



Vidhyayana - ISSN 2454-8596

An International Multidisciplinary Peer-Reviewed E-Journal

www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

Indexed in: Crossref, ROAD & Google Scholar

Kathakali: Revival of a Narrative

Research Scholar

Jemily Jose

English Department,

School of Languages, Gujarat University

Jemily.jose@gmail.com

Ph:9825229280

Guide

Dr Dushyant Nimavat

English Department School of Languages,

Gujarat university

dushyantnimavat76@gmail.com

Ph:98254 78612



ABSTRACT

Katha means story and Kali stands for play¹. Kathakali is a dance form with roots in drama, featuring themes from Indian epics such as the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. Its elaborate make-up and hand gestures help identify characters, and it is accompanied by an orchestra including drums, cymbals, and gongs. Kathakali has been a part of Kerala's culture for over 400 years, with its birth resulting from political rivalry in the 17th century. The author's paper will explore the features and history of Kathakali as a dying form of drama and discuss whether it should be resurged, including interviews with Kathakali artists and reference to Phillip Zarrilli's book "Kathakali Dance-Drama: Where Gods and Demons Come to Play".

The technique of Kathakali includes a highly developed language of hand gesture, used to convey the story. The orchestra of a Kathakali performance includes two types of drums called Chenda and Maddalam accompanied by Elathalam (cymbals) and Chengila (gong). Usually two singers render the vocal support with songs sung in a style known as Sopanam.²

In around 1657, the king of Kottarakara asked the king of Calicut to send his dance troops for a temple function. However, the political rivalry of the chieftains the King of Calicut not only refused his request but also humiliated and insulted him. Resultant the political rivalry extended itself to the field art where we find the birth of this new art form of Kathakali.³

My paper addresses the theme whether this endangered art needs a revival narrative.

Additionally, the author's paper will examine the reasons behind the decline of Kathakali as a form of drama and whether efforts should be made to revive it and how. The paper will involve interviews with Kathakali artists and draw heavily from Phillip Zarrilli's book "Kathakali Dance-Drama: Where Gods and Demons Come to Play" for research.

¹ http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/19723/8/08_chapter%201.pdf

² <http://www.indiavideo.org/invis-dvds/kathakali-kalyanasougandhikam-part-1-3680.php#Desc>

³ Kathakali - An amazing Art form of Kerala (Part 1) [RED PIX] (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=63tKLX4Zkgo>)



Kathakali: revival of a narrative

Kathakali finds its space in the Indian classical dance category. It is a recognised form of dance of Kerala in South India and is now synonymous with being a cultural icon. The vibrant and colourful images of Kathakali welcome you to God's Own Country and offer a slice of culture where it appears be it tourism ads, posters, part of national song etc. However, as a research scholar my aim it to establish how the soul of Kathakali is in drama. My paper will aim to establish its ties with drama, look at how and why this is endangered art and what steps should be taken to resurge this art form. For my research, I have looked at various reference books and internet sources but to get to the true feel of the dance form I have interviewed two kathakali artists Shri Bhaskar Menon and Radha Bhaskar. Excerpts from their interview will be used to support my arguments in the paper.

Kathakali stems out of two earlier forms of enactment mainly Krishnattam and Ramanattam. As evident from the names both forms were dedicated to Lord Krishna and Lord Rama. However, when the main characters were not Krishna and Rama these names failed to encompass the essence of other characters and these names seemed inadequate. Hence, a new name was in order though this is not reason for the origin of the dance form. The history of Kathakali dates back to early 16th century. Kottarakkara Thampuran, the Raja of Kottarakkara is credited with this. The raja was insulted by his neighbouring king Zamorin of Calicut who refused to send his dance troupe and this made him initiate a parallel mode of entertainment, which he called Raamanaattam which was later transformed into Aattakatha, and yet later into Kathakali. ⁴

A Kathakali performance, like all classical dance arts of India, synthesizes music, vocal performers, choreography and hand and facial gestures together to express ideas.⁵ Kathakali is an admixture of nritta (pure dance), Nritya (expressional dance) and Natya (incorporate both Nritta and Nritya and has in addition and element of drama).⁶ (Kurup) . But then how does it fit into the category of drama? If you turn to any source to read about Kathakali, the most common title given to it is that it's a dance drama. The dance drama form is similar to that of an opera, it also combines elements of mime in it. The easy fit into the Nritya

⁴ <https://indianartz.com/2009/kathakali/origin-of-kathakali/>

⁵ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kathakali>

⁶ http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/19723/8/08_chapter%201.pdf



category does not make it pure dance and its imperative to see the elements that make it fit into the category of drama.

