

Vacikabhinaya in Kerala's Traditional Sanskrit Theatre

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Indian traditional theatre is long extinct, but it is fortunate that most of its characteristic features survive, albeit with a lot of regional variations, in Kerala's temple theatre called Kutiyattam.¹ Kutiyattam, literally meaning 'mingled dancing', is actually the enactment of Sanskrit drama itself, and the name implies the presence of more than one character therein as distinguished from Kuttu, which is the solo discourse of Puranic stories by the Cakyar, the actor. The word *attam*, meaning dance, suggests the dance orientation of the performance. The true nature of Kutiyattam as Sanskrit theatre is often obscured by the fact that characters like the Vidusaka are at liberty to use the Malayalam language in addition to the regular Sanskrit and Prakrit; the ritualistic elements related to the temple also play their part in the enactment. These features, however, do not diminish in the least the historical, cultural and aesthetic significance of Kutiyattam as the only surviving and authentic form of the traditional Sanskrit theatre anywhere. The recent recognition of the art form by the Unesco as one of the precious legacies of human culture is a step in the right direction.

It is significant that all the four-fold modes of acting envisaged in Bharata's *Natyasastra* survive, with some modifications, in this art form. Among these, the *vacikabhinaya* or the oral acting in Kutiyattam deserves our special attention. We can see elements of the other three types of *abhinaya* in other art forms like Bharatanatyam, Kathakali and the Yaksagana also. But Kutiyattam is the only art form which has preserved the *Natyasastra* tradition of delivering the *pathya* portion of the text with voice modulation. The present paper is an attempt to study the *vacikabhinaya* tradition of Kutiyattam against the backdrop of Bharata's *Natyasastra*.

Bharata emphasizes the importance of *vacikabhinaya* through his famous statement thus:

Great effort should be taken with regard to words since 'word' is remembered as the physical form of *natya*. The gestures, the make-up and the dress as well as *sattvika abhinaya* reveal the inherent meaning of words.²

We, however, do not know the exact manner in which the dialogue portions were supposed to be delivered as per the prescriptions of the *Natyasastra*. Bharata maintains that there are certain *guna-s* (qualities) in *pathya*, the recitative part of the play, i.e., the dialogue. These are the seven *svaras* (notes), the three *sthana-s* (locations), the four *Varnas* (manner

of utterances), two ways of *kaku* (intonation), six *alamkaras* (embellishments), and the six *angas* (Limbs) and three *layas* (tempo). Bharata's prescriptions in this regard can be represented in the following tabular form:

Table A³
Svara-s for Individual Rasas

Svara	Rasa
Hasya, Srngara	Madhyama, Pancama
Sadja, Rsabha	Vira, Raudra, Adbhuta
Gandhara, Nisada	Karuna
Dhaivata	Bibhatsa, Bhayanaka

Table B⁴
Sthana-s and Their Usage

Sthana	Description	Usage
Chest	Low vocal register	Addressing people in close proximity
Throat	Middle vocal register	Addressing people at some distance
Head	High vocal register	Addressing people at a greater distance

Table C⁵

Rasa	Varna
Hasya, Srngara	Svarita, Udatta
Vira, Raudra and Adbhuta	Udatta, Kampita
Karuna, Bibhatsa, Bhayanaka	Anudatta, Svarita, Kampita

VARNAS USED IN VARIOUS RASA-S

Table D⁶
Intonation (Kaku)

Type of <i>Kaku</i>	Description	Usage
Sakanksa (expectant)	Starts with a high pitch and ends at a low pitch	Sentence where the idea is not fully expressed
Nirakanksa (non-expectant)	Starts with a low pitch and ends with a high pitch	Sentence where the idea is fully expressed

Table E⁷
Six Types of Embellishments

Embellishment	Description	Usage
Ucca (loud)	High pitch coming from head	Speaking to far-off people, to convey wonder, dismay
Dipta (waxing)	Higher pitch from the head	To indicate reproach, quarrel, dispute, annoyance, seize, anger, arrogance, defiance, harsh speech, repulsion, lamentation.
Mandra (subdued)	Low pitch from the chest	To indicate desperation, gloom, weakness, anxiety, longing, meekness, illness, playing together, wounded state, intoxication, secrecy, confidence etc.
Nica (Low)	Lower pitch from the chest	Natural speaking, illness, quiettude, strain, fear, fainting
Druta (Fast)	Uttered from the throat	Jest, playing with children, remonstrance, fear, fever, fright and exhaustion, reporting urgent matter.
Vilambita (Slow)	Low-pitched sound from the throat	Love, pathos, cogitation, intolerance, jealousy, etc.

