

Kathakali in the 21st century

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Abstract

Kathakali is an indigenous art form of Kerala which originated in the 14th century; generally performed from late evening to early morning and continues for many succeeding nights. At present, Kathakali is enacted in clubs and temples in a capsule form, with selected scenes of a play, lasting for a span of two to three hours. New melodramatic plays with specific facial makeup are generally chosen for performance. Costumes became more attractive and voluminous. Even though music is losing its emotional content, the standards of percussion improved considerably. The rigorous and meticulous training modalities have been replaced by timetable-based methods of teaching. This paper examines the changes that happened to Kathakali after 2000.

Keywords: Dance Drama; Kathakali; Kerala.

Several are the changes that have occurred to Kathakali in its totality since 2000. Changes are not new in the history of Kathakali. It has gone through major changes in every aspect during its evolution through the past couple of centuries. That is to say that changes, per se, are not surprising in Kathakali over the period of time. These changes may even be perceived as representing the continuous process of evolution. But there seems to be one difference. Changes have been rather slow and linear in the earlier periods whereas it is, apparently, rapid and exponential in the last two decades. It must also be recognised that it is not only Kathakali but every other manifestation of human endeavour to has been subjected to such temporal impacts. Yet another important aspect is that such changes have not impacted uniformly all across the various domains of Kathakali as a performing art. There are certain sectors where the impact has been intense and there are others that have largely remained insulated. Taking a sectorial view of the whole situation will help us to obtain a comprehensive picture of the topography.

The temporal factors which have impacted Kathakali are quite diverse: socio-economic-cultural scenario, lifestyle alterations, invasive technology, enhanced accessibility and affordability, and aesthetic shifts. At a macro level, the domains of Kathakali, which underwent the resultant changes are the content and its aesthetic framework, its form and format, the viewership connect, the tutelage, the sponsorship, academic exchanges, livelihood issues, exposure to other art forms, etc.

In the light of the above, the way the changes occurred at the micro level may be viewed in the following way:

The content/concept / aesthetics

This is one sector of Kathakali where the recent changes could be seen, unlike the other sectors, to have taken a reverse direction in a considered effort to rediscover the glories of the earlier past by sidestepping the trends of the immediate past. This had a focus in Central Kerala and was largely the result of concerted efforts from subject experts in a major endeavour to recapture the aesthetic rigour and formalistic axioms of Kathakali of the Thirties and the Forties more as a measure to counter the partial drift towards the light and the frivolous that happened to start from the mid-seventies of the last century. This is evident from the frequent reappearance of the contemporary Kathakali stage of robust stories like *Udbhavam*, *Subhadraharanam*, *Kirmiravadham*, *Kalakeyavadham*, etc in competition with the melodious *Nalacharitam* and such others. The motivating factors for this turnaround could be traced to the organised efforts of Vedika of Trichur, Kunchu Nair Trust of Karalmanna, Red Beard Festival of Vellinezhi, Thodayam of Calicut and other such dedicated Groups. This process of turning towards the past had a significant impact on the aesthetic status of Kathakali and also on the way it is enjoyed and appreciated by contemporary viewers. The traditional idiom of performance, which insists on strict adherence to the structural and axiomatic framework, naturally led to an overall shift back towards the original robustness and classicism of Kathakali.

External and incidental aspects

There are several other domains of Kathakali, which have also been subjected to changes in the last two decades. They have all turned out to be departures from the past. Some of those domains are integral to the very existence of Kathakali as a performing art, whereas the others are only incidental and peripheral to it.

A few examples can be cited.

There have been more instances of Seminars, Discussions, Lec-Dems, Video-Documentations, Book Publishing, etc. All of these activities have definitely contributed to better exchange of ideas, useful recordings for posterity, timely updation and up-gradation of theories and practices, etc which have together resulted in larger levels of participation in the academic domain of Kathakali. This is quite different from the past when academic interactions were exclusively restricted within the higher echelons of the social structure. There were two social realities that prompted this development. Firstly, there happened the waning of the social status of the feudal masters or, more realistically, there occurred the amalgamation of their social position with that of the rest of the citizens. Secondly, the interested members from across the various classes of the Society could dare to share an equal platform of interaction. This demographic transformation had actually started a few decades earlier. But their manifestation became more obvious in the last two decades. At the academic level, these increased exchanges and exposures have, perhaps, thrown up more opportunities for projecting and promoting diverse viewpoints and even prejudices, whether advocating for maintaining traditional fidelity or championing modern trends. This does not mean that diverse interest groups having no particular inclination towards Kathakali came to the fore and diffused the focus. What actually happened was only a broadening of the interest spectrum of Kathakali appreciation. It must be recognised that when traditional fora for topical interactions vanished as a result of social upheavals of the post-Independence era, such new developments started playing a historical role in taking forward the academic fervour of Kathakali.

