

## **The Dying Art of Telling a Story**

J. SHAILAJA

**K**athaprasangam is a performing art form that originated along with (and because of) Kerala's early 20<sup>th</sup> century social reform movements in continuation of the story-telling tradition particular to that culture. It is a miniature music theatre with one singer-performer and one or two accompanists. Over the years, it became one of the most celebrated art forms enjoying the patronage of lakhs of common public who thronged to watch their favourite performers tell a story. The setting is usually a festival ground, a temple, church, mosque or a cultural or political gathering. Often, the performances began at the ripe nightly time of 10 p.m. and lasted for two to three hours. Sometimes more.

These performances made *Les Miserables* and Victor Hugo familiar to millions of illiterate Malayalis than thousands of books ever could. Because of them Bengali author Bimal Mitra became a household name in Kerala. Using social justice as a recurrent theme, these unique raconteurs of Kerala made Kathaprasangam (story plus oration), one of the most important pop arts of the last century. If any art form or movement is comparable to Kathaprasangam, it is the theatre movement of Kerala People's Arts Club (KPAC) in Kerala. In fact, both of them share a common ideology. Moreover, both were products of their time. And yet, now at the beginning of another century, it remains largely forgotten and has almost got relegated to the position of a 'plebeian art form' with all the original contempt. With its main proponents dead and gone and its audience being lured away to 'plastic art forms' such as music videos and remix industry it is already too late to ascertain its true role and significance.

Among the performance arts in Kerala, and probably even in India, this can be called a truly secular art that enjoyed wide social acceptance, cutting across various cross-sections of society. This unique art form has grown side by side the secular and democratic movements of Kerala.

Kathaprasangam as a socially significant live performing art is almost dead now. With no major artists or promoters, it is dying a natural death, though it still has some takers and features at school or university level competitions. Nowadays, it is rarely staged other than at government-sponsored cultural life-support venues such as school, university art festivals. The values that helped this unique art form flourish in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Kerala has long receded behind the fast-paced consciousness of the present. Hailing from the socially committed pre-independence years to its heydays in the seventies and eighties, Kathaprasangam scene has witnessed a whole range of vicissitudes while moving with the progress of the Kerala society.

### *Telling the story*

Story-telling is basic to all performing arts. It is part of the oral history tradition. Communities world over have been preserving collective memory and the traditional way for it has been tales. Events pertaining to the history of a community is preserved in the form of tales particular to that community handed over from generation to generation. And it is this oral tradition that paves way for folk tales and mythologies. Performance is the expression of the person who has a story to tell.

Historic works of literature all have their oral origins and it is true in the case of any mythological work. From the great Greek mythologies to the Bible, the relevance of oral tradition is evident.

Like any other culture, Kerala too had its own story telling traditions/history, and had evolved forms right from the ancient periods.

During medieval period itself, storytellers had begun to use the *slokas* from various *champus* and other Sanskrit poems to narrate a story. This form of story telling later came to be called Padhakam.

Though the origin is the south Indian *bhakti* art form Harikatha or the Tale of Hari, the god. The form invokes a direct likeness to at least three other performance forms—Kothu, Padhakam and Thullal. The presentation styles of the first two forms are similar to that of it, though their content was extremely devotional. In social appeal and popular acceptance, contemporariness of content and realistic nature makes it closer to thullal, though it differs vastly from Kathaprasangam in its form and presentation style.

Padhakam was normally done by a single individual, who narrated the story interspersed with songs and a large number of anecdotes, and with some amount of acting. He had musical accompaniment also. Padhakams were conducted with temple festivals and were meant for the larger audience coming to the festivals. There was another form called *kutta padhakam* (by a group), which had the characteristics of a drama.

The form received considerable encouragement from the rulers of eighteenth century, particularly in Travancore, where Padhakam began to incorporate popular ingredients. Nineteenth and early twentieth century saw the emergence of another story telling form called Harikatha. This Tamil-influenced form dealt in *bhakti* themes mainly related to Krishna and Vishnu. Harikatha used the Tamil idioms and Tamil songs and was also conducted along with temple ceremonies and festivals. Both Harikatha and Padhakam are offshoots of the *Bhakti* movement, and continue to be so. *Koothu*, another offshoot of the religious school, was confined to religious spaces. However, it has managed to become socially proactive by finding social equivalents of the religious stories, although in a limited sense. These forms have used visual and narrative possibilities of performance and handled the classical Indian themes as per the stipulations in ancient treatises.

