

KUDIYATTAM

Its form and significance as Sanskrit Drama*

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As I look back, I find it a coincidence, worth mentioning on this occasion, that among the earliest studies I published thirty-fours ago are papers on various aspects of *Natya Sastra* and among them was the one on *Kathakali* and other forms in which Bharata's Sastra has been surviving in this part of the country; and in this paper, I drew attention to the *Kudiyattam* and the *Natankusa*.¹ In the Drama Seminar organised in Delhi by the Sangeet Natak Akademi in 1956, which opened with my paper on *Sanskrit Drama and Performance*.² I again drew the attention of the wider world of theatre-lovers to the only surviving form of traditional presentation of Sanskrit drama anywhere in India, namely the *Kudiyattam* of Kerala. Subsequently I persuaded Sri J. C. Mathur, a great theatre-enthusiast, when he was Director-General of the All India Radio to come here, to witness a sample display of this art and to do something through the Radio to make it better known. A further effective and signal step could be taken by me when, thanks to the financial aid of the *Central Sanskrit Board* on one side, and the persuasion and help of Kerala friends on the other, I could, under the auspices of the *Samskrita Ranga*, Madras afford an opportunity to Sanskrit scholars and those devoted to the arts of drama and dance in Madras to witness this art and gain a first hand knowledge of it. Sri Mani Madhava Chakyar and his associates came out of Kerala for the first time, I suppose, and presented at Madras on three nights scenes from three plays - *Subhadradhananjaya*, *Abhiseka* and *Nagananda*. In our *Samskrita Ranga Annual* (II) was also published a

detailed article on this art, by Dr. K. Kunjunni Raja, which prepared the more serious students of Sanskrit drama to understand these performances. From Madras to Delhi and elsewhere, Sri Madhava Chakyar's tours and performances have proved an eye-opener to all those interested in theatre and the traditions of Sanskrit play-production. This is therefore the most appropriate time to have this Seminar on *Kudiyattam*, in which we are having four groups of participants - the active exponents of the art themselves; local scholars who have seen it often; and outside scholars and Sanskritists who have had opportunities to see and study it on the background of the large and long space-time sweep of the *Natya Sastra* and Sanskrit drama; and lastly votaries of theatre in general who are not only interested in its significance as a theatre-form, but also desire to get through it an idea of how a Sanskrit drama was enacted traditionally, what practical form some of the principles and directions in Bharata's text took and how the classical technique adapted itself when the art had to live among the people at large and had to be made understandable and enjoyable by them. As an old friend of the late Poet Vallathol and sympathiser of the Kalamandala, and as a Member of the Indian Advisory Committee of the American Institute of Indian Studies, I am very glad that such a seminar has been organised.

As some persist in asking "Was Sanskrit ever spoken?", so also some may ask 'Was the Sanskrit drama enacted?'. The best evidence of its having been enacted is the practical nature of the treatise of Bharata,

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1. Triveni, Madras, VI.ii.Sep.-Oct. 1933.

2. J. of the University of Madras, XXIX, i, July 1957, p.28

embodying teachings to the actors, and before Bharata's text the *Natasutras* of the same character. A host of evidence is available in general literature bearing out the production of the Sanskrit plays. The plays themselves contain sufficient data bearing on this. When the art of presenting Sanskrit drama was perhaps at its peak in Kashmir, we have the evidence of the *Kuttanimata* of minister Damodaragupta of the 9th century A.D. who gives a detailed technical description of the playing of *Ratnavali*. So far as the South is concerned, we have Chola inscriptions, e.g. the one of A.D. 994 (130 of 1925) of the time of the great Rajaraja, granting *Nrtyabhoga* for actor Kumaran Srikanthan for performing the seven *Ankas* of *Aryakkuttu* at the annual festival of the temple at Tiruvavadaturai in Tanjore District. The Chola inscriptions mention also the actor *Kuttaccakkayan* and the grants given to him, *Sakkai-k-kani*. *Sakkai* has other meanings besides actor and although the word has been discussed by several scholars, and several old and new etymologies have been proposed, there is as yet no satisfactory explanation of the word. The *Bhavaprakasa* of Saradatanaya was a product of the later Chola period and there, its South Indian author says that he wrote on the *Rupakas* and *Uparupakas* after witnessing all the varieties in Sarada's temple, in front of the image of the Goddess enacted in the *Nartana* hall of the temple, by *Natas*.

