

## Of Traditions and Modernity: Contemporary Performance Practices of Bhāsa's *Rāmāyaṇa* Plays

Mahesh Champaklal, *Bhāsa's Rāmāyaṇa Plays: From Page to Stage*, Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 2018, pp. xiv + 632, Rs. 950/-, ISBN: 9789382396604 (Hardcover).

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Performance Studies in India, and within that Theatre Studies in particular, is barely a few decades old.<sup>1</sup> It is a relatively juvenile extension of the scholarly engagements with dramas, Indian as well as Western,<sup>2</sup> both contemporary and of classical antiquity. Moreover, most of the existing studies on classical Indian theatre, end up studying the classical Sanskrit play-texts rather than their performances on the Indian stage. Dr. Mahesh Champaklal's monograph entitled *Bhāsa's Rāmāyaṇa Plays: From Page to Stage* breathes fresh air into the body of contemporary theatre criticism, firstly, because he places textual and performance analysis together, but more interestingly because on his grand canvas we find juxtaposed, the traditional performance style of Kūṭiyāṭṭam along with that of K. N. Panikkar's modernised production of Bhāsa's play.

In his prefatorial note, the author clarifies that what concerns him here is not the ongoing debates of authorship of the plays ascribed to Bhāsa. Rather, taking the authorship for granted, he is curious about three of their performances, one by Panikkar and two in the Kūṭiyāṭṭam form, the latter being a living performance tradition practised by specific communities in the present state of Kerala in the south of India. This form, as regards the available scholarship on the same, is at least a millennium old. Added to that, the discovery of Bhāsa's play-texts at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and the post-independence fanning of the "Theatre of Roots" movement in India, have also re-energised performance artists, both traditional and modern, to engage with the classical texts in various ways.

Divided into three parts, the first one "Language in Theatre (Dramatic Text)" is a detailed act-by-act summary of two plays of Bhāsa – namely, *Abhisheka Nāṭakam* and

*Pratimā Nāṭakam*, based on stories concerning Rama and his life in exile – that forms the basis of Dr. Champaklal's present work. This section which deals with the existing dramatic texts, marks the influences and departures of Bhāsa from the epic *Rāmāyaṇa*, ascribed to Vālmīki. The author is also careful regarding the varying colours that the characters in Bhāsa's texts take, when comparing them with their portrayal in Vālmīki's text. Such as, Bhāsa's Kaikeyi is completely absolved of all her "sins" and is no longer the evil incarnate as in Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*. Even so, Dr. Champaklal does not lead us further into the underlying politics of characterisation, probably because that would take his work beyond his present concern. Also, he refers to the fair possibility of Bhāsa's framing his plays not only from Vālmīki's text but from various other poets only once (p. 10) (and I would like to extend it to the popular oral narratives which were certainly available to both of them, from which they might have freely drawn) and does not develop his statement further. Such an argumentation would have destabilised the hierarchy, and therefore the privilege, of the source-text over the play-texts that often marks the author's analysis. Hence, his categorical conclusion: "while *dramatizing the epic*, Bhāsa always gives importance to only those scenes which have dramatic value. . . . To turn the narration into action is a real task for any dramatist which is evident from Bhāsa's work" (p. 38, emphasis added). Similarly, it might not be a baseless conjecture that the trope of "Mount Mandara" (p. 49) that the author has identified as frequently used by Bhāsa in many of his plays to elaborate Herculean tasks, might also have been popular in his time as a stereotypical image. However, that is not to say that the author necessarily undermines all contributions of Bhāsa to those of Vālmīki. He elaborates how Bhāsa uses

his imagination to add symbolic value to certain elements in the Rāmākathās<sup>3</sup>, often inventing to his will and dramatic necessity. We may refer to the *valkala*<sup>4</sup> and the *pratimā*<sup>5</sup> to consider how they provide causal links in the plot of the play. Nevertheless, the constant comparisons of Bhāsa's text to Vālmīki's, as presented, overshadow the more probable dialectical network of artistic influences. Had it been avoided, it would have opened up avenues of enquiry on Bhāsa's critical engagement with Vālmīki's text – as "the voice of dissent in Indian theatre" (p. 625) – asking disturbing questions to Vālmīki and his portrayal of idealistic characters.