‘Katha’ literally means story and ‘kali’ means dance.⁷ The root of the word has encompassed both drama and dance. Now, Aristotle identifies six important elements of drama which include the following⁸ :

- Plot
- Character
- Theme/thought
- Dialogue/diction
- Music
- Spectacle

We can now examine Kathakali’s elements and whether it has these six elements that we find in drama. The first element to scrutinize is Plot which is given prime importance by Aristotle. The plot has a beginning, middle and end. Kathakali stories stem from religion and often the audience knows the story. These stories were part of epics like Mahabharat or Ramayan, parts of puranas were also included. Over five hundred kathakali plays are known to exist. The playwrights belonged to the upper caste, several of them were learned brahmins or rulers and hence it embodies a class consciousness which is even reflected in the language. Kathakali uses “high” Malayalam, which combines Sanskrit with vernacular Malayalam.⁹ Often this is cited as a reason that learned people were the ones who appreciated this art more. This observation will be further developed in the discourse of endangered art. Coming back to the argument that whether Kathakali has a plot it most definitely does.

⁷ <https://sophiesibjournal.wordpress.com/2009/03/09/mini-project-kathakali-dance-drama/>

⁸ http://ocw.usu.edu/Theatre_Arts/Understanding_Theatre/Huh__Theatre__The_Basics___Part_2__3.html

⁹ <http://disco.teak.fi/asia/kathakali-keralas-grandiose-dance-drama/>



Where Kathakali differs from other dance forms is that it is not and never can be a solo performance. The performance is a corroborative effort which includes the Rasika ‘the appreciator’ or ‘sahradya’, the artists, and the musicians, make-up artists and most importantly characters. Therefore, we see various characters for e.g. Kalyanasoungadhika has the characters of Bheem, Draupadi and Hanuman. There is an interaction between characters which help develops conflict and in turn develops the plot. These characters are categorised according to their make-up which includes green denoting a good character to black and red that shows an evil and ferocious character. “Characters that seem to have deep personalities and complex personalities are known as three dimensional characters. They may be good or evil, but if they are good, they probably have some failings. If they are evil, they may have a few redeeming qualities.”¹⁰ This complexity is also mirrored in by Kathakali make-up too, where there can be a combination of green and ‘Katti vesham’ which shows that the character is good but has a few flaws. The development of this point will be dealt in the part where Spectacle will be elaborated and discussed.

The third element that Aristotle requires of drama is Theme or thought. This is quite easy to spot in Kathakali since they are plays based on religion. The overriding thought of ‘Good triumphs over evil’ is seen in each performance.

Two singers ‘ponani’ or principal singer and ‘sinkidi’ sing the lyrics of the story that is enacted by the actors. The style of singing is Sopana.¹¹ The actors complimenting the singing also use Mudras to achieve dialogue. Twenty four main Mudras or hand gestures are used to convey thousands of words. Though the dialogue is not verbal the whole expression of eye, eyebrows, face and hands combine to communicate to the other character or audience. “The Mudras can be classified into four different groups: religious, mimetic, everyday life, and those describing abstract concepts.”¹² According to Bhaskar Menon, a renowned Kathakali exponent, sometimes there is a question-answer like interaction between the characters and if one does not question (due to internal rivalry or to pull someone’s leg) the other performer will be unable to carry forward his performance. He reminisces this with a lot nostalgia from the time he watched and performed Kathakali. This, therefore, fulfils the fourth criteria of drama i.e of dialogue or diction.