असीनां नर्तनागारे तां देवीं प्रेक्षकैः सह ।
 प्रणम्य तैरनुज्ञानस्तस्याः पार्श्वं उपाविशत् ॥
 त्रिशतम्कारभिन्नानि रूपकाणि पृथक् पृथक् ।
 नटैः प्रयुज्यमानानि भावाभिनयकैर्विद्वैः ॥
 छट्वा स देवी वरदा नाटयवेदमयाचत ॥

Ch. I. P. 2. II. 9 to 15.

A popular *Uparupaka* form of dance-drama, employing the local language had developed, earlier than *Krsnattam* and *Kathakali* in Kerala, in South India as well as in other parts of India. But in all areas, the

popular forms have a lineage going to the classical Sanskrit production. In Kerala, it is well known that the *Kathakali* or *Ramanattaam* goes through the *Krsnattam* to *Kudiyattam*. The *Kathakali*, with its popularity, has over-shadowed the *Krsnattam* and *Kudiyattam* but to the serious scholar and earnest student, the two earlier forms and the *Kudiyattam* in particular, offer many data of historical value, academic importance and aesthetic beauty and significance. Here is something, the only living source, from which the authentic traditional Sanskrit play production could be reconstructed, and given the resources needed, enthusiasts could endeavour at producing Kalidasa, Sudraka and Harsa in a way different from the modern realistic style in which they are handled now in any part of India. With music, dance, and abhinaya the ancient Sanskrit production as I have emphasised in more than one paper on the subject, was really an art of dance-drama, utilising fully the intrinsic and purely artistic resources of *Natyadharmi*. Although the plentitude and perfection of this display could not be seen *Kudiyattam*, yet it is in it that one gets glimpses of the glory of the *abhinaya* of the Sanskrit play, glimpses of which, aided by imagination and knowledge of the Sanskrit *Natya Sastra*, could help one in visualising how it would have all been done in the heyday of the classical Sanskrit stage.

The name *Kudiyattam* may be interpreted in different ways so as to bring out the various aspects of this art. It might refer to the fact that as against the form in which one person impersonates the different characters, here we have several actors coming together to enact their respective roles or as a corollary of this, full complement of all the four *abhinayas* are together availed of for the enactment. The distinction of *Ekaharya* and *Aneka-harya* is a fundamental one in the definitions of the varieties of *Rupaka* and *Uparupaka*.

As regards the date of this tradition of Sanskrit production in Kerala, available evidence would point to the 10th century A.D.,

the time of King Kulasekhara, author of the *Subhadradhananjaya*. The common nomenclature of some Ragas in the music of *Kudiyattam* with the *Devaram* music tradition in Tamil - e.g. Indalam, Sikamaram, Kaisika - points to the same period. But the presentation should have grown and gathered increasing adaptations to the local milieu during the course of a few centuries. The critique of *Kudiyattam*, namely *Natankusa*, should belong to this later developed stage of the art. Towards the end of the *Natankusa*, the text gives among possible replies to its criticism, that the discrepancies shown are coming down for some time in their practice इमा विपिन-पनयश्चिरन्तन्यः — which presupposes a certain passage of time for this tradition. Another evidence on this is the growth or prevalence of diverse practises among the different Chakyar families in respect of adding a verse or omitting it or doing or not doing it or doing in a different manner, - a fact which figures among the criticisms of the *Natankusa*.