The careful demarcation of the textual framework in this section allows Dr. Champaklal to draw analytical references with the descriptions of production manuals and performances which follow. Also, his compilation and annotations of the existing critical literature on the play-texts in this part, presents to his readers a rich variorum. In this section the author also teases out the clues grafted by Bhāsa into the texts, for the performers to read into the authorial intention.<sup>6</sup> He puts forward in display how certain elements of the play-texts make the performers aware of the characters' frames of mind, thereby allowing crucial insights towards enacting those roles. In the same thread, he also talks about how certain turns of the phrase can also be interpreted as stage directions along with the direct ones – "falls unconscious" (p. 114). Bestowing critical attention towards the development of plot, coherence of play-texts, development of characters, characterisation of Fate, the role of humour, and various other dramatic techniques, the author hereby prepares the ground for consolidating his later arguments drawn on the analysis of performance texts.

The second part "Language of Theatre (Performance Text)," takes us through the contemporary performance practices of "*Vālivadham*" and "*Toranayuddham*" – the first and third acts of Bhāsa's *Abhisheka Nātakam* respectively – on the Kūṭiyāṭṭam stage (with representative photographs taken during the Kūṭiyāṭṭam-Mahotsavam 2012 for "*Vālivadham*" and of several performances around 2014 for "*Toranayuddham*"), and K. N. Panikkar's 2002 Bharat Rang Mahotsav production entitled *Pratimā* (with representative photographs of the same production).

The first subsection "Bhāsa's *Rāmāyaṇa* Plays on the Kūṭiyāṭṭam Stage: The *Rāmāyaṇa* Trilogy," in its attempt to give us a holistic picture of the performance tradition, additionally refers to Shaktibhadra's *Āscharyachudāmani* along with the two other plays of Bhāsa, as these three together complete the performance cycle of twenty one acts, as is the practise. However, this inclusion seems to be quite redundant in the larger framework and purpose of this book.

The following subsections bring together the production manuals (*Kramadīpikā*), the acting manuals (*Attaparakāram*), and the production photographs of the two acts of *Abhisheka Nātakam* mentioned above. The sections, on the one hand, make us understand the liberties that Kūṭiyāṭṭam takes of Bhāsa's plays, while on the other, underscores the link between ritual and performance. It reads:

*The Chakyar purifies himself by ablutions in the pond attached to the temple. He pays obeisance to the gods and preceptors in the green-room. He should wear only a fresh cloth that the washerman provides. As a beginning, when he ties a red cloth on his head, he is believed to have divine sanction, and nothing can defile him any more. No spectator, even a king, can criticize him; in fact the red cloth should not be removed until the performance is over.* (p. 445)

Further, this section also shows how, for Kūṭiyāṭṭam performances, the prologue to the play is central to the performance to the extent that it supersedes the play proper. Taking up five to thirty-five nights,<sup>7</sup> consisting of the commencement (*purāppātu*), flashback (*anukramam*), the summary (*samksepam*) and the elaboration (*nirvāhanam*), this development reveals to be of greater concern for the performers as well as the audience. Moreover, as identified by the author, because the Kūṭiyāṭṭam takes up only one particular act and not the whole play to be performed at a time, such alterations of the text reinforce the "spine of the body of the performance" (p. 447). Though it seems apparent that through such alterations of the play-texts and the amplification of the spectacular, the "body"<sup>8</sup> of Bhāsa's plays too is cleansed off its politics, Dr. Champaklal, in his clinical engagement, keeps himself away from indulging into the effects of this transition in the performative practice. In doing so, he also refrains from commenting on Kūṭiyāṭṭam's heavy reliance on Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* in these preludes and the characteristic differences that it, therefore, develops in the Kūṭiyāṭṭam-proper which relies on Bhāsa's texts.

