

Kūṭiyāṭṭam and its Correspondence to the Nāṭyaśāstra

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THIS PAPER tries to trace the similarities and differences between the basic principles of drama envisaged in Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra* and in Kūṭiyāṭṭam, the live mode of Sanskrit theatre surviving in Kerala. While taking into account the fact that Kūṭiyāṭṭam conforms to the conceptual formulations of *nāṭya* as underlined by Bharata, the attempt here is to show that in theatric practice, Kūṭiyāṭṭam has major deviations from these.

Kūṭiyāṭṭam is believed to be about 2000 years old, but any exact evidence of this theatric form dates back only to the ninth century when King Kulaśekhara, along with his friend Tolan, modified it into its existing form. Kūṭiyāṭṭam is traditionally performed in temple theatres called *kūttampalams*. The repertoire includes the major plays of Bhasa, Harsha, Śaktibhadra, Kulaśekhara, Nīlakaṇṭha, Bodhāyana and Mahendravarman. In Kūṭiyāṭṭam, single acts of plays are treated as full-fledged plays and are subjected to an elaborate method of acting.

The artistic activity in Kūṭiyāṭṭam depends on both non-verbal and verbal elements like gesture, body movements, facial expression and stylized speech that aid theatric communication to create an intensely felt aesthetic experience. Kūṭiyāṭṭam is the art of elaboration reaching perfection in stylized acting. It is a non-illusionistic theatre in which situations of theatric potential are elaborated to unravel the multiple layers of meaning embedded in the text of the play. Referring to the question of stage presentation of a Sanskrit play, M.V. Katak points out that it is "primarily the problem of enacting poetry...poetry helps the actor to enrich his action, to extend its essential quality beyond what a straight enactment of the scene itself could produce"¹. When the text of a play has different layers of meaning contained in figures like *śleṣa* (multiple meaning), *vyangyārtha* (implied meaning), *vakrōkti* ('crooked' expression), *gūḍhārtha* (obscure meaning), etc. which are the characteristic features of Sanskrit verse, only a method of presentation like that of Kūṭiyāṭṭam is adequate to meet the situation.

This feature of Kūṭiyāṭṭam seems to be in keeping with the spirit of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. Bharata does not define *nāṭya* in a single sentence; his discussion is a rich mesh of interrelated ideas. In the chapter on *nāṭyotpatti*, Bharata dwells at length on the creation of

nāṭya, its content and manifestations.

Let us examine the salient points that Bharata puts forward in order to explicate his concept of *nāṭya*. The whole idea is contained in verses 106 – 124 of the *nāṭyotpatti* chapter of the *nāṭyaśāstra*, according to which *nāṭya* has an all-pervading significance. It is intended to convey sound advice (*hitopadeśa*) through the presentation of events and actions, all directed towards the practice of *dharma*. It should contain and deal with many, or all, the scriptures, art, sculpture, moral advice, right conduct, peace and war, love and murder, retribution, humour, peace, fortitude for the valiant, knowledge for the ignorant, scholarship for scholars, sport for lords, the lives and actions of gods, humans, demons—in short, everything that exists and occurs in the three worlds. Far from being a specific branch of knowledge, *nāṭya* contains in itself multifarious levels and perspectives on life.

Notwithstanding this all-pervasive significance of *nāṭya*, the cardinal point is dealt with in the following *śloka*:

Nānābhāvopasampannam
Nānāvasthāntarātmakam
Lokavṛttānukaraṇam
*Nāṭyametanmayākṛtam*²

While trying to analyze this aphoristic definition of *nāṭya*, the word *bhāva* could be taken to mean a state of being. The phrase *nānābhāvopasampannam* basically involves a transformation of the abstract unmanifest to the concrete manifest which results in a state of being—a process of concretization of abstract concepts. In the second statement (*nānāvasthāntarātmakam*), Bharata says that *nāṭya* contains many situations, contexts and conditions (*avasthās*). It goes on to imply that it is not only the *avasthās* but their inner spirit (*antarātmakatvam*) that constitutes *nāṭya*. In the third condition, (*lokavṛttānukaraṇam*), *loka* need not be taken in the limited, temporal sense of the term; it includes everything that is perceived through the senses, mind and imagination. As for the word *anukaraṇam*, it does not simply mean imitation but artistic recreation or reconstruction of the affairs (*vṛtta*) of the world.