The most obvious feature of the *Kudiyattam* which will strike any onlooker is the free admixture of the local language, a point included among the several criticisms in the *Natankusa*. It is not so much the bilingualism as such, for that is basic to the very text of the Sanskrit drama in which characters speak in Sanskrit and the different Prakrts. But it is the further use of contemporary local language. The historical and cultural necessity and significance of this as part of the endeavour to put across the Sanskrit play to the people at large and to educate them are obvious. But what should be noted is that this phenomenon is not isolated but appeared in different parts of India. In the *Parijatapaharana* of Umapati (C. 1400 or 18th century A.D.) of Bihar, the local language is used for the songs; and right from this, we have a whole crop of plays in Sanskrit-cum-Newari in Pattan and Kathmandu in Nepal. The *Ankiya Nat* of the Sankaradeva, tradition in Assam employs Assamese and Sanskrit. In the *Dhurvagana*,

the musical outfit of five kinds of songs, set forth elaborately by Bharata, there are two ideas which it is worth while for us to remember in the present context: one is that these are to be in *Prakri* and the other is, as I have maintained in my papers on the subject, they had to be composed, on the guide-lines available in the poet's text and verses, by music composers forming part of a drama troupe and added to the text. It is in this light that we have to understand Act IV of the *Vikramorvasiya* which has come down to us in manuscripts in a version fitted with Apabhramsa songs. This solves the question of un-orthodoxy regarding additions raised by the *Natankusa* as also to some extent the discrepancy of an actor enacting a verse referring to himself, in the third person, instead of in the first, a criticism advanced by the *Natankusa*. For we know from the surviving regional dance drama traditions, particularly from the Telugu Bhagavata plays, that when the entrance song, the *Pravesiki Dhruva* or *Daru* is sung, the actor who is described, himself enters dancing to it and rendering in gesture what is described in it about himself in the third person.

To return to the use of Malayalam, the criticism of the *Natankusa* would be proper in respect of the disproportionate length, vulgarisation, and introduction at the slightest pretext of lengthy excursions into different branches of learning. The explanation that these have played a great role in mass and adult education and spread of Sanskrit and learning is of course there. There is also some justification when characters like the Vidusaka indulge in this, as this could be taken as providing comic relief. Comic interludes or improvisations in local language seem to have been resorted to in other parts of the country too, although no written manuals have come down there. At any rate, these should have been short and not matters of hours or days duration as in *Kudiyattam*. The *Natankusa* cites in further justification of criticism that such vagaries are not introduced in the presentation of the

Sakuntala. It is in respect of length, irrelevance and the splashes of vulgarity that the criticism of *Natankusa* is justified. Otherwise, the vernacular interludes seem to have been prevalent in other areas too; for the *Bhavaprakasa*, which was written in the Kanci region, says (Ch, X.II. 15.6. P. 311) that at the finales of song, speech etc., the Natas etc. may, for the diversion of the audience, do some comic interludes through the local languages.

विश्रामेगीतपाठ्यादेः सदस्यानां नटादिभिः ।

परिहासाय (साः प्र) योक्तव्याः देशभाषाभिरन्विताः ॥

The printed edition reads wrongly; परिहासाय याक्तव्याः । It should read परिहासाः पयाक्तव्याः ।

It may be noted that as against the criticism of the *Natankusa*, the reply is given in one place that Bharata's treatise contains *Anuyogas* or permissive directives to enlarge or adapt or extend the application of his directions. This is true but as the *Natankusa* rightly insists, these should be done without loss of *Aucitya* and without *Rasa-bhanga*, that is, without endangering the requirements of proportion or propriety and without impeding the flow of *Rasa* or spoiling it by things in bad taste.

As I have shown elsewhere, the intensive treatment of the poet's text by the stage artistes enlarged the dimensions of the play and the production of a play had to extend in duration and most probably only one Act could be presented at a session. This would also explain the prevalence from most ancient times of individual Act-names in plays like *Mrcchakatika* and *Nagananda* in manuscripts as well as in treatises on dramaturgy¹. Such separate Act-names *Mantranka*, *Anguli-yanka*, ect. are well known in *Kudiyattam*. A direct outcome of this is that

when these Acts are taken separately, on different days, the continuity has to be given to the audience and the resume or flash-back of the story upto the Act on hand what is called here *Nirvahana*, is required and a further development from this is new compositions of verses for the story recapitulated, including a new *Nandi* for the Act-all of which figure among the aberrations cited and criticised in the *Natankusa*.