With the Kerala renaissance, many religious and temple-oriented art forms underwent a process of secularization. Secular themes were brought into story telling performances also.

Artists with nationalistic and progressive convictions found story telling to be a powerful medium to enrapture people. The form also received patronage from some social protest movements. As a result, a new form of story telling emerged and it was called Kathaprasangam. It is still one of the popular forms predominantly in central and southern Kerala. Secular themes with inspirational and emotive value were normally chosen for the performance.

*Society, the breeding ground of art*

The late 19th and early 20th century Kerala was a virtual crucible of culture as well as social experiments, which would shape the shape and fate of its society for the rest of the period. Contact with European colonialists such as the Portuguese, French and the British, the crumbling of existing administrative structure, and exposure to external ideologies helped in evolving a different perspective about the role of the local kings and the existing Brahminical structure of the society. A number of reform movements sprang up with in communities seeking to claim its position in what would be the Kerala mainstream, which was taking shape for the first time. There were also collective movements among different communities such as the Malayali Memorial essentially seeking better prospects for the local people.

Of the struggles that shaped the Kerala society at that time the prominent were politico-economic and socio-cultural struggles. While the political struggles were of a general nature, interlinking different communities aiming for an enhanced position in the economic as well as power structure of the society the social and cultural movements were more or less limited to singular communities and focused their energies in reshaping the community by retrenching age-old values that were pulling down the development of the community. The second group included, Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP) started by Sree Narayana Guru, Sadhujana Paripalana yogam by the militant activist Ayyankali and Yogaskema Sabha, the Brahmin reformist movement. Incidentally, Yogaskema sabha is the first notable one in Kerala to use artistic means consciously—through performance pieces and literary forms- to spread its message.

There were transactions between different activist veins. “During the last years of 1930s tremendous changes occurred both in the political and cultural spheres of Kerala. In that period anti-imperialist, anti-feudal, national, democratic movement strengthened in an unprecedented fashion all over Kerala. Modern value concepts which was confined to the upper strata of the society in the early phase, now began to spread to the lower layers of society. In addition to the middle class, various other sections consciously entered into the mainstream of public life. Consequently political and cultural spheres became more popular based and it acquired democratic character.” (*Cultural Formation of Kerala*, B. Rajeevan).

At a later stage, communist and left leaning movements started focusing on both political as well as socio-cultural issues at the same time. Like Yogaskhema Sabha, they also used art (mainly stage plays of Kerala People’s Arts Club or KPAC) consciously to propagate their convictions and for years to come these techniques would control the sense and sensibilities of millions of Keralites.

*From religion to social responsibility*

While it is all right to acknowledge the evolutionary roots, it is also pertinent to note in what ways it differs from the older ones, often contradicting the tradition and presenting a new perspective and energy in dealing with the present, the current reality. It is this intrinsic energy, the ability to question, to discern, differ and dissent the morass of tradition, coping with and finding ways to resist the mass-hypnotic reality that makes any art form truly modern.

This was a new beginning when art had to shed its religious predilection and had to move in to a social sphere. (On looking back, we can see this was also a brief spell and before long art had to move away from the social sphere towards its inevitable doom—the marketplace).

Following the renaissance, the shift of focus from a religious-centric existence to one involving greater social responsibility became the hallmark of community life in Kerala. Exposure to alien culture and their way of life through trade, colonialist interventions and cultural transactions by way of literary translations helped assimilate the new evolved perspective and further utilize it to its full potential. The reflections of global waves of changes after the two World Wars also benefited Kerala positively along with global surge of socialist concepts.