Table F⁸
Six Limbs

Limb	Description	Usage
Viccheda	Pause	To indicate expectancy in Hasya and Smgara
Arpana	An attractive and swaying delivery which fills the stage	- Do -
Visarga	Release from the above	Bibhatsa and Bhayanaka
Anubandha	Continuity	Vira, Raudra and Adbhuta
Dipana	Rising gradually and without break in three octaves	Vira, Raudra Adbhuta and Karuna
Prasamana	Gliding down to a low key	Karuna

Table G⁹
Tempos

Tempo	Description	Usage
Druta	Fast	Vira, Raudra, Adbhuta, Bibhatsa, Bhayanaka
Madhya	Medium	Hasya, Smgara,
Vilambita	Slow	Karuna

This elaborate procedure shows the importance Bharata attaches to verbal acting and the exhaustiveness of the treatment of voice modulation in ancient Indian theatre. It is virtually impossible for us to reconstruct the actual manner in which the text was delivered from these prescriptions, as the actual practices of verbal acting can be understood only from a living theatre. However, a close study of the *Natyasastra* leads us to the inevitable conclusion that the delivery of the text depended much on the *rasa* delineated. The nature of the addressee also had a definite role in deciding the character of the speech. Pauses, the rise and fall of the pitch, intonation and tempo also added to the depth and variety of the speech. In short, a study of the *vacikabhinaya* in Bharata testifies to the amazing richness of voice modulation in ancient theatre. It is this quality which we find in Kutiyattam theatre, though the prescriptions in Kutiyattam are very different in nature.

In Kutiyattam, the *vacikabhinaya* is done mainly through what is technically called *raga* or *svara*. Padmasri Mani Madhava Cakyar has given the details of the various *svaras* and their usage in his work *Natyakalpadrumam*. Various *talas* are also assigned to the *svaras*. The details can be represented in the following tabular form:

Table H¹⁰
Svaras/Ragas and Their Usage

Svara/Raga	Tala	Usage
Arta	Dhruva	Srngara and Rati of the heroes of the Dhirodatta type
Srikanthi	Dhruva	Verses at the end of an act, denoting the killing of wicked people, description of dusk, noon, and devotion
Muddha	Dhruva	The Srngara related to Raksasas
Srikamaram	Tripata of the Atidruta [fastest] tempo	Vipralambha of Raksasas
Paurali	do	The Vipralambha of Srirama in its climatic stage
Bhinnapancama	Ekatala	Vismaya as an ancillary to Sambhogasrngara
Kaisiki	Ekatala	Hasya and Bibhatsa
Duhkhagandhara	Ekatala	Karuna and Soka
Tarkan	Tripata	Krodha, Raudra
Viratarkan	Dhruva	Vira
Dana	Dhruva	Adbhuta, Bhayanaka
Tondu	Ekatala	Santa, Sama, Bhakti
Indalam	Ekatala	Natural state of heroes of the Uttama variety
Korakkurunni	Dhruva	Nature of monkeys
Muralindalam	Dhruva of slow tempo	Srirama's Vipralambha
Veladhuli	Tripata of medium tempo	Hasya, Bhaya, station at a distant place, impatience
Cetipancamam	Dhruvatala	The natural tone of secondary, inferior and inferior characters
Puranir	Ekatala	The description of rainy season, and dawn.
Khattantari	Tripata	Description of the killing of wicked people, benediction, prayer for auspiciousness
Antari	Tripata	Indicating the poet's words, narration of story

The various *kramadipikas* or stage manuals contain instructions of the *svaras* to be sung on proper occasions. There are regional variations found in the employment of *svaras*. In this connection, there is an important point to be noted: Even though tradition uses the terms *svaras* and *ragas* to denote these voice-modulation patterns, it would be wrong to confuse them with the *svaras* or *ragas* found in classical Indian music. The *svaras/ragas* of Kutiyattam do not possess the musical quality and the melodious individuality of the *svaras* and *ragas* of classical music, which have accurate frequency regulations in regard to the basic *adharasruti* (basic tone) represented by the drone. Dr S. Venkitasubramoniya Iyer points out that whatever may be the raga, all the renderings simply create an impression of the vedic recitation of the Namboodiri Brahmins.¹¹ But it is also a fact that the manner of articulation of the *svaras* is very effective in capturing the mood of the context. This brings us to a very interesting problem in the enactment of the Sanskrit drama: were the verses in the plays meant to be sung? The answer seems to be negative, though modern productions of the plays do favour *ragas* and *talas* of modern classical music. To quote M.R.Kale,

Metrical rhythm and tempo and not melodic rhythm and tempo are to be observed in the recitation of Sanskrit verses. This factor is noteworthy because in the post-independence revival of Sanskrit drama the actors sing the verses in the melodic patterns of musical raga. The erroneous nature of this practice is made clear by the rules of oral interpretation laid down by Bharata¹².