In my paper on Music in Ancient Indian Drama² I have devoted special attention to the different ways in which this twin art was harnessed to augment the Sanskrit production. Without going over the ground again, I might draw attention to the preservation of the relation of *Ragas* and *Rasas* and *Bhavas* in the *Kudiyattam* scheme, in whatever modified or attenuated form it may be; particularly as borne out by the emotional and thematic, rather than melodic, nomenclature in certain cases-*Arta*, *Tarka*, *Duhkha* and so on. The big pot *Mizhavu* reminds one of Bharata's *Bhandavadya*, which was however multi-faced. The prominence of the preliminary drum playing in the *Purvaranga* part is also very old and had given rise in the olden times to the Sanskrit saying 'Amrdangam Natakam', play without drum, referring to anything happening without its due attendant noise and hubbub, an idiom misunderstood³ by some unacquainted with dramatic practice as a reference to a lost *Nataka* or a type of it called *Amrtanka*.

The *Purvaranga* was a very elaborate affair and included several items of religious and propitiatory significance mixed with all this music and dance. The full details of these became obsolete long ago, as the *Sahityadarpana* says (VI.27/28): इदानीं पवरड-गस्य सम्यक् पयागामावादक एव सनधारः सव पयाजयतीति व्यवहारः ।

1. See particularly Sagarandini's *Natalaksana-ratnakosa* for a large number of these separate act-names in well-known plays.
2. *Art and Letters*, London, XVIII. i. 1953, pp.10-18; J. of the Music Academy, Madras, XXV. 1954, pp.79-92.
3. Some regrettable papers have also been published recently under this delusion.

But in the regional dance drama traditions, where the religious background is important, some part of the old *Purvaranga* survives. In *Kudiyattam*, we have some elements of the old *Purvaranga* and it is necessary to understand fully the details of the preliminary dances here, the *Caris*, the *Gatis*, and also the meanings and significances of certain dances bearing names like 'Yasi Yasi'.

It is, in fact, with the preliminary acts and dances called *Kriya* that the *Natankusa* starts its criticism and concerns itself for the greater part of its discussion. The question as to why, if it belongs to *Purvaranga*, it should be done by Hanuman after his entry is discussed at length. We may however remind ourselves that on the ancient Sanskrit stage, there was the practice of the character or characters of the opening scene of the play figuring in the *Prastavana*, as the *Sutradhara* and the *Nata*. In the two plays of Bhavabhuti, the *Uttararamacarita* and the *Malatimadhava* the *Sutradhara* and *Nata* in the prologue announce themselves as citizens of Ayodhya of Rama's time and Kamandaki and Avalokita and it is in the dress of those characters that they carry on the *Prastavana*. Hence the question in *Natankusa* whether the person dances as *Nata* or as Hanuman does not arise, as it is all governed by convention. There is the more telling universal phenomenon of the *Bharata-vakya* which is uttered by a leading *patra* in dress, but well understood as recited by an actor, *Bharata*.

Two points struck me with reference to *Vacikabhinaya*. In the scenes from three dramas which I witnessed, I kept the Trivandrum Sanskrit series editions of the three plays and followed closely the dialogue spoken on the stage with the printed texts. I found that practically the oral and the printed texts agreed, but there were some small differences here and there. It appears that for satisfying our scholarly curiosity we might as well collate the oral and the printed texts of the plays in the *Kudiyattam* repertoire. The second point relates to the recitation of the

text by *Chakyars* in a sing song tone, the prose dialogues too being evidently correlated to some tune. The evidence on the musical accompaniment of the Sanskrit play, instrumental and vocal, shows that this was a continuous one, particularly the instrumental which kept up a background and tempo, but the instructions regarding *Pathyagunas* qualities of the delivery of speech, given by Bharata, do not warrant any sing-song delivery of *vacika* as seen in *Kudiyattam*. The *Natankusa* criticises the adoption of a particular tone *Svara-visesa*, with reference to Malayalam speeches; probably this spread to the Sanskrit part also.

