

Re - imagining Gollabhāma as a woman of resistance

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About Author

Devi Girish is a Kuchipudi performer who has an accentuating academic as well as professional record. She is working as Educator at the Department of Kuchipudi, University of Silicon Andhra, California. She is an Empaneled artist of Ministry of Culture, Govt. of India. Devi has developed a curriculum of interdisciplinary attitude for Dance as General Elective for the Graduation and Post-Graduation courses of National Institute of Fashion Technology, Kerala. She has formulated a consolidated interdisciplinary curriculum for Kuchipudi for the Department of Dance, IIIT Basara. Devi was invited as an Expert Committee member of the NIFT, Kerala. Devi continues her research along with performances and teaching, she combines artistic presentation with an academic bend. With this combination, she explores the intricacies of Kuchipudi by relating it to the theoretical constructs. Devi, along with her husband Girish Chandra has created their own niche in the field of Kuchipudi tracing, together a performing career of more than 10 years and individually for more than 15 years

Abstract

“Re - imagining Gollabhama as a woman of resistance”

This paper ‘reads’ Gollakalāpam and its practise as ‘social text’. The effect of power relations, exclusion, inclusion and marginalisation against women in the society was also mirrored in performing arts tradition. This in turn moulded and structured the art forms to illustrate the way these aspects construct, devise and provide insights into the performances as ‘social texts’. Gollakalāpam is a text of resistance that questions the gender issues, caste-class hierarchies and elevates the suppressed castes as well as women. It appears to have evolved as the result of a popular response to the social problems of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The thrust of Gollakalāpam as a social protest and satire is to serve as the voice of women, through which they attempt to eradicate the discrimination based on class, caste and gender. As performance, Gollakalāpam provides a space for the lower castes and women to raise their voice against the social discrimination. The gender issues and power politics of the privileged class can be clearly perceived in the appropriation and suppression of the social frustration of the lower castes through the performance of the dance and also in its text. The other major issue the

text addresses is the gender inequality that is prevailing in the society. It takes an important turn where the text substantiates a rebellious Gollabhāma and the performance portrays female impersonation of Gollabhāma (the role was enacted by men in women attire). Even when Gollakalāpam is said to have reflected problems faced by women, the submissiveness being the nature of women is portrayed throughout the text. In the graph of the text, one could notice sudden change in Gollabhāma's attitude from rebellious to polite. At the end, the text as well as the performance graph portrays a sudden change in Gollabhāma's attitude from rebellious to polite. Also, one can perceive the appropriation of divinity in both text and performance where concluding statement asserts that the golla community is the one which traces the lineage of Lord Krishna. This paper argues that some of the major gender issues discussed in the text, position of Gollabhama in the social context and how the performance has been overruled in the name of divinity. Though the text is considered as one of the strongest literary genres under the dance scholarship that reflects the protest against the established religious beliefs, the performance would appropriate all the arguments put forth as 'divine'.

Keywords

1. Gollakalāpam
2. Gender issues
3. Divinity
4. Power politics
5. Appropriation
6. Performance



Dance forms often use themes, myths and histories of religion which comprises history of its discourse. These ideas do not belong to any individual as they are re-worked over a period of time by the practicing performers and choreographers of that form. Thus, the evolution of a dance form becomes part of the cultural heritage and a dance 'text' becomes a potential subject for further development, like any other creative form. Then, the choreographers rely on the response of the readers/spectators to modify their codes and references. The traditional forms constitute a separate language of their own, embodying a range of dance styles, each possessing a distinguished aesthetic quality. Very often controversies arise when a genre extends its boundary. In such cases, the socio-political conditions that monitor a dance form are of importance. Concepts like 'genre' and 'style' make the cultural codes manifested in a dance. These concepts may generate formulae and clichés in dance form, but sometimes they help the re-making of genre (Janet Adshead and Lansdale:1998).