It is a fact that Bharata does not use the word *raga* at all in *Natyasastra* in the sense of the melodic unit now referred to by the word; instead, he uses the word *jati*, which is actually a product of tonal shift. Bharata's music represents the pre-*raga* phase of Indian music and the *jatis* were the prototypes of later *ragas*.¹³ The *jatis* seemed to have been reserved for the *dhrupa* songs, which were actually sung melodiously, and the *pathya* portion was delivered with tonal differences. This is exactly the state of affairs in Kutiyattam. Songs are meagre in Kutiyattam but the available ones like *akkitta* are sung in a traditional style and the dialogue portion is rendered with the characteristic *svaras* described above.

Two important features of the *vacikabhinaya* of Kutiyattam deserve our attention here. The first point is that many of the *svaras/ragas* motioned in Kutiyattam are seen in the *tevaram* music of the ancient Tamil country. The *tevaram* tradition uses the term *pan*, which is roughly equivalent to the modern *raga*. The following table gives the name of the common terms occurring in Kutiyattam and *tevaram* music

Table I
Kutiyattasvaras, Tevaram Pans and the Modern Carnatic Equivalents of Pans

Kutiyattasvara	Pan	Modern raga
Tarkan	Takka	Kamboji/Kannadakamboji
Indalam	Indalam	Nathanamakriya
Srikamaram	Srikamaram	Nathanamakriya
Bhinnapancamam	Pancamam	Ahiri

It is, however, important to note that the svaras of Kutiyattam have nothing in common with the *tevaram pans* save their common nomenclature. Nor are they even distantly related to the modern ragas mentioned in the table.

The second point to be noted is the close relation between Kutiyattam and the Yajurveda chanting of the Namboodiri Brahmins of Kerala. The Vedic chanting seems to have exerted a very prominent influence on the Kutiyattam, for all its tradition of the non-vedic tradition of svaras. This does not seem to be strange, as the cakyar community mostly owed its origin to namboodiri Brahmins downgraded in status. There is a saying in Malayalam: *Othil pilacchal kuttu*, meaning, if one errs at (or is downgraded from) the study of Vedic chant, one's recourse is *kuttu*, the Kutiyattam discourse.

All this would lead us to the inevitable surmise that Kutiyattam evolved out of the various oral discourses of ancient *tamilakam* when Sanskrit drama came to be staged in Kerala. The svaras/ragas of the Kutiyattam tradition are remnants of this old chanting which must have been musical before undergoing transformation later. The Vedic chanting also exerted influence on Kutiyattam for obvious sociological reasons suggested above. The present *vacikabhinaya* seems to be an amalgam of various strands in diverse traditions, but the stress system and the rich suggestive techniques envisaged by Bharata in his *Natyasastra* are also preserved intact. This seems to be the source of vitality of this extraordinary legacy of ancient Indian theatre.

NOTES

1. See, for details of Kutiyattam, K.Kunjuni Raja, *Kutiyattam*, Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi, 1964, C.Rajendran, *The Traditional Sanskrit Theatre of Kerala*, University of Calicut, 1989.
2. *Natyasastra* 15.2 (Raganatya series, edn)
3. *Natyasastra* with *Abhinavabharati*, ed. K.L. Joshi, Delhi, 1995, XVII.103-104
4. *Ibid.*, 105-108, See also, V. Raghavan, 'Sanskrit Drama in Performance', in *Sanskrit Drama in Performance*, ed. Rachel Van M. Baumer and James R. Brandon, Hawaii, 1981, pp 9-43
5. *Ibid.*, 109 (prose passage)
6. *Ibid.*, 110-111
7. *Ibid.*, 112-114
8. *Ibid.*, 130
9. *Ibid.*, 131
10. Mani Madhava Cakyar, *Natyakalpadrumanam*, second edn., Kerala Kalamandalam, Vallathol Nagar, 1996, pp.75-94
11. S.Venkitasubramonia Iyer, *Sangitasastrapravesika*, Language Institute, Trivandrum, 1974, p. 300
12. M. R. Kale, *The Natyasastra of Bharata*, p. 190
13. N.A. Jairazbhoy, 'Music', *A Cultural History of India*, ed. A.L. Basham, p. 216.