¹⁰ http://ocw.usu.edu/Theatre_Arts/Understanding_Theatre/Huh_Theatre_The_Basics_Part_2_3.html

¹¹ <https://sophiesibjournal.wordpress.com/2009/03/09/mini-project-kathakali-dance-drama/>

¹² <https://sophiesibjournal.wordpress.com/2009/03/09/mini-project-kathakali-dance-drama/>



Aristotle in his poetics mentions the importance of Music and during the time that he writes it already was an integral part of drama. Music is integral to all dance and so we see this in Kathakali performances. 'The rhythm of the orchestra controls the action and acts as a strong psychological stimulant, a somewhat unfair emotional trap' (Barba, Sanzenbach, p. 42). The musical instruments include Elathalam, Chenda, chengila, Maddalam and Iddakka. The musicians stand to the left of the stage. The percussion of the drums is indicative of the type of character that comes on to the stage. The rhythm of the instruments slow and the start to vigorous brings life on to the characters and combine into an inseparable performance of the text. There is an intense rapport between the lead singer and artist who know when to move to the next dialogue or scene; this makes everyone on stage to equally be a part of the performance. The instruments used in Kathakali are all handmade except the Conch shell which is used to indicate the entry of an important character or dramatic event.

What is attributed the least in Aristotles elements of drama is that of Spectacle and for Kathakali this is one of its main features. It's a highly stylised form of art, larger than life characters with costume and make-up to match. Kathakali achieves this element easily as the form itself embodies spectacle.

'In kathakali the make-up expresses a type of character and not an individual personality. The personal characteristics of the actor's face disappear under the layers of colours and designs. The point is to make the spectacle as impersonal as possible' (Barba, Sanzenbach, p. 44).¹³ Since the characters stem out of religious texts they can be categorised into Divine, human and demons.

The makeup along with the colour combination defines the character. For example all divine or noble characters have 'Paccha'(green) face make up. According to Radha Bhaskar the materials used are all natural products. The Manayola is a stone powdered to make yellow to this they add 'Neelam' to get the green colour. Coconut oil another natural ingredient is added to make it paste like. The red colour is obtained from a stone 'Chaayilyam'. Mrs Bhaskar also adds that since these are not ready products and are natural they cannot be prepared in advance. All of the makeup grinding begins before the performance. These natural products protect the artist from any harmful effects. Another stone, Chenchilyam is powdered

¹³ <https://sophiesibjournal.wordpress.com/2009/03/09/mini-project-kathakali-dance-drama/>



and applied in order to protect the skin from burns.¹⁴ The Chutti or the white ridge found at the edge of the face is also made from rice flour paste. The easy substitute for this in modern times is white paper pulp however Mr Bhaskar Menon says that the modern-day makeup and easier substitute have proven unsuccessful. The black sooth or kanmashi is used to line the eyes. Again, a natural product which is obtained from burning gingelli oil. The chutti around the face of the kathakali makes it a distinct feature of the dance drama art form. The artists believe that the white base of the chutti enhances the expressions of the lips and that of the face. The person who applies this is a specialist called Chuttikaran. The process of the makeup takes anywhere between 3 to 5 hours depending on the character. During the make up the artists often go to sleep. But veteran dancer Bhaskar Menon smiles and says ‘we do not sleep; we internalize the character’. When they wake up, they do so as a character. According to experts, the artist after makeup does not talk, their own character never surfaces if it does, they are not true artists.

The other types of makeup include ‘Katti’ or knife and ‘Kari’ which indicates the role of a villain. There could be a combination of colours (green, red and black) to indicate the complexity of the character. Some make up includes beard or Tadi wherein again the colour and type of beard indicates the type of character. The white beards indicate superhuman or good characters for example hanuman, black beards are indicative of hunters or primitive people and the red beards are clear sign of evil and bloodthirsty ones. The simplistic or less stylistic make up is found on women characters or brahmans or sages etc is called the ‘Minukku’. Along with the makeup the women characters dressing is also less voluminous compared to the male.

