

*Kuṭiyāṭṭam Theatre*, K.G. Paulose, DC Books, Kottayam, pp. 236, 2006

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Kuṭiyāṭṭam is considered to be the only surviving Sanskrit theatre, well preserved in Kerala. K.G. Paulose, a great researcher in Kuṭiyāṭṭam has published a comprehensive and in-depth study of this ancient form of visual performance with roots of Bharata's Nāṭyaśāstra under the title 'Kuṭiyāṭṭam Theatre', which is second among his proposed trilogy, the first being *Improvisations in Ancient Theatre*.

The present volume consists of 33 chapters carefully arranged in five distinct parts. The first part with its eight chapters, chiefly deals with the evolution of the Sanskrit theatre study, which he calls 'The National Theatre'. Tracing the beginning of Sanskrit theatre in Bharata's Nāṭyaśāstra in the first chapter, he deeply investigates its Vedic origin and connects the Bhāṇa type of Sanskrit *rupaka* with the *akṣasūkta* of *R̥gvēda*, which is a sort of a monologue of a dice player who has lost everything in dice. He also examines the references of *yāga* found in Mahābhārata and Rāmayaṇa and finds in it the primordial form of acting. Jātaka stories are also referred to for their various accounts that give the glimpses of the popular theatre of India prevailing during the period of Buddha in the form of *pekkanaṃ* (*prékṣanakam*), which he terms the specimen of the theatre in a crude form. The second chapter is about the influence of Buddhism on Sanskrit theatre. In the *Lalitvistara*, one of the earliest biographies of Lord Buddha, he finds one of the earliest references to drama proper. Examining 'Samājās', the theatrical entertainments, he concludes that while Buddha renounced the theatre, his followers used it to propagate his teachings; the Sanskrit theatre slowly absorbed his thoughts and ultimately elevated him to the position of a presiding deity along with Vishnu, Shiva and others by designating him as the deity of 'santa' *rasa*. In the notes given at the end of the chapter, he takes into account the rich tradition of theatre belonging to Jains.

The third chapter traces the evolution of Nāṭyaśāstra. There is an important observation here which is quite original and suggestive

of a new exploration. According to the author, Nāṭyaśāstra symbolises the synthesis of three streams of culture – the Vedic represented by Indra, the Indus civilisation presented by Shiva and the folk tradition of Sri Krishna; Nāṭya thus evolved with the fusion of different streams of ancient life—Vedic, Indus and Folk. He further observes that the pre-Bharata theatre was folk-oriented and crude in its very nature. Ordinary people played them in the streets. Bharata transformed this popular theatre to that of the elite by incorporating the technique of stylisation which, according to him, is the real contribution of Bharata. He blames that Nāṭyaśāstra by providing grammar to theatre, alienated masses from performance. These are the unique conclusions of the author which gave new direction to the interpretation of ‘Origin of Drama’ as laid down in the first chapter of the Nāṭyaśāstra.

In the fourth chapter, the author makes a debatable observation that while Bhāṣa belonged to pre-Bharata theatre, which was predominantly representations of fight and warfare reflecting the crude form of society in its early days, Kālidāsa, in sharp contrast to Bhāṣa, is a true representative of the tradition of Bharata who refined the theatre and made it more sophisticated; prescribed the dos and don’ts. On the basis of the internal evidences provided by his three plays, the author proves that the plays of Kālidāsa are the best specimen to exemplify the changes brought about by Bharata.

In the fifth chapter, regarding the ‘Performance of Sanskrit Dramas’, the author identifies three sources for reconstructing the form of presentation of ancient dramas, namely theoretical texts like Nāṭyaśāstra, the stage directions given in the dramatic texts and accounts of the performance found in the later texts like Kuṭṭanīmata and Saṅgītratnākara. He has also evolved new terminology for various theatre forms. Theatre of Excitement, Restraint and Identification corresponded to folk, classical and realistic methods in theatre. He, unlike other scholars, considers Sanskrit theatre as having multiple stages for the enactment of different scenes, or the single stage having multiple levels for multifocal scenes. He also analyses various stage directions which fall under two broad categories: Nāṭyadharmi – stylised and lokdharmi – realistic.

