a *santarasa* drama composed most probably as an illustration to the theory enunciated in the *Natya Sastra*.

Besides how can we admit even a possibility of an independent origin of the art, the existence of which can be traced back to Kulasekharavarman, a royal poet and patron of this art who ruled around the 10th century, i.e., when the classical theatre was still in vogue all over India? For how otherwise shall we explain the existence of numerous dramas composed around that time or how shall we explain the unusual activity in the field of dramatic criticism which began at that time and continued for some three centuries? The atmosphere indicated by these developments was

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1. *Natyastra*, G.O.S. v.I, p. 18.

prevailing all over India and it is little probable that somebody would stage a play, not according to a local variation of the same tradition, but according to a separate one unconnected with the rest of convention. Even the criticism pointing out that the Kudiyaattam performers do not actually use the *Natya Sastra* as their handbook cannot invalidate this opinion. For the using of the *Natya Sastra* as a practical handbook seems to have been discontinued long ago and all over India. It usually was replaced by shorter and handier manuals. This was a common practice in the field of literary criticism, in the field of dance, in the field of music and certainly in the field of theatre. Especially when this art spread throughout such a vast territory it was bound to be slightly modified according to the local tastes. To my mind there is only one proper explanation of the fact that the classical theatre has survived in Kerala; the vast ocean of theatre dried up leaving clam pools in the deepest places where the rocks of customs and tradition as well as the shadow of the temple walls protected them from the scorching sun of political dependence which, especially in case of the Muslim rulers, meant death to theatre. True as all these arguments are, still they are, so to speak, external and cannot really be considered as conclusively proving the classicism of the Kudiyaattam. Much more convincing are the internal features of the "group acting" including its very spirit. For it is in these features that a *sahridaya*, i.e., a true connoisseur of the classical theatre, detects the living principles of the art of the *bharatas*.

The most important feature of them all, and, at the same time, the one that gives to a classical theatre of India its unique personality is the recitation accompanied by *mudras*, i.e. by the code of gestures—*angika abhinaya*. Most theatres in the world know and use the *angika abhinaya* limited to a close imitation of the natural behaviour of men. It is only the classical theatre of Asia, especially that of India, which treats gesture as raw material to be moulded into a tool of the artistic expression uninhibited by the sickening circumscription of naturalism. The classical theatre of India and the Kudiyaattam as well, is comparable to an abstract painting where the painter is pre-occupied with the emotions which he has to express and pays little attention to the susceptibilities of those who are exclusively limited to a naturalistic mode of aesthetic perception. It is, of course, true that in distinction to an abstracting painting Kudiyaattam operates with elements which do not possess that perfect non-descriptiveness—so far as the form goes—of pure colours. The human body and voice allow abstraction only to a certain degree. This must have been clearly seen by those who were responsible for the coining of the two terms, i.e., *natyadharmi* and *lokadharmi*. The first expresses certain exceptional privileges of the stage which, as Abhinavagupta points out, are transferred during a performance beyond time and space and thus are not bound by the demands of easy realism. Yet it never is entirely

free from the *laukika*, bondage, and therefore one can freely have recourse to *lokadharmi* which expresses precisely the bondage.

Another feature of the art of the Chakyars belonging to the same category of internal evidence is its costume and make-up called collectively the *aharya abhinaya*. As in the case of the *angika abhinaya* here also the reality is freely tailored to suit the foremost requirement of this art, i.e., the emotional impact upon a spectator. Note what nobility the face gains when covered with paint and framed with the *kiridam* and *chutti*. See the red lips so prominent that even the slightest trembling of them will not escape attention. Finally the eyes, the whites of which are made pink through an insertion of a certain particular harmless seed, gain the same force of expression as the lips. Everything, the *dhoti*, the jacket, bracelets, armlets and all other ornaments are used freely to underline the hauteur of a character and, if they have any model, it is sculpture having similar aims in its own right. It may be interesting to note in this connection that the *Natya Sastra* seems to make a point when it insists that an actor cannot enter the stage without having his limbs properly painted<sup>1</sup> and that it explicitly calls this aspect a *natya-dharmi* one.

