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A Comparative Study Of Dramatic Text And Performance Tradition In Special Reference To Kūṭiyāṭṭam And Kālidāsa:

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Abstract

This article examines the relationship between the Sanskrit dramatic tradition of Kālidāsa and the classical theatre form of Kūṭiyāṭṭam in Kerala. While Kālidāsa's literary stature was widely acknowledged in South India and manuscripts of his dramatic works circulated substantially in the region, his plays did not become a part of the Kūṭiyāṭṭam repertoire. The study explores the stylistic and performative distinctions between the dramatic structure of Kālidāsa's works and the theatrical conventions of Kūṭiyāṭṭam. In contrast, the plays of Bhāsa became central to Kūṭiyāṭṭam performance practice because of their brevity, openness to elaboration, and suitability for interpretive expansion by the Cākyārs.

Introduction

It is surprising that the works of the incomparable Kālidāsa have not been staged in the ancient drama-dance style of Kūṭiyāṭṭam of Kerala. The matter becomes even more striking when one considers that manuscripts of Kālidāsa's dramatic works have been found in substantial numbers in South India. Some scholars believe that these manuscripts contain revisions of the original works of Kālidāsa because they begin with the phrase "After the benediction enters the Sūtradhāra," similar to the manuscripts of Bhāsa's works. However, these revisions should only be regarded as intimate reasons for the acceptance of Kālidāsa's works in the South.

The principal question, therefore, is this: if Kālidāsa was accepted in South India, why did his dramatic works not find a place within the wonderful drama-dance tradition of Kūṭiyāṭṭam? This suggests that there must have been certain differences between the theatrical traditions represented by Kālidāsa's dramas and Kūṭiyāṭṭam, and that these differences were responsible for the disconnect.

Kūṭiyāṭṭam: Tradition and Performance Structure

Kūṭiyāṭṭam is performed by artists traditionally known as Cākyārs. They usually perform male characters, while female characters are enacted by Nāṅgiyārs. The latter also assist in the recitation of special ślokas. Those responsible for costumes, make-up, and stage equipment are known as Nāmbiārs. In this style, a single actor often performs several roles.

Many characters do not appear on stage directly. Instead, they are represented either by cloth or by actors taking on alternate roles. Approximately twenty plays form the repertoire of Kūṭiyāṭṭam. These include works by Śaktibhadra, Baudhāyana, Kulaśekhara Varman, Śrīharṣa, Mahendra Pallava, and Nīlakaṇṭha, apart from the plays of Bhāsa. Among these, thirteen belong to Bhāsa alone.

The traditional theatre space in Kerala where Kūṭiyāṭṭam is performed is known as the Kūṭṭampalam. The term 'Kūṭṭu' means theatre, while 'ampalam' refers to a house or temple. Thus, the Kūṭṭampalam may be understood as the theatre house of the temple. The structure of the Kūṭṭampalam generally contains three parts: the Nepathyā, which

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remains invisible to the audience; the Raṅgamaṇḍapa or the main performance area; and the Mṛdaṅgapāda, or the drum area.

Another well-known Kūṭṭampalam exists in the Vadakkunnathan Temple at Thrissur, reconstructed in the ninth century. Most Kūṭṭampalams are square in shape, although the one at Chengannur is oval. In earlier times, open square spaces were often left vacant in Kerala temples specifically for the construction of Kūṭṭampalams, which resemble the Vikṛṣṭa stage described by Bharata in the Nāṭyaśāstra.

The Concept of Performance in Kūṭiyāṭṭam

In Kūṭiyāṭṭam, actors do not wear costumes appropriate to the specific characters they portray. There are no painted backdrops or stage devices intended to establish the situational context of the play. Instead, the stage is deliberately kept bare. This recalls Peter Brook's notion of the "Empty Space." According to Bharata's directions in the Nāṭyaśāstra, the stage should remain empty so that the audience, through verbal, physical, and imaginative suggestion, may construct the dramatic world internally.

The performance tradition of Kūṭiyāṭṭam places extraordinary emphasis on imagination. Mental creativity becomes central to the actor's interpretive practice. A notable example is the performance of a single monologue from the third act of Bhāsa's Pratijñāyugandharāyaṇam, which may continue for thirty-eight consecutive nights. Such elaboration is sustained through interpretive imagination supported by embodied knowledge.