My attempt in this paper is to ‘read’ *Gollakalāpam* and its practice as ‘social text’. The effect of power relations - exclusion, inclusion and marginalization against women in the society was also mirrored in performing arts tradition. This in turn molded and structured the art forms to illustrate the way these aspects construct, devise and provide insights into the performances as ‘social texts’. *Gollakalāpam* is a text of resistance that questions the gender issues, caste-class hierarchies and elevates the suppressed castes as well as women. It appears to have evolved as the result of a popular response to the social problems of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The thrust of *Gollakalāpam* as a social protest and satire is to serve as the voice of women, through which they attempt to eradicate the discrimination based on class, caste and gender. As performance, *Gollakalāpam* provides a space for the lower castes and women to raise their voice against the social discrimination. The gender issues and power politics of the privileged class can be clearly perceived in the appropriation and suppression of the social frustration of the lower castes through the performance of the dance and also in its text. The other major issue the text addresses is the gender inequality that is prevailing in the society. It takes an important turn where the text substantiates a rebellious Gollabhāma and the performance portrays female personification of Gollabhāma (the role was enacted by men in women attire). Even when *Gollakalāpam* is said to have reflected problems faced by women, the submissiveness being the nature of women is portrayed throughout the text. In the graph of the text, one could notice sudden change in Gollabhāma’s attitude from rebellious to polite. At the end, the text as well as the performance graph portrays a sudden change in Gollabhāma’s attitude from rebellious to polite. Also, one can perceive the appropriation of divinity in both text and performance where concluding statement asserts that the golla community is the one which traces the lineage of Lord Krishna.

This paper argues that some of the major gender issues discussed in the text, position of Gollabhāma in the social context and how the performance has been overruled in the name of divinity. Though the text is considered as one of the strongest literary genres under the dance scholarship that reflects the protest the established religious beliefs, the performance would appropriate all the arguments put forth as ‘divine’.

If an element of a performance – a gesture, a movement or a sound – is taken as a text, then each element can be read, singly or in units. This would be the construction of meaning based on single elements and on combinations of elements. It also includes larger structures working across the sections of the discourse which the dance sets up and becomes evident only in performance. de Marinis says that the theatrical performance can be conceived as

A complex discursive event, resulting from the interweaving of several expressive elements organised into various codes and sub codes (which together constitute a textual structure) through which acts of communication and signification takes place, while also taking into account the different pragmatic contexts of enunciation

(1–2).

This view makes it clear that the notion of a performance text may be considered as the theoretical concept of the performance.

‘Reading’ a Performance

If every ‘text’ incorporates in itself a ‘discourse’ then the ‘reader’ gets a chance to understand or read the ‘text’ in the larger framework of discourse. It makes the reader an active participant in the construction of meaning. But this view was unacceptable to the critics in Western countries till the late twentieth century; they argued against the interpretative reading of any form. According to Barthes “text is permanently unstable” (Janet Adshead and Lansdale:1998). Since the text is unstable, it can yield multiple interpretations simultaneously or at different points of time in consonance with the cultural, social and political preoccupations of the people. Reading dance opens up the study of issues like the idea of the unconsciousness, formation of ideologies, examination of the hegemonic structures and so on which would extend the scope of incorporation of concepts to ‘read’ the dance scholarship.

Dance as ‘Discourse’

Discourse is understood as a system of statements within which and by which the world and its realities could be known. It provides a system of representation, which in the Foucauldian sense encompasses a wider area of social knowledge. By discourse, Foucault means:

A group of statements which provide a language for talking about – a way of representing the knowledge about – about a particular topic at a particular historic moment. Discourse is about the production of knowledge than language (Taylor and Simeon: 2001).

Discourse could be a constructive concept, since it constructs a topic and accurately defines and produces objects of knowledge. It governs the way a topic can be debated and reasoned about. It also influences ideas, which can be put into practice and used to regulate the conduct of others (Taylor and Simeon: 2001). Through discourse, Foucault tries to analyze the exclusion and marginalization involved in a social and cultural system. He also identifies the relationship between power and knowledge which classifies individual subjects (Pramod K Nayyar: 2002). Foucault extends discourse to include the exercise and practice of power and its application and effects. He maintains that there are various complex processes through which the individuals/subjects are constituted as effects and objects of power. He argues that power is not the possession of a group or an individual, but a network spread through society. The individual is both the effect of power and the element of its articulation; in other words, the individual is the site and instrument of power (Pramod K Nayyar: 2002).