Yet another important internal feature testifying to the classical character of the Kudiyaattam is its theatre-hall. The whole permanent building is called Kuttamabalam—literally the temple of acting. Although apparently its construction does not strictly follow the principles laid down in the *Natya Sastra* yet its atmosphere seems to embody all that the *Natya Sastra* speaks about. The topography of the *nepathya* connected with the stage by a couple of doors between on which the musicians sit answers exactly the description given in the *Natya Sastra*. In one of the minor Kuttambalam the ceiling over the stage is divided into nine squares. In the central one there is an image of Brahma and all round the images of the Lokapalas. This seems to correspond to the *vastumaadala* described in Chapter III of the *Natya Sastra* though, of course, it is not, in the case of that Kuttambalam, situated on the stage as the *Natya Sastra* specifies. Yet the idea that the stage is like a vedic sacrificial altar—the centre of the universe—is expressed here too. I may mention also that according to the tradition still current among the Chakyars the three wicks of the huge brass oil lamp which stands in front of the stage symbolise the sacrificial fires—*garhapatya*, *ahavaniya* and *dakshina*. Thus the theatre-hall of the Kudiyaattam seems to enshrine the same solemnly-metaphysical values which the *Natya Sastra* visualised.

Finally one more aspect of the entire problem stressing the uniqueness of the art of the Chakyars needs to be underlined. The Kudiyaattam is a living

<sup>1</sup> *Natya Sastra* transl. by M.M. Ghosh, XXIII, 68-9-84, 98, 145.

art. I readily shall agree with those who point to the peculiarities of this art which are not to be found in the *Natya Sastra*. Still in the form of the Kudi-yattam we have at last a source which does not give rise to innumerable guesses only, but which offers a concrete practical know-how of the art of the ancient Indian theatre or, more carefully, of one of its branches. To substantiate my point I should like to tell how doing even a very cursory reading of Chapter V of the *Natya Sastra* with the Chakyars I have found that almost every element mentioned in that text they were able to identify as one or another element of their own practice though, of course, differently called. It seems, by the way, that the Chakyars should participate in preparing any future critical edition of the *Natya Sastra* which to this day is, in many places dealing with the actual practice of theatre, unintelligible. Thus the practical skill which the Chakyars possess should be studied, learned and applied and changed, adapted and moulded according to our own modern vision of theatre. In order to be properly understood I should like to stress that I am speaking here for tradition and not for stagnation. For I firmly believe that the *dipa* of the modern national theatre of India should be lit with a torch brought from a Kuttambalam of Kerala although the oil for that lamp may be mixed with the oil of Greece, or of the West in general.

All this granted still the Kudi-yattam is not going to do the job alone. First of all because it is rapidly withering itself, due to many factors which I doubt whether it will have necessary strength to overcome unaided. One of these factors till recently was responsible for the Kudi-yattam's survival but now it digs its grave. This is its clinging not only to Sanskrit but even to Prakrits which, relying on the authority of the *Natya Sastra*, should be changed according to changing times.<sup>1</sup>

Yet out of deference for tradition the Chakyars applied this rule only to *Vidushaka* and only in addition to his Prakrit which he still retains. Even for this limited reform they have been strongly censured by a traditionally minded anonymous author of the *Natankusa*. This clinging to a sacral language which is not comprehensible to the major part of the audience on the one hand, allowed this art to prosper within the precinct of the temple bestowing on it a ritualistic sanctity. But, on the other hand, it resulted in abandoning all those parts of the enacted dramas where the *Vidushaka* did not appear on the stage, for there was nobody then to explain the meaning of the recited verses to the audience. Further, when he was present on the stage he was given more and more prominence, so that finally the *Vidushaka*, as the only one whom the public really understood, became an

1. *Natya Sastra*, transl. by M. M. Ghosh, XVIII, 46, p. 331 ; *Natya Sastra*, VXIII, 46, p. 275.

uncrowned king of the Kudiyaṭṭam. His repertoire was enriched by long monologues taking sometimes more than four consecutive nights. While the Kuttambalam would burst with crowds during his performances, the true Kudiyaṭṭam still in Sanskrit, would at its best attract few learned Nambudiris. But even they very often preferred to watch the exquisite acting of the Chakyar, than to hear repeatedly a text which they any way knew almost by heart. Fulfilling this demand the Chakyars have been elaborating their *angika* and *astvika abhinayas*, so much so, that one verse now serves them as a pretext for three or four hours of a dumb *abhinaya*. In this manner both the *Vidhushaka* and the *angika abhinaya* claiming for themselves ever more of the time of performance have been crippling the proper drama, the Sanskrit, which guaranteed its unpopularity in the measure equal to the respect accorded to it.

