

Performative Gender And Religions In South Asia

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Lecture 50

Classical Traditions and Performances V

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Performative Gender and Religions in South Asia. So, as a continuation from our previous lectures from this module on classical dance forms, today we are going to discuss one more dance form called Kathakali from Kerala. So, Kathakali originated in Kerala and it is widely performed across the globe due to its widespread popularity. It is a 300 year old ritual theatre which combines dance and pantomime or mukabhinaya with religious inspiration as well as mythical influences. So, it is said that the classical theatre form called Ramanattam which was founded by Kottarakara Thampuran in 17th century AD is the predecessor of the Kathakali dance form. When translated, literally Kathakali means "acting out".

So, the open air performance starts at sunrise and it goes until nightfall. It entails a lot of bodily vigour and because there is so much of extreme you know bodily movements, highly energized bodily gestures, very quick and swift movements, it is usually seen that Kathakali is performed only by the male dancers. It is a male dance form where women rarely participate. So, and at because it goes on for such a long time it requires a lot of energy bodily you know flexibility and some high quality acrobatic skills.

So, the stage of Kathakali is just 5 to 6 square yards in size. Initially the place would be presented in the courtyard or the temple complex. So, in the sanctum sanctorum Kathakali would be performed. So, there are large oil lamps lit in the arena where the performance is to be done. It is meant to lit or light the stage.

It is meant to light the stage and also have a religious significance or symbol. The only prop available to the dancer or the performer is a stool which the actor can utilize for a variety of purposes, including as a place for taking rest. It can serve multiple purposes. It can play a hill or a mountain, it can play for example, place for taking rest or it can be

some kind of object.. heavy object that the actor picks up to demonstrate his virility and strength. So, at the rear of the stage the orchestra and the two vocalists are seated.

The orchestra performs tunes that are adapted from the Carnatic theme music, which is commonly played in the Kerala temples, and there are two different kinds of drums being played. One is a gong and then we have a tambura. So, the gong and the tamboura or a cymbal organ are being played in the background. A loud continuous drumbeat heralds the start of the performance at dusk. Free entry to the audience is usually offered and people start to gather around the performance spot.

So, in order to get Shiva's approval or blessings for the performance, two young performers perform the Todayam, which is a ritual dance and they perform this Todayam without any makeup or costumes. Here it is important to note that the avatar of Shiva that is being worshipped prior to Kathakali is Nataraj the dancing Shiva. And after seeking Shiva's blessings and approval the show is started, the dance performance begins. So, even prior to the beginning of the show there are certain unexpected revelations. Percussion from the orchestra serves as an accompaniment to the unexpected revelations and these revelations are repeated a number of times.

And then suddenly the two boys that were performing the Todayam, the invocation, propitiation of Lord Nataraj would draw back the curtain. They would draw back the curtain revealing the Kathakali performer in all his majestic attire. So, only after the Todayam the Kathakali performer is displayed before the audience after some unexpected revelations. So, Kathakali performer's body starts quivering, his arms are extended in a symbolic stance, his knees are bent and his feet are usually resting on the outside edge of the sole, rather than the actual sole itself. It is balancing out, it is resting on the outside edge.

So, the singers start chanting, the interpreters start singing and the performance starts at once. There is a kind of expectation that is built within the audience through the pre-performance of Todayam. Through these revelations where people are anticipating that at any time the actual performance of Kathakali will begin. And then the Kathakali performer is displayed in front of the audience in all his majestic attire and glory. So, the performer dances, makes gestures, mimes, he leaps. So, it is a lot of bodily energy and vitality that is required to perform Kathakali, and alongside these acrobatic skills he is

also telling the tale using a complicated articulation, which incorporates both ballet and mime.

So, it requires extensive training, extensive training for years in order to become an expert in Kathakali. The play tells the tales of some remarkable occurrences involving the gods, the devils and legendary figures. So, in the Kathakali narratives good always triumphs over evil and the demons. The actor portrays the conflict between good and evil, only through moving his body, and the audience is already familiar with the themes of the play. So, this is very much like the epic tradition where the central plot of the story is known, so where the central story is known, the characters are known beforehand, it is not something new that the performer or the performance is telling.

So, the onus is on how the performance is being executed, how the dancers are narrating a familiar myth or a familiar legend or folklore. So, this is very much like the Athenians were aware of the mythology of the Greek trilogies, they already knew about Iliad and Odysseus, but it is the narrative style which becomes more important, the technicalities, the techniques, the stylistic devices that become more important because the story is already familiar, it is existing at the heart of the given tradition and in the collective consciousness of the people since time immemorial; there is nothing new that can be said about Ramayana for example. So, how the artists are treating the story becomes more important, the artistic treatment and intervention of the story becomes more important than the story itself. Every gesture and each movement is an ideogram, which tells a tale and it can only be comprehended if it is conventional. So, it is almost a requirement that the story needs to be a familiar one, the characters need to be people that are widely known and they are almost inveterate in the collective psyche, in the collective consciousness of the people.

So, there are six eye movements in Kathakali, eleven different ways of looking and four different postures for the neck. Like I said, Kathakali dancer needs to be trained for years together in order to attain expertise that allows him to perform on stage. So, all of the flexible areas of the body including the feet, the toes, heels, ankles, waist and hips are covered by the 64 motions of the limbs. A dancer needs to know all of these 64 motions. The hands and fingers move in a set of predefined poses that are known as mudras or signs, and these mudras or signs have narrative purpose.