Discourse could also be understood as analyzing the dispersal of power. It acts as a system which perceives normality and functions as a structure pertaining to social norms. As far as the society is concerned, it

defines the concepts of exclusion and marginalization. Some sectors, communities and perceptions of the society are excluded or denied certain 'rights' in the society; the normality of life is different for them. This exclusion is dependent on certain power structures prevalent in the society. But, as Foucault concedes, in every society the production of a discourse is controlled, selected, organized and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off the threat to its powers.

Discourse can thus explain the development of a 'social text', which incorporates all the hierarchical and hegemonic systems prevailing in the society. These traits could be easily found in performing arts since they reflect the society. These features of discourse would help to analyze the dance form, *Gollakalāpam* and their practice as 'social text'. The effect of power relations, of exclusion, inclusion and marginalization in the society which often molded and structured the art forms would be studied to illustrate the way these aspects construct, devise and provide insights into the performances as 'social texts'.

***Gollakalāpam* as Social Text**

The composition of *Gollakalāpam* is considered a variation of *Bhāgavatha Mela Natakam*, an offspring of *Kūcipūḍi* performing tradition. *Kalāpam* is described as "a rural mind's master stroke". *Gollakalāpam* is also known as "*gopika viprasambhashanam*" or "*gopikaviprasamvada*" (Kothari: 2001). The word *golla* refers to milkmaid and *kalāpam* is interpreted as argument. In short, the dance drama *Gollakalāpam* deals with an argument between a milkmaid and a Brāhmin, which is of high philosophical value. The text as such has many versions and many authors have attempted to re – write "*Gollakalāpam*" or "*Gollaveshakatha*" (Kothari: 2001).

Gollakalāpam is also considered as a text of resistance that questions caste-class hierarchies and elevates the suppressed castes as well as women. The discourse of *Gollakalāpam* combines philosophy and science, and the enactment is done in such a way that Gollabhāma, a milkmaid, interrogates a brāhmin, and the content includes the discussion of religious and philosophical matters. Among dance pieces in *Kūcipūḍi*, *Gollakalāpam* has an extraordinary offbeat theme. It appears to have evolved because of a popular response to the social problems of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

It is believed that the text of *Gollakalāpam* was primarily written by Tharigonda Vengamamba (eighteenth century) and later adapted by Bhagavatulu Ramayya (nineteenth century) to be included in the *Kūcipūḍi* repertoire (Radheshyam, 2014 pc). But neither the comparison of these two texts nor their performances have been done by any scholars till date. Vengamamba was a pioneer among women writers in the eighteenth century. She is said to be a devadasi/courtesan, who raised her voice against brāhmins and discussed the issues faced by suppressed castes as well as women. However, the adaptation of the text by Bhāgavatulu Ramayya, a brāhmin, could be read as appropriation of the resistance symbolized in the dance form.

In its performative aspect, it is evident that the feelings of the deprived classes find an opportunity to register their protest through the performance. An interesting fact is that the *Kūcipūḍi* performers who were Brāhmins

chose to perform *Gollakalāpam*. This suggests the existence of hierarchy within Brāhmin caste. Brāhmins who were associated with dance and music (*Nata, Vita, Gayakas*) were considered to be lower to other Brāhmins and were treated as ‘*Pankthi Bahyas*¹’ and this performance is regarded as a sweet revenge for them. This manifests the power play within the caste system. The suppression of ‘others’ within the caste indicates the whole notion of validating the ‘power’ by repression. The performance begins with Gollabhāma’s entry onto the stage and she happens to meet a Brāhmin who provokes her into an argument. To brāhmin’s questions regarding the whereabouts of Gollabhāma, she replies that she belongs to the *Yadava* community. She emphasizes that she is a Golla and boasts that she sells milk in various parts of the country like Gandhara, Kamboja, Saurashtra, Kashi, Malava, Panchala, Magada, Keralam, Dravidadesa and so on (Kothari: 2001). The Brāhmin is irked by her answers and to overcome his irritation, enquires about her birth and station in life. Gollabhāma understands his trick and retaliates that all human beings are born equal. But the Brāhmin argues that even though human beings are born equal they are as different from each other as the different parts of a tree, such as a flower, a fruit etc, which sprout from the same seed. Thus, one is a cowherd, and another a brāhmin. Gollabhāma refutes this by saying that Matanga sage was an untouchable by birth, but became a *rishi/sage* because he practiced *tapas/penance*. She asks that if *tapas* could make one a sage then what was so special about being born a brāhmin. She strengthens her argument by quoting verses from certain scriptures like, *Janmana jaayathe sudrah* (Anuradha 2008). She also makes it clear that even by performing the *Pancha Maha Yagnas*, or the five important *Vedic* sacrifices namely *Deva, Pitru, Bhuta, Manushya* and *Brahma*, one could not become a brāhmin. Gollabhāma also throws light on the spiritual concept behind the caste formation.