Another harmful development which contributed to the present shape of this art was a progressive elimination of actresses and dance from a performance. Yet it has to be stressed in this connection that the Kudiyaṭṭam is the only traditional art of theatre—apart from pure dance—which to this day gives the female roles to actresses, limited as their part is in a play. Nowadays an actress usually appears at the very end of a performance and since most often she is still a child her acting is very poor while she marshals all her courage in order not to be afraid. It was not so before when the skill and beauty of the Kudiyaṭṭam actresses were famous. The absence of dance from the stage of Kuttambalam is apparently connected with the present position of actresses. Most obviously the progressive “Victorianization” of society contributed a lot to a considerable unwillingness of women in the Nambiar families to continue to appear on the stage after their wedding. Often also it is a handsome number of children that keeps them busy elsewhere. On the other hand, the diminishing popularity of the Kudiyaṭṭam does not provide sufficient incentives in order to overcome these difficulties.

It is obvious that in the form of the Kudiyaṭṭam we have a curious example of how, a more-or-less dead language while saving an art from complete extinction can at the same time cripple and deform it. Just to make my point clear I should like to mention here another local variation of the classical art of theatre which survived in Tamilnad.

In the Bhagavatamela Natakam of Mellatur, Sanskrit has been replaced by the vernacular and therefore the general structure of a performance in that tradition changed only so far as it was necessitated by the particular requirements of the *Puranic* stories. Also dance has been preserved as an integral part of a performance, since its execution has been entrusted together with the female roles to male actors, who I must say, do it in an exquisite way

although, of course, they are lacking the particular grace which only a woman can give to dance. It was exactly this that prompted Bharata to ask Brahma for the creation of *Apsaras* to take female roles in his first play. With all this the Bhagavatamela Natakam no longer protected by the sanctity of Sanskrit yields itself much more readily to all sorts of modernisations. Consequently only the Kudiyaṭṭam emerges as the art which has preserved the purest classical form of the art of theatre guarded from an adverse external influence by the sanctity of Sanskrit, the impenetrability of the temple walls and by its own traditional theatre-hall the location of which secured for this art respect accorded otherwise only to a temple ritual.

The problem which now suggests itself is of a purely practical order. How to stage a classical Sanskrit play after all what has been loudly proclaimed so far ? I have already given a brief characteristic of the main source of the practical know-how. Let me now risk a few, most probably very controversial remarks, concerning this problem. An approach of an actor to his role will be a convenient opening to the discussion of it. There certainly should not be any Stanislavsky method. No psychological analysis aiming at what is particular in a character to be played. Also no identification with this character. What is needed is the technical perfection of the *angika*, *vacika* and *sattvika abhinayas*. A Sanskrit playwright does not describe the particular but the general and typical. It is therefore much more important to know the psychology of the audience than that of the characters played. An actor should make his part into a musical note on which the entire harmony rests but which does not become a particular sound which can never more be repeated exactly in the same way. H.W. Wells noticed this musical quality of Sanskrit dramas before. But we should apply it now to the practical task of acting. This impersonality of acting is certainly responsible for taking the classical *abhinaya* as preserved by the Chakryas for a form of dance rather than for acting. It certainly will be no blame if an actor succeeds in maintaining this impression while applying all the three *abhinayas* of *angika*, *vacika* and *sattvika* in concert. The Kudiyaṭṭam performers can give us exactly this skill which forms a characteristic feature of their art of acting. The same concerns the female roles. Here only one point has to be made concerning dance which certainly is a necessary addition to the rather pale and evidently inadequate female roles. With few exceptions like Vasantasena of the *Mricchakatika* for instance. But Vasavadatta and Padmavati certainly danced in Act II and III of the *Svapnavasavadatta*. In this respect we can, I guess, gain more from the male actors of the Bhagavatamela Natakam, for the actresses of the Kudiyaṭṭam do not seem to have much to offer now. One could ask here whether all this can be applied to a non-Sanskritic text. That the classical formula preserved by the Kudiyaṭṭam performers can be

applied to any language is absolutely certain. While still in Kerala I tried to perform a Polish rendering of one of the verses of the *Svapnavasavadatta* in this convention. It appeared to be not only possible but even unusually attractive.