So, the acting language uses these mudras as its alphabets. The actors emotions are expressed on the face. If he is terrified for example, everything has to be shown through facial expressions. There is no way a Kathakali performer can speak. So, for example, if he is terrified how will he convey that? Through eyebrows fluttering, his eyes open wide, his eyeballs moving, his nostrils flaring out, his cheeks trembling and his head spinning erratically.

If the performer has to portray a character who is enraged, then his lower eyelids have to rise. The lower part of the eyelids rise, his gaze becomes fixed and penetrating, his nostrils and lips tremble, his jaws are tight and he stops breathing. It is a kind of stiffness of facial muscle that he needs to exhibit. So, the literature form of Kathakali is called Attakatha. It makes up the literary repertoire of the Kathakali tradition.

So, Bakavadham, Kalyanasoughandikam, Kalakeyavadham, Krameeravadham, Nalacharitham, Dakshayagam, Uttaraswayamvaram, Keechakavadham, Duryodhanavadham are some of the famous Attakatha that are performed by the Kathakali artists. Some of the stages for performing Kathakali are Keli, Arangukeli, Thodayam, Vandanam, Purapaadu, Melapadam, Kathabhinayam and Dhanassi. These are the stages or the order that the performance of Kathakali follows. And then there are certain classical features of Kathakali including Angikam, Vachikam, Satvikam and Aharyam. In Kathakali, the mudras by hand become the Angikam and the songs become the Vachikam part.

So, through both Angikam and Vachikam, the narrative can be told, the emotions can be conveyed. The different slokam and padam used in Attakatha are sung by the singers of Kathakali. So, Rasabhinaya is the Sathvikam part of Kathakali. Aharyam is based on the good characters and the evil characters that Kathakali performers perform. And some of the important aspects of attire or vesham used in Kathakali include the kathi or knife, the pacha or green, the thadi or beard, the minukku or radiant and the kari or the black.

So, one by one if we take up these different aspects of vesham, pacha first, it represents royalty, divinity and virtue and the performers you know that use the pacha or the green color always wear a headgear because these are the virtuous characters, they are the heroes, they are the positive characters, the virtuoso. The green color or pacha that is used for painting the faces of the heroes or the virtuous characters is produced by mixing

the manayola and the neelam or blue and the coconut oil is used as the base of the color. Some characters that portray this kind of green makeup include Dharmaputra, Nala, Daksha, Bhimsen and Arjun. These are all heroes and virtuous characters. Next, we come to kathi or knife, which represents the villainous male characters. Some characters portrayed in the kathi makeup would include Duryodhan, Kichak, Ravan and Narakasur.

So, there are two types of kathi characters for example, the Nedumkathi and the Kurumkathi, and we see that in Kathakali tradition the kurumkathi is more popular. The distinctive features of kathi characters include bearing a mustache. So, the kathi or villainous characters would inevitably carry a moustache on their face, a little knob called chuttippu that is fixed to the tip of their nose as well as another knob that is present in the middle of their forehead. These are the markers of being evil characters in terms of vesham or attire. Next, kari vesham is used to portray the demons.

The characters in kari are further classified into two according to their gender. One is the Aankari, the other is the Penkari. So, Aankari refers to the male demons, Penkari refers to the female demons. So, for example, the forest dweller called kaattalan in Nala Charita is an example of an Aankari or a male demon character. Next, another aspect of vesham is the thaadi or the beard.

The thaadi is further classified into three types. One is the Chuvanna Thaadi or the red beard, the Vella Thaadi or white beard and the Karutha Thaadi or black beard. So, Vella Thaadi literally means white beard and this kind of makeup or vesham is donned by the virtuous characters, the heroes. One such hero being Hanuman, the monkey chief in Ramayan. Next, Chuvanna Thaadi means red beard and it is worn by the evil characters.

So, the evil characters have red beard. Dushasan is an evil character wearing red beard or Chuvanna Thaadi. Although Bali and Sugriva are not evil characters, they are great monkey chiefs, but we see that in Kathakali tradition, they wear the red beards in Ramayana tradition, in the narratives of Ramayana. Next, Karutha thaadi or black bearded makeup is used by the tribals. Black bearded makeup refers to the forest dwellers in Kathakali.

Next, minukku. So, minukku is one of the five veshams or types of makeup in Kathakali. It is used to represent the women and the sages. So, these are not the main characters as such. Traditionally, Kathakali being a predominantly male performance, the female characters are also performed by the male artists. So, the minukku vesham is used to represent gentleness in a high spiritual standing, and it is characterized with the yellow facial paint.

The ones that represent the minukku vesham, they are either females or they are saints and they wear a yellow face makeup. Minukku are the minor characters in the story. Like I said, the women and the sages do not play the central role. So, the central roles are played by the male characters. The heroes are dominant in the Kathakali tradition, which is clearly a male-centric tradition or a male-centric dance form.

So, here we have a performance of Kathakali. We see that there is a hero with the white beard and another with a red beard who may not be a virtuous character, may be someone who is an evil character with a red beard. They wear exquisite elaborate headgears and through very energetic footwork, they are telling a narrative. Once again, the artists cannot speak. It is the mudra, the foot movements that tell the narrative.

There is a lamp lit in front of the stage and the orchestra are being played by the musicians at the back. Look at the makeup of the face. They have makeup that takes such a long time to prepare and apply. So, there is so much of investment in these art forms, in training, in dressing up, in narrating the story.

A lot of investment is made. It carries the entire tradition, history and heritage of a culture. So, the green makeup refers to the heroic characters. Once again, the green makeup and the white beard. So, we see Duryodhana and Dusshasana at Indraprastha.

This is the title of the narrative. So, with this, we come to the end of this lecture and the discussion of all the classical forms in this module. I will meet you with another round of discussions in another lecture. Thank you.