After extensive explanation about universal human behavior, Gollabhāma shifts her focus of discourse from human beings to nature. She attempts to interconnect them by substantiating that every human should inculcate the fundamental lessons of life from nature. She points out that an earthworm is born and lives in the muddy sludge; even then the worm is alive. But, human beings cannot always conceive and react in such extreme situations. They try to find their comfort zones to be cocooned in them. Here, Gollabhāma tries to motivate human beings to come out of their comfort zones and face the realities of life. She cites the example of the lotus which grows in muddy water but contains not a drop of that water in it. This could be regarded as a fine example of the earlier discussion “*Naathanaasthi..... Tasmaath jagrutah jagrutah*”. While elaborating the significance of a sacrificial attitude in life, Gollabhāma quotes the example of the silk worm which sacrifices its life for patterning silk. But, in real, the irony lies in the reversal action of mankind. They try to sacrifice others’ happiness in order to ensure one’s own happiness. But the accumulator does not understand that this kind of happiness does not last long (Radheshyam 2014 pc).

In order to prove the oneness in humankind, Gollabhāma discusses *Pindoopathi* or procreation. She describes the process of human birth from the time of conception to the delivery of the baby. She dwells deeply

¹ They were not allowed to dine with ‘other’ brāhmins

on this topic and gives details of the child's growth in the womb. She says that the child in the womb is like a *brahmajnani* or one who knows everything about the world. The process is the same for every child whether a Brāhmin or shudra.

Praraabtha vasamuna eereethi garbhamuna

Daari teliyathu neeramulanchaku

Daarichuupunu Srihari.

Gollabhāma tries to explain that the process of birth for each person is the same, irrespective of their caste or religion; yet, as soon as the baby enters the world, it is distinguished from its fellow beings in terms of class, caste, creed, religion and so on.

Being a social protest and satire, *Gollakalāpam* articulated the voice of the muted. *Gollakalāpam* reflected upon social, class, caste problems and women centric issues. The outcastes, who were suppressed and downtrodden, were given a voice to speak out in the society. The reason to select golla to debate with brāhmin could be a shrewd strategy which allowed the author to trace the lineage of Krishna. This in turn projected many virtues of the golla community.

Gollakalāpam attempted to eradicate the discrimination based on class, caste and gender. The performance provides a temporary empowerment of the suppressed castes and women. But in the performance, the knowledge attained by Gollabhāma remains bizarre and unexplained. Initially, Gollabhāma appears illiterate, but in the concluding stage she seems to have the necessary authority and knowledge to argue and substantiate questions of philosophy and life sciences. Here, she is portrayed to have possessed some supernatural powers!!!. The 'divinity' attributed to the golla community through Krishna's lineage and the knowledge acquired through previous births² are stated as the reasons for her knowledge; however, they do not support the discourse but instead contradict it. In discourse, according to the behavior of the form, the nature of the content differs. For instance, the content of the form of knowledge – the scientific and the mythological – might be the same, but its nature changes depending on the behavior of the form. In this case, the rational thinking of science excludes the assumption of upper-caste supremacy by proving it wrong, but the myths could include the same assumption since these beliefs are validated in myth. But the role of power is always associated with rational thinking; since science includes rationality and excludes unscientific applications, power resides in science. This compels the exclusion of the unscientific notions from the scene. Thus, even though the 'text' tries to uphold certain issues, it also provides certain loopholes to eradicate it.