I have kept to the last what I consider as the most precious part of *Kudiyattam*. The essence of this art lies in the *Angikabhinaya*. Drama or *Rupaka* is called *Vakyarthabhinaya* while *Uparupaka* and forms of dance-drama are called *Padarthabhinaya*. The actor has first to show the whole *Rasa* or *Bhava* which is the *Vakyartha* and then come to its break-up and interpret word by word, *Padartha*. The *Vakyartha* is shown prominently by the actions of the parts of the face chiefly by the eyes, that is, in terms of Bharata, by the *abhinaya* of the *Upangas*. The second aspect of this *abhinaya*, especially of the beautiful verses which blossom forth on the dialogues like flowers on the boughs, is the improvisation. The possibilities of ideas and sentiments that could be drawn out of the lines, whereby the main idea could be enriched are unfolded and gone through in *abhinaya*. The very scheme of *Sancari-bhavas* and the detailed description of the *Anubhavas*, and again the elaboration of the interpretation through the six stages of *Sarirabhinaya* - all set forth by Bharata, show that this should have been the ancient and traditional way of interpreting the text of the plays. Although there are no old manuals of such *abhinaya* handed down in Sanskrit for the classical plays, we have some indications of this line of interpretation in the *Kuttanimata*, and in the *Kudiyattam* tradition, we have actual manuals. This technique is quite

familiar to the spectators of the well-known dance form referred to as *Bharata Natya*, in which *Padas* especially are interpreted in variations, whose range and number are in proportion to the imagination, knowledge, culture and maturity of the artist. The third point which I would like to touch upon is one which the *Natankusa* mentions and criticizes, namely, a character in a particular role, for example Hanuman in male dress, enacting the feelings and actions of Sita, a female, not present, but indicated by a mere symbolic gesture of taking up the end of the garment. This would apply also to Ravana portraying the actions and feelings of Parvati, as also of Siva. The unknown author of *Natankusa* is no doubt an erudite scholar in Bharata's *Natya Sastra* but some of his critical observations will have to be modified. Taking the present case, the inapplicability of the criticism will be clear if we recall cases like Dusyanta recapitulating before the Vidusaka the incidents of his meeting Sakuntala in verses like *Snigham viksitam* and *Darbhankurena*; and if he has to render these in *abhinaya*, he will naturally have, while being in his role and make-up of the male Dusyanata, to display all the feminine *bhavas* and *Anubhavas* of Sakuntala. Indeed it is this mastery of the whole art of expression that makes it possible for whole troupes of female actors, as the one figuring in the *Kuttanimata*, or for whole troupes of male actors, as in all *Bhagavata*-plays, to portray successfully any role, male or female.

This brings us to the proper perspective of what to do at the present time with this art of Sanskrit drama. What is of intrinsic and artistic value and intimately fused with the text of the Sanskrit plays and flows directly from the ancient production technique as seen in Bharata or even later texts should be preserved. The digressions in local language may be completely left out, if this is to be produced abroad, outside its Kerala-home, and it is not necessary to venture on the task of translating all the *Nirvahanas* and *Purusarthas* into Hindi. The preliminaries could be confined to the first show or reduced to the minimum by drastic slashing of the number of prayer verses etc. They may even be omitted except when some are specially interested in them. Music may be brought in tune with contemporary Carnatic or Hindustani style in its pure classical form and capable singers employed. Instead of the whole thing disappearing by its sheer prodigiousness, its sprawling out, and its overgrowths, let its essence be retained so that, by adopting its technique, not only the thirteen in its repertoire, but also several other classics of the Sanskrit theatre could be produced in the indigenous style all over the country. Our hopes are not airy, as the masters of the art who are participating in this Seminar are alive to the situation and willing to co-operate.