

The Changing Scenario of Kathakali on Modern Stage

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Abstract

Kathakali has undergone many changes through different phases of transition. The major changes are in the areas of themes elements of stage in the process of on stage editing or manodharma and different constituents of Abhinaya including the Rasas. These changes have been made in in order to suit the requirements of modern stage and cater to the sensibilities of modern day viewer.

KEYWORDS: Temple classical dance, Naatyaasthram, Geethagovindam, Percussion Instruments, Abhinaya

Introduction

Nowadays Kathakali encounters several problems in its production and presentation from its emergence on the modern stage century's back. This is a vital condition of its transition from the traditional theatre to the contemporary stage. As classism defines, there is no ancient or perfect art, which should not be opened to refinement of technique or adaptation to the new context. The art Kathakali has synthesized the finest points of Indian histrionics and the power and vigour of the culture of the people. The very dynamism of this tradition is its capacity to change and adapt. Even though Kathakali went through many vicissitudes for the last few centuries, its inner viability and adaptability to keep itself as a vibrant and living form of cultural expression remains unchanged. In the Kerala Kalamandalam, Malayalam poet Vallathol Narayana Menon brought about a few changes by way of stream living certain aspects of its technique and interpretations as a part of the renaissance of the art in the late thirties. The veteran Gurus in different parts of Kerala followed the same throughout Kathakali's history. The emphasis that these attempts are done by those who have had a deep and sympathetic understanding of the art or who have been well-versed in its complex technique.

Phases of Transition.

In Kathakali, the matter is that in what matter the changes are to be brought about. To make an attempt convincing on the contemporary stage should be accompanied by a serious effort to understand its nature and purpose. The transition of any great classical art demands this. For example, Bharatha in the Natyasasthra, which traverses the whole gamut of dramaturgy, emphasizes the norms of appreciation by the patrons along with laying down the canons of Natya and the accomplishments of the artists. As Kathakali represents a distinct, evolved classical tradition, any change which is effected in order to fit it on the modern stage should be effected from within the tradition. For example, the 'Noh' and 'Kabuki' (the comparable dramatic traditions in Japan) have successfully adapted themselves to a stage which has been evolved to suit their special requirements.

In case of Kathakali this adaptation has not happened to any remarkable extent. Kathakali resembling earlier Krishnanaattam and Koodiyaattam has developed as a religious dance retaining its conspicuous ritualistic content even though patronized by Princes and Landholding chieftains. The themes drawn from the puranas, symbolic aspects like the Thodayam, the Purappadu (an initial dance of benediction from behind the curtain) or opening dance that follows it, the recital of verses from the 'Geethagovindam', the Dhanasi (the concluding prayer) all emphasizes its religious character and high art in dedication. A traditional performance of the Kathakali produces in the spectators the impact of a vivid religious experience. The acceptance of the art implies the acceptance of its symbolic purpose.

The performance of Kathakali on the village green under the canopy of the starlit sky against swaying palms and luscious nature or in the carved corridors of temples adds to its qualities of grandeur and mystery. The art merges unobtrusively with the background and the effect is one of an organic harmony. The orchestra from where rhythms of dance seem to raise, the characters emerging from the shades of night, the audience crowding around the bell metal lamp, all seem to merge to be integral in one magic circle of light created by the living flame. The unique feature of Kathakali is this achievement of oneness, which is the acme of artistic experience.

All the components of Kathakali were born of the logic circumstances and were therefore harmonized as soul and body. The utmost importance is that this logic is to be preserved in any authentic presentation of Kathakali. Otherwise, what in the original form was an intimate and rich artistic experience is reduced to a mere spectacle. The unity which was a unique achievement of the Kathakali theatre is broken in several ways. The orchestra, dancers and the audience drift apart, and the harsh electric lights, rudely thrown about, destroy half the beauty of the art.

