



ROLE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF KRISHNANATTAM IN PERFORMING TRADITIONAL ARTS

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Abstract : *Krishnanattam is a dance drama derived from the Attakathai written by Zamaorian king of Calicut. This visual art was established on the basis of Krishnagiti, a poetry collection. Manaveda, who was a passionate devotee of Krishna said to have been forced this dance drama and named it on the devotion to lord Krishna. The Ithivritha (plot) comprises of eight parts extending from Lord Krishna's Avathara(birth) to his Swargarohana(death). As it is the dance of Krishna it was given the name Krishnanattam, also the story of Krishna has been divided into eight parts, so it is also known as Krishnanashttkam. Art forms of Kerala can be usually divided into two groups, classical arts and folk arts. Though Krishnanattam is included in classical arts category it also incorporates the elements of folk arts. This article attempts to study the role and significance of Krishnanattam in performing tradition arts. It is practiced as ritual art within temple premises as a votive offering to Lord.*

Keywords: *Krishnanattam, Bhakti Art, Cultural Heritage, Eight Plays, Performing Art.*

INTRODUCTION

In India, Kerala is home to a magnificently unique variety of art forms which have influenced the social and cultural life of the state, adding to its typical character. Kathakali is the most popular art form in which the entire body is used to depict a story. It is the Kerala State dance. The Kathakali artists wear embellished costumes, ornaments and facial make-up. Another popular dance in Kerala State is the Mohiniyattam. Mohiniyattam, the dance of the enchantress is one emphasizing feminine grace while Kalaripayattu is an amazing martial art. Eventually speaking this martial art is said to be the base for karate, judo and kungfu. All these popular martial arts originated from this traditional martial art. The rich and vibrant culture of Kerala has been continuing to fascinate people worldwide. The traditional classic and folk songs and dances of the people, their ballads, their rituals and their intellectual pursuits form the real treasures of Kerala contributing to its rich cultural heritage. Kerala is a haven for the lover of dance, drama and music and festivals. You have scores of art forms, which are quite unique in nature to Kerala, like Kathakali, Ottamthullal, Chakyarkoothu, Krishnanattam, Koodiyattam, Padayani, Kalaripayattu, Pavakathakali, Theyyam, Velakali, Thiruvathirakali, Kolkali, etc. These art forms help one to experience a range of varied emotions ranging from passion, love, kindness, compassion to humor, joy, sorrow, grief, and from anger, wonder, horror to fear, valour, courage etc.

Krishnanattam (Dance of Krishna) developed from the same tradition as Kutiyattam during 17th century. It is a full-scale form of dance-drama concentrating solely on episodes in God Krishna's life, from his birth to his ascent into heaven. In its spirit Krishnanattam is pure bhakti art as its function is to sing ecstatic praise to the Lord Krishna. Krishnanattam is performed only in the Guruvayur Temple and it is intended exclusively for Hindu audiences.

THE HISTORY OF KRISHNANATTAM

East Indian poet Jayadeva's, the bhakti poem, Gita Govinda by the 12th century gained enormous popularity in Kerala and it is still chanted in the temples. It led to an early form of a Krishna play, asthapadiattam, which was later replaced by krishnanattam. The creator of krishnanattam was the poet Manadevan, born at the end of the 16th century. It is said that he had a vision in which the flute-playing Krishna appeared. This led Manadevan to create his own praise to Krishna known as Krishna Geeti. After the decline of the Zamorin dynasty a krishnanattam troupe was settled at the Guruvayur temple in central Kerala. From that time onwards, they perform this traditional art in Guruvayur temple. It is the only place where we could visualize this traditional performing art today also.

THE PLAYS OF KRISHNANATTAM

The stories of krishnanattam cover the whole life cycle of Lord Krishna, an incarnation of God Vishnu, are based on the Bhagavata Purana, and they are always sung in Sanskrit. The life cycle of Lord Krishna is segregated into episodes and is performed on eight successive nights, while the opening episode, concentrating on the incarnation of Vishnu, is repeated at the end of the cycle, thus forming the ninth evening in the series.

In true piety, it is believed that merely witnessing, krishnanattam is a meticulous act bringing good karma to the spectator. Krishna's story as described in detail in the Tenth and Eleventh Cantos of Srimad Bhagavata, Mahabharata and Harivamsa is presented as song, dance and acting in a cycle of eight plays in eight days. The plays are Avataram, Kaliyamardanam, Rasakrida, Kamsavadham, Swayamvaram, Banayuddham, Vividavadham and Swargarohanam.

FEATURES OF KRISHNANATTAM

The costume, dominated by a large skirt-like lower garment, as are the gold covered wooden ornaments. They also both share the local, stylized and colourful make-up system. However, there are exclusive differences between the styles. Firstly, the actors do not use their voices in Krishnanattam. Two

singers who accompany the musicians sing all the lines in the sopanam style, used for chanting the Gita Govinda in the temples of Kerala.