The concept of *nāṭya* as explained by Bharata has thus a cosmic significance. Pramod Kale observes in this regard that the theatre is “not an ephemeral phenomenon—a couple of hours’ plaything. It is lasting in its impact and vital in its existence as the universe itself”³. It is a composite art intended to impart knowledge through the presentation of various episodes, all directed towards the practice of *dharma*. The dramatic theory of Kūṭiyāṭṭam seems to have identical

features with this concept of *nāṭya*. The philosophical content of *nāṭya* as presented in *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* is explained by D. Appukkuttan Nair thus:

...Now let us consider a Kutiyattam performance. The first item to be considered is the lamp. The lamp represents *Sakshi*, the eternal witness who is not affected by anything, but whose presence affects everything else. It represents the *paramatma* in its unmanifest form. Then a conch is sounded which represents *Nada Brahman* or *pranavam*. This *pranavam* takes several forms in the nature of the different rhythms on the *mizhavu*. A curtain is held which represents the *avarana* aspect of *maya* or illusion. The removal or *vikshepa* or the curtain and appearance of the performer represents the *vikshepa* of *maya* and the manifestation of *prapancha* or cosmos on the stage in a symbolic and stylized manner. After the performance is over, the performer removes his headgear, comes and puts out the lamp, conveying the idea that what was represented was not real, but only an illusion, like a dream.⁴

This quotation seems to be the clearest exposition of the concept of *nāṭya* as illustrated in the theatric practice of *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*. Now let us take a few illustrations from *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* itself to see how it is possible to convey different layers of meaning in performance.

In the first act of Kulaśekhara's *Subhadrādhanaṇjaya*, Arjuna, already in love with Subhadra whom he has not met, dwells at length on the beauty of the maiden (who is actually Subhadra herself) whom he saves from the clutches of a demon:

*Calakuvalayadhāmnoranjanasniḡdhamakṣṇor-
Bhayacaladhṛtiyugmaṃ keyamālayanti
Mukhaparimalalobhāt bhṛṅgadattānuyātrā
Śīthilayati Subhadrāmudritam mānasam me.*

Rendered in prose: Who is this damsel, with darting eyes resembling dark *kuvalaya* flowers? Her eyes, with their beauty enhanced by the application of collyrium, flutter for fear. She is accompanied by swarming bees that gather around, drawn by the fragrance of her face. This girl loosens the chords of my heart, already sealed by Subhadra.

In the enactment of this *śloka*, the actor who takes the role of Arjuna subjects it to a four-fold elaboration. First he recites the *śloka* with appropriate *mudrās* and then enacts it without the aid of recitation. Then he analyzes the verbal meaning and lastly elaborates on the deeper shades of meaning. In the first place, he recites "*iyam ka*"—who is she—with action and dwells elaborately on the *nāyikā's* race, her parents, family, and all other aspects of her identity. Then he confesses, "My heart is opened" and, elaborating on this, adds "which has been sealed by Subhadra". Here he goes on to explain

how she entered his heart through the ears (by the words of Gada) and sealed it so that nobody else could enter. Now, a sequence of questions and answers: "How is this damsel...with darting eyes". "How are the eyes...bearing the beauty of dark *kuvalaya* flowers". "How else...swiftly fluttering, due to fear". "How again...their beauty enhanced by the application of collyrium". At this point the actor elaborates on the application of collyrium. He takes on the role of the *nayikā* asking her friends to dress her up. He then plays each of the friends as they regard the heroine and set about adorning her. The entire process—unknotting and doing up the hair, adorning it with perfume and flowers, tidying the curls, applying *sindūr* on the forehead, adorning the *nayikā* with ornaments, helping her dress—is elaborately depicted according to the creative imagination of the actor. The *sakhīs* are not satisfied, however; something is missing. One of them suddenly remembers they forgot to apply the collyrium, and proceeds to do so. The entire sequence is occasioned by the one phrase *anjanasnigdhamākṣi* in the text of the play.