The seventh chapter deals with an important aspect of theatre, namely, ‘Author’s Text and Performance Text’. According to him, the director creates a subtext from the dramatic text for performance. There is a remarkable observation made by the author in this chapter. Ancient Greek theatre expanded the external level

while the Indian tradition stressed on the internal action and elaborated methods to visualise the internal. He traces the development of theatre from *nṛtta* to *nāṭya* in the first instance and from *nāṭya* to *nṛtya* in the period which marks a departure from general theory of *nṛtta*, *nṛtya* and *nāṭya*. In the last chapter of this part, he closely examines various reasons for the decline of National (Sanskrit) Theatre. The description of the presentation of the first act of Ratnāvali in Kuttanimata of Dāmōdargupta, eighth century CE and its further extension in Abhinavagupta's commentary on *dhvanyaloka*, wherein theory of *dhvani* is applied to theatre, marks a progression. A natural extension of this process is seen in Kulasekhara of Kerala whose innovations marked a milestone in the development of Sanskrit theatre in Kerala in the form of Kuttiyattam, as per his final conclusion.

The second part of the book focuses on the Kerala scene, highlighting the local aspects of Kuṭiyāṭṭam theatre and performance, in nine chapters. In the first chapter of part II, the author firmly establishes the fact that the theatrical tradition of ancient actors of Tamizakaṃ the three regions that spread from Tirupati, in the north of Kanyākumāri at the southern tip namely Cēra, Cōla and Pāṇḍya regions, with Tamil as common language—survived in Kerala through the Cākyārs, a class of people expert in acting. While discussing the 'Tradition of Sanskrit Drama in Kerala' in the next chapter, the author highlights the fact that the mode of presentation of the plays written by Kulśekhara, Śaktibhadra, Ravivarmakulasekhara, Rāmāpaṇivāda, Pūrṇasarasvati, Kākkaśēri Bhaṭṭatiri, Rāmavarma, Bālakavi, Nīlakaṇṭha, Śrīrāma and Sundaraśāstri—all belonging to Kerala was more or less—an imitative style, more realistic in nature; but there emerged in Kerala 800 years ago another tradition of presenting Sanskrit plays, that of Kuṭiyāṭṭam and it is this that preserved the Nāṭyasatra tradition for posterity. In the subsequent chapters, the author gives a detailed account of how the doctrine of *dhvani* expounded by Ānandvardhana (ninth century CE) of Kashmir received sound acclamation in Kerala through a royal dramatist Kulśekhara of the same century, who applied *dhvani* to the theatre. His performance text is known as *Vyaṅgyavyākhyā*, meaning interpreting the implied, a striking innovation in the performative practices which marked a deviation from Bharata's national tradition and laid down the foundation for classical forms like Kuṭiyāṭṭam, Kṛṣṇanaṭṭam, Kathakali and Mohiniyāṭṭam. In the chapter on 'Kulśekhara in retrospect', he discusses in detail the three original contributions

made by Kulśekhara to the Sanskrit theatre: (a) Retrospection (pūrvasam-bandhna) connecting the present to the past, (b) blend of suggestive sense (dhvaniyōjana)—expansion of meaning in two phases of thematic (expressive) and psychic (suggestive), and (c) spectator-actor interaction (prēkṣaka prayōkṭṛ sambandha) bāhyārtha (kēvalārtha) for the nātālōka—ordinary spectator and sūkṣmārtha (dhvani) for prēkṣaka— elite spectator; four-fold acting for the former and nētrābinaya for the latter. Thus, according to the author, Bharata's actor was imitator; Kulśekhara added the functions of narrator and interpreter to him. Many from far and near wonder as to how Kerala could keep alive the tradition of Sanskrit theatre while it became extinct in other parts of the country. According to the author, the structure of Kuṭiyāṭṭam gives the clue. The absorption of Malayalam to the multi-lingual frame of Sanskrit drama, the transformation of the role of *vidūṣaka* in Kuṭiyāṭṭam and the assimilation of numerous local practices from the folk theatre. These three factors contributed to the successful localisation of a National Theatre in Kerala.