The uniqueness of krishnanattam was that the acting and the singing were separated from each other. This enabled the actors to concentrate on the abhinaya, mime acting and dancing. However, the acting in krishnanattam is not as detailed as in kutiyattam. This is perhaps because krishnanattam is a form of bhakti worship and a kind of offering, and thus not a theatre form for aesthetic people and it is meant for the devotees. One distinguishing characteristics of krishnanattam is that some of the characters wear masks. They may be larger than the human head, and their style is often naive and robust, even grotesque.

Dance has a more eminent role in krishnanattam because the actors do not have to recite or sing their lines. Another reason may also be that dance has a very significant role in life of lord Krishna. Both mimetic (abhinaya) and non-descriptive (natta) dance are employed. Krishna himself dances with his consorts and gopis, Krishna's beloved ones. The dance sequence in krishnanattam reflects the influence of local folk dances and highlights the art forms' emotional directness, a characteristic of bhakti art all over India.

PREFATORY RITES

The first event of the play is Kelikottu. It is carried out by playing drums (matthalams), gong (chegandi) and cymbals (ilathalam) during the daytime at the East corner of the Guruvayur temple. This is to inform the people in the neighborhood and the surroundings about the performance scheduled in the night. At dusk, a lamp is lit in the makeup room and another lamp is lighted from this lamp for the actors (all male) to put on their makeup by sitting around it on the floor.

The Sanctum Sanctorum is closed for the day after the routine rituals of the temple are completed; the Kali Vilakku (An Oil Lamp of the Play) is kept on the stage in front of the performance space in the Temple on the Northern direction of the Sanctum Sanctorum. The Kali Vilakku is lit from the lamp in the

makeup room by a Brahmana. The musical instruments such as drums gong and cymbals are placed on the ground behind the Kali Vilakku. The matthalam players show due respect by touching them after that they'll lift them up, play a couple of beats on both sides to invoke sabdabrahma and hang the instruments around their neck. Then Kelikottu is performed using matthalams, chengandi and ilathalam.

After kelikottu, a colourful rectangular Thiraisila (curtain) is held behind Kali Vilakku by two stage accompanist. Then Thodayam is performed by the women characters that are appearing on that day's play by standing behind the screen. Thodayam is a prayer dance performed by the dancers accompanied by music to invoke the blessings of the Lord. Thodayam is not meant for the spectators. For Thodayam, the lines starting with Narayana Narakantaka Narakaparayana in the fifth padam of the play Kaliyamardanam are sung.

All performances begin by reciting the sloka starting with Souvarnatbhuta as the mangalasloka for the auspicious beginning. After Thodayam, it is time for Purappattu and it is a piece of pure dance choreography. Either Krishna or Balarama or both, or along with other characters, dance with gestures of hand and face and special steps. Here is the list of characters that performs Purappattu in eight plays. In Avataram, the first scene of Brahma and Bhumi Devi is considered as Purappattu. In other plays, the scene in which either Krishna or Balarama or both appear first on stage is considered as Purappattu. In Kamsavadham, Purappattu is in the middle of the play. In Vividavadham, there are two Purappattu, first in the beginning played by Balarama and wives and the other after some time by Krishna, Bhima and Arjuna. In Swargarohanam, there is no Purappattu.

CONCLUDING RITES

As like prefatory rites except Swargarohanam all plays end with Dhanasi. Dhanasi is performed by the characters in the last scene of the play by dancing in a peculiar way accompanied by singing the lines commencing with *Narayana Narakantaka Narakaparayana* in the fifth padam of the play Kaliyamardanam. As the characters exit from the stage, a sloka is sung as mangalam resembling

auspicious end. The play is concluded by playing a couple of beats on the matthalam just as in the beginning.

DIFFERENCE BETWEEN KRISHNANATTAM AND KATHAKALI

A Krishnanattam performance is basically different from Kathakali, which uses hand and facial gestures and follows padarthaabhinaya meant as the literal interpretation of the verses. Krishnanattam is more dance-oriented with sumptuous, complicated and aesthetic patterns. There is an old saying that to appreciate Kathakali the spectator has to observe the actor's face and for Krishnanattam the audience has to watch the actor's footsteps carefully. Kathakali reveals the story of Ramayana in eight divisions so it is also called as Ramanattam. As such Krishnanattam also has eight divisions.

CONCLUSION:

As a whole we can say that Krishnanattam was designed by the mixture of the existing arts in course of time in Kerala. Though it is influenced by the classical arts like kutiyattam, Ramanattam, Mohiniyattam, Thullal, and other folk arts but Krishnanattam differs from other arts as it was followed up on the threads of devotion. The story and context of Krishnanattam was based on Bagavataham and was developed by Natyasastra rule clearly and systematically. So far, Krishnanattam is being performed in several stages, especially in temples other than Guruvayoor. The story part is to perform and yet people can get easily communicated by the art. It is because of the traditional awareness in people about Natta (dance), Thala (Rhythm), Abhinaya (Mime Acting) and Aharya (Costumes). Another unique feature of the Krishnanattamis that one of the characters begins to sing and the others act and hence there is an amalgamation of sounds and sight. Krishnanattam is bound to excite the humanity by uniting the longing soul to the eternal. Hence Krishnanattam still hails victoriously till date in all its charming glory. This performing traditional art is witnessed by domestic and international tourists.

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