Stage

The Kathakali stage resembles Shakespearean stage which was angular in shape. In Shakespearean stage chorus in Henry V apologises to the audience for depicting mighty events on the wooden O, around which the spectators sat close to the actors, highly participating in the actions. For the performance of the Kathakali, the picture-box high stage developed during the European renaissance is strictly unsuited. Kathakali is an art which rests in rapport and close communion between the dancers and the audience. The realization of the rasa which is the basic principle of Indian dramaturgy is almost impossible in the new rigid proscenium stage which creates a gulf between the dancers and the audience seated in rows in depth. The Koothambalam (dance halls) in some of Kerala temples like Vadakkumnaadhan temple in Trichur, the Harippad temple and the Thiruvalla SreeVallabha temple points out the intimate character of the artistic experience which was intended to be derived from a close proximity and kinship between dancers and the audience. The realization of the rasa is an authentic experience both for the dancer and for the audience. Who are brought to the very threshold of the partnerships in the play. The communion between the dancers and spectators where the character of the rasa evoked by the dancer is conveyed and shared with the spectators is the essence of the artistic experience in Kathakali theatre in its traditional settings.

The near identity reached between the dancers and the audience in traditional Indian theatre is comparatively a new development in western theatre. The western theatre is now trained to recapture through experimentation the basic Indian dramatic conception 'Unity'. 'Theatre in the round' is being increasingly recognized in the west as more artistically satisfying as compared to the picture-box proscenium stage which keeps apart the players and audience. The other theatrical devices being tried to achieve the integration include 'entry' through the audience which is used to practice in Kathakaliduring special situations. For example, Roudra Bheema chasing Dussasana, (Duryodhanavadham) Sudamaas approach to Sreekrishnas mansion, (Kucelavrutham) the pursuit of sage Durvaasa by Sudarsana (Ambareeshacharitham) and the lamentation of the serpent Karkodaka burning in forest fire contrived amidst the audience in Nalacharitham.

In modern theatre a raised stage is essential for presenting Kathakali where the audience sits on chairs in rows, but so high as to exaggerate the distance between the dancers and the audience. In Kathakali the foot-work is very important and is not desirable to have a stage which keeps the eye level solely on a line with the feet of the dancer. A dance form which lays great stress on the total harmony and on the dancers transubstantiation through a combination of several elements like the Ahaarya, Abhinaya, Nrithya, Nritha, seems to be ridiculous. A stage with an elevation of one-and-a half feet will be satisfactory and it should stand projected, preferably with a semi circular front so that the audience can be seated on three sides. The picture-box theatre which fails to recreate the logical conditions of the traditional theatre loses its intimate character of the magnificent dance based on an extraordinary intensity of experience. The performances presented in the open air on a ground level stage with the audience sitting close to the dancers are memorable for their visual beauty and the impact they leave on the audience.

There are some criticisms like the singers and drummers distract attention from the dance itself and may therefore be removal from the stage to provide an unobstructed background for the dancers. The orchestra in Kathakali is not a mere 'accompaniment' but is an integral part of the dance in a vital sense. The rich poetry which forms its music provides the dance all its suggestive quality and imagery, and the musician is the director of the play with a decisive influence and controls over the whole tenor of the dance its tempo, its elaborations and the duration of the dance drama. For the Chenda and Maddalam poetry rhythms are a part of the whole being of Kathakali. In no other classical dance of India is the orchestra so deeply integrated with the dance as in Kathakali. To take the orchestra off the stage means that the dance loses its very life. The orchestra on the stage emphasizes the unity of the play and heightens the effect of the marvelous transformation of the dancers from the human to the super human and their extra ordinary actions. The answer to the criticism is not in shifting the orchestra from the stage, but in evolving new organic relationships on the stage itself which firmly keeps the oneness. Kathakali, unlike certain other dance forms, is not a recital but a rendering in ballet form where all components play an equally important role in keeping the sense of unity.