Story-telling is the precursor to all performing arts. In India too, many story-telling forms like *pandavani* are still surviving. Then what makes Kathaprasangam unique? It is primarily its modern bent. Moreover, it was a 20<sup>th</sup> century phenomenon whose emergence was assisted by a renaissance movement in Kerala. Originating from a mere story-telling form, following the styles of Harikatha and Padakam, it deviated from the *bhakti* tradition and moved into a more socially responsible role. Realism became one of its hallmarks and a number of its proponents attempted to make it an effective tool for social change. It is a unique form that has grown along with the secular and democratic movements

Kathaprasangam also deviated from the mainstream traditional oration techniques in a major way, by being a pure and modern oration oriented performance form. There was no special make up or costume for the performer and he or she appeared in ordinary costumes, and they never needed special artistic realm or ambience to tell the story. For more often they were telling the story of human being like themselves- and not of Gods or of exalted being. It is simplicity at its realist best with no elaborate lighting or sound arrangements. There were also no religious symbols associated with the performance, not even a lighted traditional lamp. It was the beginning of a true secular art form.

*Influence of social realism*

Kerala's unique socio-cultural atmosphere allowed Kathaprasangam to ascertain a space hitherto unaccorded to performing arts and Kathaprasangam, on its part, was largely influenced by the then predominant realist school of literature in Kerala.

It can also be said that region's change over to modernity was taking place at this time. It was an era that witnessed the emergence of various community-centred social reformist movements. These included Nambuthiri Yogakshema Sabha, Nair Service Society, and

Sanadana Dharma Paripalana Sangham (SNDP). They have aimed for removal of evil practices related to the four-fold Aryan caste system, removal of matriarchal joint family system, and emergence of linguistic and cultural identity. These movements were part of a historic process that saw the old world structure replaced with a new one based on the values of the new reality and experience.

The realist school gave invaluable contribution to modernize the cultural atmosphere of the state. Though introducing European literary culture in Kerala, they managed to destroy the prevailing literary and artistic concepts of feudalism. Writers like Thakazhi, Kesava Dev and Ponkunnam Varkki emerged on the scene as main proponents of the realist school. Earlier Nalappadu Narayana Menon's translation of Victor Yugo's *Les Miserables* had set the tone for European influence and social realism. Though this influence was evident in all spheres, particularly in theatre, it was primarily a literary movement. A large number of European and other Indian language works were translated in to Malayalam, reaching a huge percentage of the population. In the local language, the above writers and others continued experimenting with new sensibility chartering unprecedented forays.

A large number of Malayali public were out of this sphere of influence because of illiteracy and many other social factors. They were also beyond the purview of the highbrow arts, which were any way not concerned with contemporary realities anyway. There was no medium to cater to these masses—with minuscule investment—and it was to this slot that Kathaprasangam artists moved in. And it was an era before television and communication boom and Kathaprasangam was an ideal choice for a generation held in waiting for a popular entertainment form- albeit with a progressive coating.

#### *Performance aspects*

The aspects that helped in the emergence, use and spread of Kathaprasangam are many. The most important one were its adaptability and economy. Unlike the classical forms, it had no associated stylistic rituals or content limitations. It was relatively easy to make or adapt storylines to suit the ideology or point of view that the artist wants to present.

Economy was another great factor. It was as simple as a performance form can be. There were no ornate costumes, costly equipment or accompaniments required. In fact, there was no dress code for the performers. Only minimal musical accompaniments were required. In most cases, a *Tabla*, *cymbal* and *harmonium* were the only supporting equipment. This also eliminated any costs involved in the preparation of a presentation. It was the most cost effective form of a theatre concept.

In Kathaprasangam, the important thing is to select or write the main story. Then this story, the main narrative, is broken down in a way that it is interspersed with songs and other such emotive elements in a 'gripping' way. These narrations are highly dramatized like the dialogues of drama.

A Kathaprasangam presentation evinces the fact that theatre is an art form that originated to tell a story. It has all the elements of theatre (Acting, music, chorus, movement: (as prescribed by Bharata) present in minute forms. The performer even mimics the sound of

different characters according to their age, gender, etc. For character transformation simple devices like a towel or a handkerchief was used. In short, Kathaprasangam is equivalent to one-actor plays (in which one actor plays many characters) that is a rage in modern theatre. The performer uses both his face and body and his voice in a very minimalistic, but varied manner (*sookshma abhinayam*—as stated by Bharata Muni).