The next important element of a production of a Sanskrit drama is its stage-setting. I consider this element next only to acting, for the character of the space in which an actor acts is extremely important in creating what one may call the personality of theatre. In Kerala we have a theatre building in flesh—if one may say so—of stone and timber. It is absolutely stupefying that a long discussion should have raged around the subject of what the stage looked like in the ancient theatre-halls and it is only now that a detailed comparative study of Kuttambalams and the *Natya Sastra* description of a theatre-hall has been undertaken. After all there must exist some texts describing the construction of Kuttambalams which may be invoking the authority of Bharata himself. Thus it is from this direction that we can obtain practical help in determining how a stage for a classical Sanskrit drama should be constructed. But how should it be set? The almost empty stage of Kuttambalam is a very eloquent answer. The testimony of the *Natya Sastra* does not seem to contradict the practice of the Chakyars, although it mentions some light elements which can be placed on the stage. Anyway it certainly should not be overstuffed with the “talkative” modern sets. It may be illuminating to mention in this connection the much discussed problem of the curtain in the ancient Indian theatre-hall. The *yavanika* and the mysterious stage directions “enters with a toss of curtain” have caused quite a lot of brain twisting. But the Chakyars have not yet contributed to this discussion. Whatever be the verdict of scholars they are the ones who do actually have to carry and do carry out this stage-direction on the very stage. We could see how they do it quite recently at Sapru House where they performed during the East-West International Conference.

The next interesting problem is that of make-up. It has been described already above. I want to add here only this much that once again in this respect we can have from the Chakyars a very practical help. They can tell us how to prepare the colours, how to put them on the face. What materials use to make different details of costumes and so on and so forth. Certainly we are not obliged to do it strictly in their way. But undoubtedly we should take from them the basic formula. Let us for a moment now return to the *angika*, *vacika* and *sattvika abhinayas*. All of us feel that something is wrong when the classical Sanskrit drama, even in translation, is spoken in Stanislavsky’s way. We are aware of disharmony but we do not know where to look for a better solution. What the Kudiyyattam has

to offer us is not its long list of recitatives *ragas*, but only so much that the recitation of a classical text has to be hieratic, like chanting *mantras* at the sacrifice, which the drama, after all, according not only to Kalidasa but also to Bharata and Abhinavagupta is, when performed. The same concerns the two remaining *abhinayas*. Everything that an actor does has to be as hieratic as his recitation (of course we have to exclude *Vidushaka* from this rule). This also concerns the more subtle means of expression called in traditional technical parlance of the ancient Indian theatre *sattvika abhinaya*. A modern, subdued way of the facial expression seems disconcertingly inadequate whenever classical Indian drama is concerned. The case of the Kudiattam corroborates this by the fact that during its *abhinaya* there is not an inch of the face of an actor which would not participate in his *sattvika abhinaya*. The fame of these actors in Kerala exactly on this account, needs no comments. It is from them that a modern actor can learn the perfect control of his face. He will be able then to change it like so many masks, each suited to a different emotion. Turning to music, we can acquire from the *panivadas* of the Kudiattam the "coexistence" of music with the recitation and gesture. Of course, without closing our eyes to the fact that the Kudiattam does not have much more to offer, being itself rather deficient in music and as mentioned above, dance. Yet in this respect the classical tradition in the field of music will certainly supply all the needs.

Having thus reviewed the main spheres in which the Kudiattam has an enormous wealth of the practical know-how to offer to all those who today try to stage classical Sanskrit drama, let me quote one more detailed example of how helpful their practice can be when we are confronted with difficulties in staging different scenes of Sanskrit dramas. In the *Nagananda* of Harsha there is a famous scene in which the heroine attempts to kill herself by hanging. The problem is how to put it convincingly on the stage avoiding at the same time modern explicitness which would destroy the poetical atmosphere of this scene? The actress of Kerala takes hold of a long *dhoti* which has been twisted into a noose and which is hanging from the ceiling over the stage. When an actress jumps from the stool and hangs holding with her hands the noose at the level of her neck, it starts to untwist and the actress begins to rotate faster and faster coming nearer to the ground where a hero, of course, waits to rescue her from herself and from her noose.

Certainly one could multiply such examples. But by now I hope that I have made my point clear. The Kudiattam is not just a museum-piece. It is a store-house of the practical knowledge of the actual practice of the classical Indian theatre. Since, as I do believe, only classical Indian

theatre can give a necessary impulse for the creation of the truly national Indian theatre, therefore, the importance of the Kudiattam as completing our so far limited knowledge of the ancient Indian theatre drawn exclusively from literary sources, with the reliable information concerning its practice, cannot be overstressed.

It is a demand of the moment that this, so far little known, theatrical tradition of Kerala should become a pivot around which the entire research in the field of the ancient Indian theatre should revolve.

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