In Kūṭiyāṭṭam, in many situations, the obvious meaning is conveyed by the oral delivery of the text, whereas the implied meaning is elaborated by gestures and facial expressions. But in *Mantrankam*, or the third act of Bhasa's *Pratijnayaugandharāyaṇa*, the augmentation of the text by *vācikābhinaya* (oral rendering) is so elaborate that it reaches unbelievable heights.

The plots and intrigues devised by the ministers of Udayana for his escape from prison form the basis of the story of the third act. The main character is the Jestful Beggar, Vidūṣaka, who is actually the disguised Vasantaka. In the text, the Vidūṣaka's words are:

Ha, I put my bowl of sweets at the feet of the temple deity, counted the gold pieces received as gift, tied them up, and when I look back I do not find my bowl of sweets...

This seemingly incoherent and ludicrous speech attains great significance in Kūṭiyāṭṭam. The sentence "I put my sweet bowl at the feet of the deity" implies that Udayana is safe in the hands of Vasavadatta. His "counting the gold coins received as gift" indicates that the instructions he received for the implementation of the plan have been checked. "When I look back, I do not find my bowl of sweets" means that when he arrived at the meeting place after checking on the plan, the chief planner was missing.

The Vidūṣaka succeeds in conveying all the cryptic meaning of this speech, and more. Taking off from the first word "*bho*" ("Ha"), he narrates different stories, maxims and proverbs. While discussing different strategies for the release of Udayana, he ponders over the

need for selecting the right accomplices, who have tact, wisdom and resourcefulness. He cites the advantages and disadvantages of different methods, with stories to substantiate them. Then he chooses Sivoti whom he regards as his father, but who is actually a symbolic representation of his own conscience. When he sets out on a mission, his conscience warns him of any misdeeds or rash action. He digresses into the field of *dharmaśāstra*, *arthaśāstra*, *śukranīti*, *bārhaspatyam*, etc. Several ideas and ideologies are brought in. There is humour, satire, obscenity, philosophical speculation, political strategy, various methods of espionage, details of implementation.

The narration goes on for 37 nights, and on the 38th night the drama moves on from the first word "*bho*". The rest of the action of the play, involving other characters as well, takes only four days to complete. This is an illustration of the extent to which oral elaboration can extend. Kūṭiyāṭṭam's is a unique theatric language that transcends realism, embracing a universe of thought and belief.

Though it corresponds to the aesthetic precepts envisaged in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* Kūṭiyāṭṭam, in performance, does not always conform to the dramaturgical rules of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. In the first place, Kūṭiyāṭṭam is an indigenous form of theatre native to Kerala, and hence a great deal of regional influence is inevitable. Secondly, this theatric form exploits *nāṭyadharmi* technique to a degree far beyond the conception of Bharata. The *Nāṭyaśāstra* seems to emphasize specificity and concrete categorization, while Kūṭiyāṭṭam tends to be more symbolic and abstract. The differences between the two approaches may be seen in practice with regard to the four modes of *abhinaya*: *āṅgika*, *vācika*, *āhārya* and *sāttvika*.

In *āṅgika* or histrionic acting, Kūṭiyāṭṭam adopts its *mudrās* not from the *Nāṭyaśāstra* but from *Hastalakṣaṇadīpikā*. There are striking differences between the two methods in the use of *mudrās*. The *mudrās* adopted in Kūṭiyāṭṭam are more of a tantric significance, while in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* there is a detailed and meticulous representational treatment of the subject. The *cāris* and *gatis* in Kūṭiyāṭṭam also do not correspond exactly to those mentioned in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. Mani Madhava Chakyar observes that according to differences in character, there are different *cari* movements⁵. In all movements of the body, Kūṭiyāṭṭam is highly symbolic, reflecting internal states rather than representing a concrete external reality.