There is no religious element present in the form. The basis of a Kathaprasangam exposition could be any story. The content was non-religious. The purpose was not to propagate *bhakti* or devotion but create awareness for the Malayalam language and literature. The other purpose was to fight against the evils of the society and to strive for its uplift.

Kathaprasangam became one of the most popular forms in central and southern part before spreading into northern Kerala. Secular themes of inspirational and emotive use were the preferred themes. Most of the artists are socially committed and hence the themes often convey social messages. Works by international authors such as Dostoyevsky, Shakespeare, Ibsen, Tolstoy, Victor Hugo and others have been adapted by these artists. Many outstanding novels and stories by Malayalam writers and other Indian authors have also been adapted.

Modern novels and stories/poems of Malayalam poets like Asan, Vallathol and Ulloor Vayalar Rama Varma were adapted for presentation as Kathaprasangam. Satyadevan was a pioneer of Kathaprasangam and later M. P. Manmadan, K. K. Vadyar, P. C. Abraham, Joseph Kaimamparamban and Kedamangalam Sadanandan, V. Sambasivan and Kollam Babu popularized the art and made millions its ardent followers.

#### *People's art, people's performer*

Of all the popular Kathaprasangam exponents, V. Sambasivan deserves a special mention as he almost single handedly and successfully redirected the energy of this nascent form towards a reformation process aimed at popular sensibility of that time. Samban, as he is popularly known, is credited with reshaping the entire art form on a mass base with his popular performances of carefully chosen stories. His presentation techniques, melodious songs and emotional portrayal of stories and characters reached the heart of the people.

His fame coincided with the first major Gulf boom of Kerala which saw jobless youth who left their homes kept coming back with their new found richness in Arabian countries—prominently United Arab Emirates and other oil-rich Sultanates—popularly known as Gulf countries. Almost all of them carried with them what was the latest in electronics—a cassette player. The Japanese brands Akai, Sony, Panasonic and the likes thus began to flock to rural and urban Kerala in large numbers. And invariably, almost all of them brought cassettes of Samban's latest stories. He was, like the electronic equipment they carried, the latest and probably the best thing in entertainment for most of them.

Through his performance and with the help of the cassettes he made a number of positive works popular through the length and breadth of Kerala. They include *Vilakku vangam* (a translation of *Kari Diye Kinlam* by Bimal Mitra), *Thulli Vellam* (K.A. Abbas), *Karamazov Sahodaranmar* (*Karamazov Brothers*, Dostoyevsky), *Anna Karenina* (Tolstoy), *Romeo*

and *Juliet*, and *Labham Labham* (*Ekak, Dasak, Satak*, Bimal Mitra). Prominent among his adaptations of Malayalam works are *Ayisha* (poem by Vayalar Rama Varma) *Kochu Seetha* (poem by Vallthol), *Devalokam* (Cherukadu), *Mayyazipuzhayude Teerangalil* (M. Mukundan) and *Yantram* (Malayatoor Ramakrishnan). Besides, he has also written three original works for Kathaprasangam: *Vyasanum Marxum*, *Naranathu Bhranthan* and *Vayalar-kathayum Jeevitha Charitram*.

Before passing away in 1996, he has turned the cultural scene upside down his highly effective performances. His contoured voice and efficient acting style and above all the relevance of that one-man initiative, remains unsurpassed in the minds of people. Especially at a time when invasion arts are conquering all protected spheres of cultural life with the greed only the market can afford.

#### *Gone with the global*

With invasion of a number of new 'elastic' art media such as television and internet, which facilitates infinite replication and thus ensured marketability a possibility and prerequisite have overshadowed quite a number of local, live folk art forms. In most cases, it is the most crucial art forms that evolved at the local, minuscule level that had the misfortune to fall prey to this invasion. The ensuing globalization and perpetuation of its value system through the dominant cyber culture—a systematic profit-oriented flow of information on one side and definitive trivialization of instilling 'fun' values on all aspects crucial on other side—has ensured that the revival of these art form are near impossible. Many a performance form has lost the adaptability to be a match against the global Armageddon that is encroaching on all spaces hither to held sacred. Kathaprasangam is one such art form which certainly has its glorious days behind it but who can deny the human spirit that will find its ways of expression? Another story, another way of expression perhaps. But that story will be told some day.