² In the personal interview with Vedantham Radheshyam, these reasons were stated as the basis for gollabhama's knowledge

The Gollabhāma's scientific explanation of *Pancha Kosamulu* or five different parts and their functions in the human body amuses Brāhmin as well as spectators. She describes that *pancha kosamulu* functions in the same pattern for all human beings, irrespective of their caste, creed and religion. With these scientific and spiritual explanations, she tries to convince Brāhmin about the equality among human beings. In order to disprove her arguments, Brāhmin incorporates the discussion of four-fold caste system of - Brāhmin, Kshatriya, Shudra, Vyshya. Gollabhāma. He elaborates that the caste system was a byproduct of the society and evolved over a period of time. Here, she substantiates her point by quoting the verse,

Brahmano mukhaanaasith, Baahuraajanyakruthaha

Uuruthat vaishanava, Padyagum sudramajaayathe

The meaning of the verse is that each caste has evolved out of the body of *Virat Swaroop* of Shriman Narayana or Vishnu. It is said that from the face of the Lord evolved Brāhmins, from his shoulders Kshatriyas were born, his thighs became the birth place of Vaishyas and from his feet Shudras were born. With this quote Gollabhāma explains the importance of each caste, saying that each organ of the body has its due importance and one cannot differentiate among them. Likewise, every caste formed in the society has got its own importance. Unfortunately, the hierarchy that has evolved in the caste system is the evil product of the society. She concludes that all are one with the Supreme Being as emphasized in the *Advaita* philosophy.

The most significant arguments in *Gollakalāpam* are those dealing with the caste discrimination and the superiority of Brahmanism. Even though he tries to defend himself throughout the discussion but Gollabhāma criticize and demolish him at every defense. She says that the performance of the *Vedic* rites makes a Brāhmin a *Dwija* or twice born. By imbibing and imparting *Vedic* knowledge, he becomes a *Vipra*, but not a brāhmin or one who knows the Brahman, the omnipotent spirit. She concludes this argument by saying that it is the self-realization or attainment of knowledge by one's self that makes one a brāhmin.

There are many other facts which the milkmaid tries to explain other than the caste and class discrimination. She elaborates upon the hypocritical nature of mankind. Human beings pretend to be spiritual and virtuous, but are selfish and spiteful. Though brāhmins preach *ahimsa* or non-violence, but at the same time they offer animal sacrifice at temples and during the *yagnas*. Then, she moves on to criticize *agnideva* or the God of fire, who yearns for the life of innocent animals like goat or hen. On contrary, she upholds her own caste by explaining that golla community is the only means through which brāhmins could perform *yagna*. As milk, ghee etc are supplied by them and they are the key ingredients to perform *yagna*. The other issue the text addresses is the gender inequality that is prevailing in the society. The patriarchal nature of the society has deprived women of many rights and restricted their freedom of expression. The powerful character of Gollabhāma has inspired women to take the revolutionary step of choosing to come out of their forced seclusion. Ironically, though the *Kalapam* portrayed a rebellious Gollabhāma, the role was enacted by men in women attire.

It can be argued that, by choosing the golla community rather than any other and tracing its lineage to Krishna, an Aryan god, the author of *Gollakalāpam* is reinforcing the existing power structure while appearing to question it. The way Gollabhāma projects her own caste's virtues seems contradictory to her claims of equality. Even when *Gollakalāpam* is said to have reflected the problems faced by women, the submissive nature of women is portrayed somewhere throughout the text. In the graph of the text one could notice a sudden change in Gollabhāma's attitude, from rebellious to polite. At the end, she tremendously changes her attitude and admits that the Brāhmin may not take her seriously since she is a 'woman', who has spoken about all these philosophies. But on the other hand, this could be perceived as a satirical note.

As a performance, *Gollakalāpam* provides a space for the lower castes to raise their voice against the social discrimination. The power politics of the privileged class can be clearly perceived in the appropriation and suppression of the social frustration of the lower castes through the performance of the dance and in its text. The ploy of power is employed in a highly spirited manner which depicts the exclusion of a certain community or gender in the performance. But, the form had tried to bring those unnoticed aspects into the limelight and discussed them throughout the performance. On contrary, the form has been appropriated by privileged castes perceiving their feisty resistance

Controversies and confusions apart, this text is considered as one of its kind which stood up in the society against conventional themes. The text was written at a crucial stage of history, when the state experienced much political and social turmoil. The social, political and cultural milieu has influenced the performative tradition to come up with an exceptional theme like *Gollakalāpam*. This is considered one of the strongest literary genres under the dance scholarship, which reflects the protest the established religious beliefs.

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