A makeover also happened in the format of Kathakali performances. Overnight performances considerably came down in number. Instead, three to four-hour-long programmes became the order of the day, with rather few exceptions. This change over suited the convenience of all stakeholders; the performers, support artists, organisers, and the viewers. Some decades ago, the viewers, particularly in the villages where major Kathakali events took place, could not return home in the middle of the night in the absence of public transportation. Circumstances forced them to stay overnight at the venue. This predicament was also a reason for the overnight performances becoming the normal practice then. The times have changed. People largely travel by their own or hired vehicles and have no problem in travelling in the night. And the performance schedule is accordingly changed. Kathakali, thus, has come to conform to the standard practice of performing arts in general. This change over also has started some couple of decades ago but has become the standard practice in the recent past, and it has prompted a new crop of white-collared young professionals to become hardcore Kathakali buffs.

Yet another change is the increased level of female presence in the Kathakali arena. Where a Chavara Parukkutty was a singular exception some forty years ago, presently there are a good number of versatile and established professional female Kathakali artists, apart from several other amateur artists. There is even an exclusive female Kathakali troupe (Madhavan). Whether this tribe will flourish in the future and whether they will be able to make an impact on the destiny of Kathakali are matters that only time will be able to tell.

The next logical question is whether or not the rigours of *kalari* training for the young students are essential. Even the successful and established female performers have, most likely, not undergone the rigorous hardships of physical training. That being the case, the male students might also naturally prefer to do away with the arduous training. Maybe there are already artists who have skipped that phase. The implications, if any, of this scenario may have to be assessed. If there is a consensus that the degree of the hardship of training could be brought down considerably, then that would, indeed, attract more young students to this art.

The invasion of technology is yet another major impact that the last decade, in particular, has seen. It was first impacted during the Eighties of the last century by the introduction of the simple Audio Tape Recorder which brought music to the forefront of Kathakali. A vibrant group of young musicians took leadership roles and a wave of new young listeners came forward as Kathakali viewers. As a natural consequence, stories that had music scope rather than visual appeal came to be treated as a favoured performance. But in the last decade and a half, the role of technology expanded elsewhere. Firstly, there was the potential of video recording. This enabled the publication of a large number of professionally produced video documents of classical performances. And Kathakali could again be electronically documented and preserved for posterity as visual spectacles rather than as audio music recordings. And the popular circulation of these video recordings expanded the reach and scope of Kathakali as a performing art. Moreover, it also enabled the aficionados to repeatedly watch the master performances at closer angles in detail and analyse the intricacies. Then, in the recent past, came the all-pervading influence of the Internet and social media. The internet is brimming with a wide variety of Kathakali performances, just like many other Classical art forms like music concerts, dances, Panchavadyam, Tayambaka, and whatnot. Kathakali has benefited in no small measure from this electronic explosion. Accompanying this, there has come up a lot of discussion fora, etc in the WhatsApp medium. As a combined effect of all the multifarious arms of the pervading invasion of technology, there has happened a lot of discussion and appreciation of Kathakali in all its varieties, the excellent at one end to the average at the other. It must also be recognised that there exists a problem with such

extensive involvement of technology; it becomes quite difficult to differentiate between the good and the bad. The peaks and the depths are all averaged out to a middle-level plateau. Maybe that is a characteristic attribute of contemporary democracy too. Generally, the entry of the new electronic media has enhanced the accessibility and affordability of Kathakali. It may not enhance the aptitude and sensitivity of a potential viewer. But, for a viewer with inherent inclination and aptitude, increased accessibility will be a real impetus to become an ardent follower of Kathakali. If there is a considerable chunk of such potential viewers, it may do good for Kathakali in the long run. In this context, a reference might also be made to the current social condition of isolation and personal distancing caused by the global pandemic. The electronic media power has also enabled Webinars and online performances. It may, perhaps, lead to a situation of online tutelage also. The impact of such drastic shifts may have uncertain ramifications for Kathakali.

The increased socio-economic status of the general population has created a situation where youngsters are no more interested in taking up Kathakali as a potential profession. Until four or five decades ago, financial constraints forced many youngsters to turn to Kathakali to earn a livelihood in spite of the known psycho-somatic pressures connected with its training phase. That is no more the case. This change does not augur well for the growth of Kathakali. In another five decades, one wonders, whether Kathakali will still be able to be proud of Maestros like in the past.

In the continuously changing social environment, particularly in the light of the new social and official recognition of the rights and privileges of every segment of the Society, including children, students, etc, the all-pervading and authoritarian status of an *Asan* is under threat (Achuthankutty). This may be matching with the changing attitudes, preferences and values of the current society. It is, however, likely to have an impact on Kathakali tutelage unless updated practices are evolved and put in position immediately.

Yet another aspect is the changed levels of self-esteem and self-satisfaction, that are present all across society. This has led to an increased pressure to innovate and establish the level of creativity innate to an Artist among her / his peers. This is quite different to what it used to be some decades ago when everybody insisted on dedication, devotion and adherence to tradition as set out by her / his teacher. The best way to excel was by maintaining her / his loyalty and dedication to the Teacher. That is no more the situation. Everybody wants to innovate and outshine the preceptor. The Teacher's example or model is not a barrier or yardstick at all. This social change might open up new vistas of original performances. But it might create a bit of a chaotic scene as well.

Work Cited

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