Instead of performing an entire play in sequence, Kūṭiyāṭṭam often selects a single act or section for elaborate performance. Such a performance may continue from five to forty-one nights.

Bhāsa and the Kūṭiyāṭṭam Tradition

In Kerala, the Cākyārs have performed Bhāsa's plays for centuries. It is possible that they derived the logic of this performance style from Bhāsa himself. Just as Bhāsa realized the essence (Aṅgi) of the Mahābhārata within single acts or sections of the epic, the Cākyārs similarly sought to experience the essence of an entire play through the detailed performance of one act.

A characteristic feature of Kūṭiyāṭṭam is the elaborate presentation of the beginning of a play in order to provide a complete background to the dramatic theme and characters. This process is known as Nirvāhaṇam. Each act becomes complete through the Nirvāhaṇam. For example, while performing the Nirvāhaṇam of Bālivadhānam (the first act of Abhiṣekanātakam), events preceding the birth of Bāli are also enacted.

An illustrative dialogue demonstrates this method. Two servant girls, Vijayā and Nandanikā, converse regarding Prince Bharata and the conduct of Queen Kausalyā. Though the thematic content has already been conveyed in

an earlier act, the conversation is expanded and explained again to the audience in greater detail. Such elaboration forms an important feature of Kūṭiyāṭṭam dramaturgy.

Bhāsa himself included introductory segments known as Praveśakas in his plays, positioned in the place of the traditional Anukāvātāra. Professor Richmond interpreted the daily Kūṭiyāṭṭam performances he witnessed at a Thrissur temple in this context. According to him, the Nirvāhaṇam of Kūṭiyāṭṭam resembles the Praveśakas in Bhāsa's plays, suggesting that the Cākyārs preserved a living connection with Bhāsa's dramaturgical method.

Brevity and Interpretive Possibility in Bhāsa

One of the most important characteristics of Bhāsa's writing, frequently noted by directors and analysts of the Nāṭyaśāstra, is brevity. Scholar Appukkuttan Nair, quoting Meerwarth, observed that Bhāsa's concise dramatic structure allowed the Cākyārs to reveal multiple possibilities of poetic interpretation through meaningful and performative elaboration.

The brevity of Bhāsa's writing enabled performers to extend the meaning of scenes and sustain performances over many nights. Bhāsa's dramaturgy therefore provided a fertile foundation for interpretive performance.

Why Kālidāsa Did Not Become Central to Kūṭiyāṭṭam

A major question arises: why did the Cākyārs prefer Bhāsa's plays over those of Kālidāsa, who is often regarded as the greatest Sanskrit playwright?

Appukkuttan Nair offers a comparative explanation. According to him, Kālidāsa presents delicately fragrant flowers already in full bloom, whereas Bhāsa offers seeds capable of flowering in numerous ways when nurtured properly. Kālidāsa's dramatic works attain completion within themselves; Bhāsa's dramatic writing, by contrast, invites interpretive cultivation.

A comparative example from Kālidāsa and Bhāsa further clarifies this distinction. In Kālidāsa's Abhijñānaśākuntalam, when Śakuntalā leaves the forest hermitage to reside in Duṣyanta's palace, Sage Kaṇva advises her through a famous śloka: she must serve the elders in her husband's family, treat co-wives kindly, remain patient with her husband, and behave modestly. The emotional and ethical framework is fully articulated.

Bhāsa, however, would likely have expressed the same situation with a concise statement such as: "Dear daughter, you should behave appropriately." The Cākyārs would then interpret and expand this statement through śāstric injunctions, worldly examples, and experiential commentary. Thus, Bhāsa's dramaturgy naturally accommodates the interpretive richness required by Kūṭiyāṭṭam.

Conclusion

The evidence suggests that it was most probably the writing style of Bhāsa that inspired and nourished the dramatic tradition of Kūṭiyāṭṭam. The flexibility, brevity,

and interpretive openness of his plays suited the elaborate performance practices of the Cākyārs far more effectively than the highly finished poetic structure of Kālidāsa's dramas.

At the same time, it remains an important area for further research to investigate whether other theatrical traditions in India were shaped by the dramaturgical style of Kālidāsa. Such research would deepen our understanding not only of Kālidāsa's dramatic significance but also of the historical evolution of Indian theatrical forms.

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