Traditional and modern lighting on stage

Considering Kathakali performances on the modern stage, a controversy that emerged was whether the traditional lamp should not be wholly discarded, in favour of electric lights. The argument forwarded is that the light supplied by the lamp is not sufficient for large audiences and that it obstructs the view. The lamp has a definite function in the rendering of a Kathakali dance apart from being a thing of beauty marking all auspicious ceremonies in India. The lamp is the focal point of all actions on the stage and has great relevance to the determination of the dancer's postures, movements, and his stances at the conclusion of each dance cycle called Kalasam. It has a coordinating and controlling function in relation to the dance patterns and even the absence of the lamp makes many a dancer feel uncertain of his position. By training and practice the dancer's eye level is conditioned by the height of the lamp. The live flame of the lamp satisfies a distinct purpose in abhinaya which is an important aspect of the Kathakali dance drama by making it beautiful and vibrant in its varied nuances. In the Thiranokku or Curtain-look which is a unique theatrical device for introducing prodigious heroes, the lamp flame swayed by the Thiraseela illumines their gorgeously made-up faces and shows with great intensity their basic nature or swabhava and the subtle variations of the rasas. The traditional lamp in Kathakali provides a point of concentration which helps immensely in enhancing the dramatic effect. As the intention is to highlight the intensity of action in extraordinarily powerful situations, electric light can't be substituted effectively. For example, in the rendering of the situations like Roudrabheema in his lionine rage, slaying fiendish Dussasana, God Narasimha manifesting himself from within the pillar etc. lamp is an indispensable condition for the rendering of abhinaya and the full realization of rasa in its infinite nuances.

Rasas: The Essence of Abhinaya.

Rasa is an impersonal delicate quality produced by the abhinaya of the face, through the glances of the eyes, movement of the lips, the nostrils and cheeks. It is a combination of satwikaabhinaya and aangikaabhinaya. The nine rasas themselves are accompanied by the many vyabhicharya bhavas which give them their beauty and fullness. The abhinaya in Kathakali is Naatyadharmi that is creative and aesthetic.

In Natyasasthra the erotic sentiment is light green, white represents the comic, the pathetic sentiment ash colored, the furious sentiment red, the terrible sentiment black, and finally the marvelous sentiment is represented by yellow. The facial make-up in Kathakali indicating the qualities of the characters is based on symbolic value of colors. Kathakali exploits the transforming qualities of colors, in its make-up and costumes for achieving similarity with the legendary heroes and gods who are the 'actors' in the drama. The colors of the facial paint help rasaabhinaya, the ahaarya is a grant essay in colours is assembled with great artistic sense and contributes to the fashioning of fabulously impressive characters. The gold, red, white, yellow and blue, in patterns of sweeping and extremely delicate movements, when seen in the light of the dancing flame provide an unforgettable magical quality.

Manodharma: Editing and revamping on stage

Night-long performances are unrealistic except in special situations which bring the problem of editing and timing of the plays. The reason behind this tendency is to 'leave' it to the actors to edit a play on 'the stage'. This provided very undesirable results-haphazard, disjointed presentation of plays with no organic sequence in the situations unfolded. Editing of Kathakali requires a deep understanding of literature, of the art and competence to provide guidance to the dancers.

Kathakali has lived in a 'closed' society by habit. It is a synthesis of several arts and its extreme stylization puts it beyond 'informed' appreciation of the majority rather than a deep rooted susceptibility to the divine and heroic lore and the mysterious pageantry of the dance. Kathakali lacks 'preparation' which is needed for its aesthetic enjoyment.

The quality of manodharama is a unique feature of Kathakali. The pattern of action is determined by the swabhava of the characters. Based on his understanding and study, the dancer has the freedom to display his originality. Even outstanding performers lacks the ability for such creativity ; being limited to what has been learned from the guru, the characters, presented as mere types, are found to lack individuality.

New Themes

There is rare scope for experimentation because of an unholy propensity for repetition, combined with appreciation expressed in intensely personal and nostalgic terms. New Kathakali plays are seldom written and yet many fine themes in the puranas can be tapped for the Kathakali stage. Also, episodes outside the puranas by their unfamiliar nature may be lending themselves to presentation in Kathakali. These themes include history, Buddhist lore, and Tagore's dramas, Vikramadithya's tales and so on. New theme such as SreeYesudevacharitham, Magdalanamariyam, and Doctor Foust is successfully experimented on present stage.

Conclusion

A question exists whether Kathakali can be a medium for projecting contemporary life and aspiration on the modern stage. Considering modern themes, the incompatibility of make-up and costume will be an adverse factor. Moreover, the technique of the Kathakali can admirably be used in the presentation of situations and vignettes from the rich and varied Indian life. In modern stage many Indian dancers have drawn heavily on Kathakali's superb technique in their portrayals. The classical Kathakali art should respond to the new social urges. It is important for the new themes to get fitted in to the ethos of the dance. There is a need for research and experimentation for a creative theatre. We need a concerted effort to evolve a progressive stage craft which uses to advantage the new technical skills being available, without hindering the ethos of the dance.

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