The glossary of technical terms that accompanies this section also throws light on the aforementioned relationship between ritual and performance. The instances, where the contemporary Kūṭiyāṭṭam performers deviate from the prescribed *Kramadīpikā*, is noted (p. 290). The section also marks the economy of presenting characters on stage as practised in Kūṭiyāṭṭam and the use of costumes to demarcate the changes during multiple impersonations. Such performative techniques reduce the number of actors required, as it is performed by only two communities – the Chakyars and the Nambiars, primarily as a mode of worship, and only in the temple precincts, until recently. Added to that, we are informed that the recitation of speeches of absent characters and the appearance of unimportant

characters with their heads covered are conventionally accepted. The *Attaprakārams* also hint at numerous comic interventions that the performance ought to follow. Thus, as in Bhāsa, the element of humour continues to flow in the Kūṭiyāṭṭam. Also noticeable is the way the half-curtain and the wooden stool are used as the only major props on stage. Not only do they enhance the dramatic value of the performance by relying on the imagination of the audience, leading us to various time-zones and places, but also make us inquisitive about the shared hermeneutic codes in play. The present work extends an understanding of the network of meaning – the skilful combination of *nātyadharmī*<sup>9</sup> and *lokadharmī*<sup>10</sup> elements” (p. 444) – by supplementing the production and acting manuals with innumerable reference frames from various performances.

Dr. Champaklal also emphasises the fourfold *abhinaya*<sup>11</sup> in compliance to the *Nātyasāstra* – the stylised speech (*vāchika*); the movement of the limbs (*āṅgika*); the subtle facial expressions and gestures (*sāttvika*) and the combination of the make-up, costumes, music, props, *et al.* (*āhārya*) – and describes how they evoke the suitable states of the characters. The centrality of to the Indian traditional theatre is also highlighted especially through the elaborate use of the traditional drums (*mizhāvu*) and the sacredness ascribed to the space it occupies on the stage. The synchronic representation of the music played and the gestures performed demands years of training. It is through “discipline,” the author remarks referring to Panikkar, that the performers achieve “creative freedom” (p. 464). Drawing details and references the author concludes that “[i]n Kūṭiyāṭṭam, it seems the performance is the real text. An overwritten or verbose text is often hindrance to performance. The elaboration is the contribution of the performer” (p. 470).

In the following subsection “K.N. Panikkar’s Production of ‘Pratimā’: Synopsis, Director’s Note and Performance Data,” the author engages with Panikkar’s 2002 production based on Bhāsa’s play *Pratimā Nātakam*. In the words of the director, in his play *Pratimā*, he probes “the underlying relationship of the concept of Pratimā with the content of the play” (p. 478). Hence, as in the Kūṭiyāṭṭams, Panikkar’s is also a re-creation of the classical text. Furthermore, considering it as a Bharat Rang Mahotsav production, his is an attempt to present it on the proscenium for a metropolitan audience. As Dr. Champaklal shows, Panikkar too, like the Kūṭiyāṭṭam plays, freely borrowed from Vālmīki’s *Rāmāyaṇa*, in as much as a verse from Vālmīki’s text is brought in as the pivotal refrain in the final scene of his play. The use of modern stage lighting systems that have enabled Panikkar to represent multiple time frames – with characters being faded out or appearing as if in a dream – have

also been indicated by the author. That this “modern” production also has vital ritual elements, has also been laid out. The author remarks that while the music brings into the production “the spirit of devotion” (p. 599), the use of the traditional umbrella in the production, would potentially drive the informed audience to relate it to a regional festival of Kerala – namely, the Pooram Festival – and connect it to the play’s tradition, its roots. Accordingly, to the author, this production stands as a reinvention of “a part of the mythology in a new era for a new audience. It involves the audience to question the mythical relationship of the concept of the play” (p. 604-5). Although Dr. Champaklal talks about the modernity of the play in using the lights, minimal and suggestive set elements, to me, the true modernity lies in the director’s reworking of the “*pratimā*” from a sculpture – a symbol of death in Bhāsa’s text, to represent it as an enlivened character in his production. With this transformation, the abstract idea of “recognition” became the thread of Panikkar’s play, lending it the thematic integrity.