The third part of the present volume lists the major playwrights and plays associated with Kuṭiyāṭṭam as well as techniques of presentation in total six chapters. There is an important observation regarding Bhāsa on Kuṭiyāṭṭam stage. Sanskrit dramas generally extol the heroes. Bhāsa made a deviation by going deep into the minds of those defeated. Kuṭiyāṭṭam acknowledged this trend and developed into something like a cult. All the major characters in Kuṭiyāṭṭam are anti-heroes, Rāvaṇa, Bāli, etc. The epic heroes like Rāma, Kṛṣṇa, etc. have only minor roles done by junior artists, says the author. While discussing the techniques of Kuṭiyāṭṭam, three major parts of the performance are discussed in detail. They are (a) Pūrvaraṅga—preliminary rites, (b) Nirvahan recapitulation of the past incidents, and (c) Kuṭiyāṭṭam performance of the dramatic text. The chief characteristics of Kuṭiyāṭṭam are also highlighted, like the dramatic text need not be enacted in full; an act or a part of it will be presented on one day. The actor explains every verse elaborately. While describing, the actor can depart from the text and explain things according to his imagination, *manōdharmā*. The *abhinaya* is supported by hand gestures. The author has described in detail the basic gestures of Kuṭiyāṭṭam with diagram. Various Rāgās used in Kuṭiyāṭṭam, the *Śātvika* and *Aaharya Abhinaya*, various modes of Abhinaya, Nātyadharmi and Lōkdharmi aspects, Rhythm, Role of women, Temple Theatres, and finally Kuṭiyāṭṭam as a *yajña* are the other topics which are dealt with exclusively in the chapter regarding

the techniques of Kuṭiyāṭṭam. Transformation of Roles—*pakarnnāṭṭam* is a unique feature of Kuṭiyāṭṭam. He traces its roots to the folk forms like mutiyēṟṟ, teyyam, etc. The acting of Kuṭiyāṭṭam is carried on in two phases: (a) the solo acting of retrospection, and (b) the combined acting of the dramatic text. During the solo performances, actors choose certain situations from the text and develop them. A full chapter is devoted to illustrate the nature of such elaboration in Kuṭiyāṭṭam. He has also shown graphically the multiple levels of stage-audience relation which is extracted from his earlier work, *Improvisations in Ancient Theatre*.

The fourth part discusses the Stage Manuals, with an account of the improvisations, additions and deviations in six chapters. Here the evolution of Kuṭiyāṭṭam is traced on the basis of the Stage Manuals like ‘āṭṭaparakāram’ and ‘kramadipika’, which are considered to be inexhaustible treasures for the world of acting, written in Malayalam. In the following chapters are a few specimens representing the respective phases of development of Kuṭiyāṭṭam Theatre. The performance of ‘Ratnāvali’ faithfully follows the tradition of Bharata as described in Kuṭṭānīmata. Various improvisations made during Kulśekhara period, such as connecting the past to the present—purvasambhandha—expansion of meaning, state polity, distortion of dramatic text, addition of puruṣārtha, etc., are practically shown through the Stage Manuals, which is the unique feature of this scholarly work. The reader can get glimpses of the Kuṭiyāṭṭam stage in action as graphically described. The real value of this painstaking research lies in the way the author unfolds the acting technique of Kuṭiyāṭṭam as revealed in the Stage Manuals.

The last part updates the information about innovations, tracing the development up to UNESCO’s recognition of Kuṭiyāṭṭam as humanity’s intangible heritage. The efforts of bringing Kuṭiyāṭṭam out of the temple, staging of Bhāsa’s plays by contemporary directors and Kuṭiyāṭṭam as a Theatrical Piece—are noteworthy chapters of this part, suitably entitled ‘Century of Liberation’.

K. Ayyappa Paniker, in his preface, rightly observes, “To the beginners who are just initiated to the theatre, this book will be informative and instructive; to the connoisseur it throws up many ideas for further thoughts, some perhaps controversial.”

The very high scholastic work is written in a very simple yet lucid language. Some sections are historical, some are descriptive and some are analytical. All the chapters carry detailed notes which further clarify the different aspects of Kuṭiyāṭṭam in a comparative manner.