

The Languishing Art of Katha Kalakshepam

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Purana Pattanam has been with us for centuries. Though a mythological figure, Sage Narada was perhaps the first Keertankar. In Tamil Nadu scholars like Parittiyur Krishna Sastrigal were popular for their exposition of Valmiki Ramayanam in the Purana Natanam Style. However, a new direction was given to this art-form with the arrival at the Tanjore Court of two famous Keertankars from Gwalior. Morkar Bava and Ramachandra Bava greatly influenced the local Pauranikas and Bhagavatars. Two giants, Tanjore Krishna Bhagavatar and Tirupalanam Panchapakesa Sastrigal took upon themselves the task of assimilating and incorporating the attractive elements of the Marathi style in the Tamil Paddhati. Krishna Bhagavatar and his followers introduced Marathi forms like Saki, Dindi, Pancha Chamaram, Ovi, Anjanagitam, Gataka and Abhang into the repertoire of Katha-Kalakshepam.

The Bhagavatars also enriched their presentations by including compositions in various languages by composers like Purandaradas, Arunachalakavi Rayar, Ananda Bharati, Ramaswamy Sivan and of course the Musical Trinity, Thyagaraja, Dikshidar, and Syama Sastri. It is seldom noticed by the common listener that the Poorva Ranga or the first act of a Kalakshepam includes songs in many languages like Marathi, Hindi, Kannada and Telugu. This was cultural and emotional integration without tears!

As is well known, the Harikatha performance has two broad sections. The Poorva Ranga (which is really a curtain-raiser and an introduction) starts with the traditional prayer to Vigneswara and then goes on to explain the main theme of the musical discourse. This

is done through a number of Niroopanams in various languages and the audience is spell bound and ready for the main show, the Uttara Ranga, which is devoted to unfolding the main story. Through prose and poetry set to pleasing melodies the Keertankar or Bhagavatar leads the audience from one ecstatic experience to another. They are master-communicators who can explain the most obstruce philosophical concepts in delightfully simple language and with apt and telling anecdotes. There is never a dull moment. If the Bhagavatar senses a little restlessness among the audience he will immediately break into the Namasankeertanam and thus involve the audience and get them interested.

Originally the Katha-Kalakshepam drew heavily from the immortal epics like the Ramayana and Bhagavatam and also from Siva Puranas. The Kirtanatarangini in Marathi was also a treasure house of Kathas for the Keertankar to draw freely from. About a hundred years ago composers like Gopalakrishna Bharati, Neelakanta Sivan and Ramaswamy Sivan delved into the lives of the saiva saints and composed songs for use in Kalakshepams

Gopalakrishna Bharati's Nandan Charithram was set as a Kalakshepam master piece by Tanjore Krishna Bhagavatar and it remains popular to this day. In recent years the lives of great souls like Tyagaraja, Vivekananda and Gandiji have become subjects for Kalakshepams. The royal composer Swati Tirunal was also inspired to compose beautiful Niroopanams for Kuchelopakyanam and Ajamilopakyanam.

The Keertankar or Harikatha Bhagavata is multifaceted personality. In Harikatha the performer is himself the performance. Blessed with a commanding personality, a sense of rhythm, high sense of drama and of course erudite scholarship in many languages, the Keertankar is really many attributes rolled into one. The Keertankar has often been described as "one man theatre". Many of the Bhagavatas knew 'Bharatam' and enthralled their audience with abhinaya and nritya to the tinkling of the 'Gajjais' that they wore on their feet. Some of the intricate rhythm patterns like 'Usi' and 'Ezadi' (seven beats) produced by them to the accompaniment as the 'Mridangam, Chipplakattai, Jala and Gajjai', used to keep the audience literally on the edge of their seats.

In the early days many celebrated sangita Vidwans who were concert artists in their own right, took to performing Harikatha in addition to concerts because they realized the vast potential of this art form to exhibit their varied talents. Giants like Maha Vaidyanatha Iyer invariably performed a full concert on the first day followed by a Harikatha on the following day. Other great singers who enriched the Harikatha art form were Tanjore Panchapakesa Bhagavata, Anantarama Bhagavata, Mangudi Chidambara Bhagavata, Muthiah Bhagavata and among women Saraswathi Bai, Kanakambujam and Banni Bai. Because of the enormous opportunity to play a variety of talas, eminent percussionists associated themselves with Harikatha performances. Names like Alaganambi Pillai, Naraynaswami Appa, Pakkiri Pillai, Tanjore Vaidyanatha Iyer, Dakshinamurthi Pillai and Palaghat Mani Iyer come to one's mind. It is the contention of Harikatha Vidwans that a percussionist who plays for Harikatha can without difficulty play for concerts. But the vice-versa is not always possible

Mere virtuosity does not qualify for a good Keertankar. It is also a spiritual guide and so

his personal life should be above board. It was Sant Tukaram who said 'O Vittala, I also not want to be in Vaikunta, the happiness I derive doing Harikatha will never be found there'. Sant Namdev went further and asked his Lord not to give him Mukti but let him be born again in Pandharpur so that he might perform Kirtan at the temple gate.

Well, these were the high standards set by the originators of Kirtan.

There is some debate about the origin as the Katha. Many scholars believe that Sant Namdev (1278-1350) was responsible for evolving the Harikatha form. Legend has it that when Namdev sang his Kirtans Lord Panduranga danced. The other school claims that it was the Haridasas of Karnataka who introduced the Kirtan into Maharashtra. It is interesting to note that in Maharashtra the Kirtankar is even today called Haridasa. So far as Tamil Nadu is concerned this art form came from Maharashtra through via Gwalior in Madhya Pradesh!

Katha or Kirtan today is truly national though it is called by different names in different parts of the country—Harikatha Kalakshepam in Tamil Nadu, Katha Prasangam in Kerala, Kirtan in Maharashtra, etc.

Harikatha has been aptly described as a night school for the unlettered. While it is true that language and literacy are no barriers and Harikatha is indeed the spoken word medium, par-excellence. It is also noteworthy that the most well read and sophisticated listener has ample fare for his employment in a Harikatha performance. Besides its role as a means of moral communication in the hands of an adept it played the role of a social conscience rouser. During the freedom struggle this medium was used by Tilak and others to instill the sense of unity and patriotism. Tilak was an ardent admirer of the Kirtan and is reported to have said 'Had I not become a journalist, I would have been a Katha Keertankar'. The Kirtan is a potential

change-agent but in the hands of novices (and there are many of this tribe) it can be abused into a propaganda vehicle with disastrous results. Due to the almost total neglect of this art form by the powers that be, it should surprise none if this form joins the ranks of what are called "the endangered species". Fortunately some attempts are being made to set up a school for young and talented aspirants. Fairly frequent opportunities are being given for holding Harikatha sessions. Annual prizes for best performer are being awarded. But one swallow does not make a summer. There is need for concerted efforts

on all fronts to revive and rejuvenate this art form. Luckily some stalwarts like Embar, Balakrishna Sastrigal, Sant Kesavdas are still around and their services should be harnessed. The Sangeet Natak Akademi held a Round Table last year to discuss the ways and means of fostering this rare art form. It was heart warming to see the active participation of the top rankers in this art form. I am confident that financial and other help would be forthcoming if proper schemes are drawn up by competent people and organisations. Surely there is no dearth of such talent south of the Vindhya.

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