Coming to the third and final part of the book, “Language in Theatre, Language of Theatre (Dramatic Text versus Performance Text): In the Context of Indian Classical Theatre,” the author opines that “[t]here is no question of superiority or primacy of one over the other. It is not merely a question of dramatic text having its fulfilment or realization only in the performance. It is, in fact, more a question of reciprocity, of mutual dependence” (p. 610). Further, as he compares the dramatic manuals – *Nātyasāstra*, *Vyangyavyakhyā*, and *Nātānkusha* – on the one hand with the productions under consideration on the other, we are informed about the crucial debates that have existed for centuries now (*Nātānkusha*, the latest of the trio, considered to be a text of the 15<sup>th</sup> Century). In this section of the book the author, albeit cursorily, looks at the audience and the theories of reception which deserved more attention. Referring to *Vyangyavyakhyā* he says, that the Kūṭiyāṭṭam took liberties with Bhāsa’s texts as “the audience is more interested in ‘How’ rather than ‘What’” (p. 620). For, the Rāmakathās being popular stories, the audience would already know it, therefore underlining the need for “retrospection and suggestive acting” (p. 620), which demands the expertise of the performers. In other words, the expectation of the audience would rarely be to see a new play (though they might be fascinated or disgusted to see one such play), but definitely a new performance. It is this that keeps the audience glued onto the performance. The author also says that the audience of these plays consists of the “ordinary folk” along with the “elite” (p. 622). This categorisation, however, in the Indian context, is not just of class or of erudition but of caste, always-already embedded in the other markers. Though, this could have been a take-off point

for a discourse on the dimensions of caste, from textual, performative, as well as the spectatorial framework, the author seems quite nonchalant to the role it plays in both the play-texts and in performative practices. For, with the “elites” sitting in the front and the “ordinary folk” at the back, along with the prominence bestowed on the subtle gestures and facial movements, a necessary hierarchy of meaning – of reception and erudition – is augmented through the tradition. Even though it is voiced that the body of current practices, “no longer the traditional Sanskrit Theatre of Bhārata, instead is an autonomous art” (p. 624) in various ways; with the identification of the categories of audience in mind, it might be interesting to take a second look at the productions at large, and their “popular” nature.

Before we conclude, it must be noted that Dr. Champaklal’s book demands at least a basic understanding of Sanskrit and a thorough knowledge of the Devanagari script. Otherwise, expressions such as “शरद् brought joy to the हंसी”<sup>12</sup> (p. 73) would leave the reader clueless. Secondly, though the author presents a dense account of the play texts and the performance manuals, one would wish a further interrogation of the source texts along with their enacted transpositions taken up in this book, so as to provide insights into the “politics” of these practices. Finally, the inaccuracies of copyediting I cannot help but mention. The book is replete with typological, grammatical and punctuation errors. Also, though it is understood that multiple spellings do exist in the popular usage for certain of the terms used in the text, one would like to avoid being lost in that quagmire engendered out of the lack of the standardisation of spellings, both of technical terms as well as proper nouns.<sup>13</sup>

Even so, Dr. Mahesh Champaklal’s book, providing

the readers an opportunity to take a comprehensive look at the *miseen scène* of the practices of classical Indian theatre today, demands further critical attention. It is an invaluable compendium, bringing together play-texts, performance manuals, photographs as well as crucial analytical debates onto our platter, representing Performance Studies in India.

### Notes

1. That is, when we consider Performance Studies and Theatre Studies as institutionalised academic disciplines.
2. Aware of the existing debates on the categories “Indian” and “Western,” I use the terms here at their face value.
3. As the term suggests, *kathās* were oral narratives which evolved and were named after their central character. Hence, *Rāmakathās* denote the popular narratives of Rama.
4. Garment worn by the ascetics made out of the bark (*valkala*) of certain trees.
5. Statue.
6. The author, however, does not refer to the existing debates on the same.
7. Overlapping, but inconsistent data can be found in p. 465 and p. 614. Even so, that does not affect my argument drawn here on the primacy of the prelude over the play-proper.
8. Used in the metaphorical sense of the term.
9. Dramatic.
10. Realistic.
11. Acting.
12. The words in Devanagari mean “autumn” and “swan” respectively.
13. For example, the work uses both “*milavu*” and “*mizhavu*” to denote the traditional drum (*mizhāvu*), and both “*Valin*” and “*Bali*” for the Monkey-king (*Vāli*).