The spectacle just does not come from the makeup but the costume too. The male characters wear a voluminous costume. Layers and layers of thick cotton is tied around the waist to achieve the look. The reason for such a look is explained by Mrs Radha Bhaskar. She says that when the vision of how the Kathakali should look was visible to Vallathol who prayed for help on the visual, seated then on a seashore, he could only see it till the waist. How much ever he tried he could see nothing but ocean waves beyond the waist. Therefore, to imitate and simulate the waves this voluminous costume was fashioned. Along with this is heavy gilded wood ornaments are worn on the hands, neck and ears of the artist. Mr Bhaskar Menon says that the entire weight of the costume is around 20kgs. The dancer has to carry this weight and perform the entire night and hence physical strength and stamina is required. The crowning glory of a Kathakali is the

¹⁴ <https://soumyarajan.wordpress.com/2009/05/18/kathakali-make-up/>



keertam or the gilded wooden crown decorated with green and red stones. Some artists also wear silver nails on the left hand.

This highly complex and stylised makeup of the kathakali artist serves its purpose of transporting the audience from the current world to a mythical one. Though there is no elaborate stage or backdrop the characters themselves are enough to create that magic. Once the artist is ready the performance begins which could go way into the night lasting to wee hours of morning.

Each person involved is important and cannot be done away with. When the performance begins the artists stand behind a Trieshela which is a satin cloth, this serves as a curtain and is held by two people. Right from these to makeup artists the involvement, commitment of each is contributory to the success of the event. The role of the audience in this has equal importance as that of the artist. The audience does not remain a passive spectator but is elevated to the place of a connoisseur. There is a symbiotic relation between the performer and the artist where the artist is encouraged and stimulated by the connoisseur.

The ideal connoisseur is knowledgeable in Sanskrit, enculturated into the finest nuances of each poetic text, and able to appreciate and criticize each performer's style and approach to performing particular roles. Today he is known as a rasika ('taster of rasa') or sahrdaya—one whose heart/mind (hrdaya) is so attuned and able to respond intuitively to a performance that he is able to 'take away so much'. (Zarrilli, Kathakali Dance-Drama: Where Gods and Demons Come to Play)

According to Radha Bhaskar and Bhaskar Menon the 'knowing audience' act as critics and critique the performances informing the Guru of the levels of the artists. This motivating factor is something each artist looks forward to from their performance.

The third and important aspect of Kathakali is its patronage. Kathakali when it began had a lot patronage from kings to high cast rulers and/ or landlords. Their interest in this performance art gave an impetus to the art form. However, Zarilli in his book "Kathakali Dance-Drama : Where Gods and Demons Come to Play" mentions the decline of this patronage in great detail which my paper will not go into further. Some of the few reasons cited by him are included in the following insert :

"Kathakali was given birth, nurtured, patronized, and increasingly refined by its traditional patrons— those 'non-polluting' high-caste ruling and/or landholding extended families, especially titled royal lineages of



Nayars (Samantans) and the highest ranking Namboodiri brahmins. These castes were most directly charged with and invested in the sensibilities and socio-political order reflected in the epic and puranic literatures enacted on the kathakali stage". (Zarrilli)

With the influx of the British colonies a more modern English education became more sought after. This education gave the generation an opportunity to make change in the socio – economic status but this change started to see the decline of Kathakali. Zarrilli also details in the book Kathakali Dance Drama: Where Gods and Demons Come to play various reasons for the further decline of the dance form which encompass changes in social customs like marriage, legal reforms, political conditions etc.¹⁵ The decline of Kathakali can be attributed in part to the changing social and economic conditions in Kerala, which have led to a decline in patronage for traditional arts and a shift towards more commercial forms of entertainment. The impact of legal reforms that have affected the traditional system of patronage. Despite these challenges, the future of Kathakali seems to have a silver lining.

The art form continues to attract new audiences both in India and abroad, and that new generations of performers are finding new ways to interpret and innovate within the tradition. It is important to preserve the cultural heritage and spiritual significance of Kathakali, and continue to engage with the art form in a thoughtful and respectful way.

Kathakali is not simply a form of entertainment, but a deeply spiritual and philosophical practice that reflects the cultural values and beliefs of the people of Kerala.

¹⁵ Page 30 (Zarrilli, Kathakali Dance-Drama : Where Gods and Demons Come to Play) by Phillip Zarrilli



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