In *vācika* or oral acting, Kūṭiyāṭṭam is more conventional and stylized. It is not based on the seven *svaras*, *talas* and other

components of music described in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, but in a play, they represent the dramatic situation, character and *rasa*. In music, there is no attempt to either imitate life or make it pleasing to the ear. The 'svaras' recited by the Chakyar bear a striking resemblance to the manner in which the Kerala brahmans chant the *Yajurveda*. As for instruments, Kūṭiyāṭṭam mainly employs a drum called *mizhavu*—really a big copper pitcher with its mouth shut by leather. According to the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the wind and string instruments are also part of the orchestra, but these are absent in Kūṭiyāṭṭam. Even the small cymbals—*kuzhitāla*—are used only for rhythm.

In *āhāryābhinaya*—which includes the physical details of stage-setting, costume, make-up, etc.—Kūṭiyāṭṭam has major deviations from the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. Stage-setting in Kūṭiyāṭṭam has a ritualistic significance, with tender coconut shoots and fruits, as also banana trees in fruit, adorning the stage. A huge lamp, a *nirapara*—a vessel containing paddy grains—and a *pīṭha* complete the set. The *Nāṭyaśāstra*, on the other hand, elaborately speaks about the representation of palaces, chariots, banners, statues of animals, etc. to adorn the stage⁶. Such details in Kūṭiyāṭṭam are represented by histrionic acting. Regarding the costumes of actors, the *Nāṭyaśāstra* describes the various types of costume and explicates them in minute detail. The ornaments are categorized according to their nature, material, method of adornment, sex of the character, regional differences, and so on⁷. In Kūṭiyāṭṭam, however, costume is determined not by a person's physical characteristics but by his psychological traits. For example, the facial make-up of Bhima and Arjuna differ as the two differ in character, even though brothers. (Kathakali seems to have borrowed this aspect from Kūṭiyāṭṭam; for example, Duryodhana wears a *katti* make-up while Dussāsana has *tādi*.)

In *sāttvikābhinaya*, the highest form of acting, Kūṭiyāṭṭam occupies a predominant position. Each *śloka* from the text is interpreted by means of gesture and facial expression to unravel the cosmic dimensions of meaning hidden in the text of the play. The text provides only a bare outline which the actor has to fill in by his skilful *abhinaya*. This gives the *abhinaya* an elasticity not easily attainable in other forms of drama.

To sum up, it appears that the theatric conventions of Kūṭiyāṭṭam have their own distinctive characteristics and are not solely dependent on the postulates of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. Though the basic conceptual framework of Kūṭiyāṭṭam conforms to the aesthetic spirit of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* as a production source, it is evident that the *Nāṭyaśāstra* has not exerted too much influence on this art form. In

matters of technique and presentation, Kūṭiyāṭṭam is more symbolic and inward-looking, while the *Nāṭyaśāstra* seems to offer a consciously developed theatric vocabulary that is at the same time concrete and explicit. □

NOTES

1. M.V. Kantak: 'The Natyashastra Dramatic Mode', *New Quest* 44 (1984), pp. 70–82.
2. Ravishankar Nagar (ed.): *Natysastra of Bharata Muni*, Delhi, Parimal Publications, 1981, p. 38.
3. Pramod Kale: *The Theatric Universe: A Study of the Natyasastra*, Bombay, Popular Prakashan, 1974, p. 35.
4. D. Appukkuttan Nair: 'Bhasa and Kutiyattam', an unpublished paper.
5. Mani Madhava Chakyar: *Natyakalpadrumam*; Cheruthuruthy, Kerala Kalamandalam, 1975, p. 23.
6. Ravishankar Nagar (ed.): *Nāṭyaśāstra of Bharata Muni*, p. 104.
7. *Ibid.*: pp. 111–114.