UNIT 1  CLASSICAL THEATRE TRADITION -
KUTTIYAATTAM

Structure

1.1 Introduction

Objectives

1.2 Kuttiyaattam

1.2.1 Brief History
1.2.2 Actors
1.2.3 Theatre
1.2.4 The Stage
1.2.5 Preliminaries
1.2.6 Nirvahana
1.2.7 Angika Abhinaya
1.2.8 Aharya Abhinaya
1.2.9 Vachika Abhinaya
1.2.10 Satvika Abhinaya
1.2.11 Vidushaka

1.3 Questions

1.1 INTRODUCTION

In a previous lesson, you were introduced to the classical theatre or what we can call the Sanskrit theatre. You became acquainted with all the intricacies of the staging of a drama as per the dicta prescribed by the legendary sage Bharata in the Natyashastra. In theory you understood what is the meaning of the four abhinayas - angika, vachika, adharya and sattvika. You were also told how these abhinayas are beautifully blended in our classical dance styles. But you are sure to raise a question “what has happened to the naatya that Bharata had envisaged?” Indeed, your question would be a very pertinent one.

You must remember a few very relevant facts here. Firstly Bharata’s naatya was created some 2500 years ago. In the intervening vast stretch of time from then to today, the society and the country have undergone vast changes. It is but natural since society or human life are never static, they are always on the move, very dynamic. This constant movement is not very visible but the changes that it brings in change the society, its attitudes and its conditions in a significant manner. Yet there are certain aspects which are constant and are very visible even today.

We have noticed that Sanskrit was our language – the Natyashastra is written in Sanskrit and is available to us even today in Sanskrit, many of us love Sanskrit and Sanskritic studies. Similarly our religion is still with us – probably the oldest religion in the world. But very gradually the importance of Sanskrit declined in our society.

There are various reasons for this decline of Sanskrit. The study of Linguistics (the science of language) in our country has shown that prior to the coming of the Aryans into our country from Central Asia, we had a flourishing, well established culture and society. We get ample evidence from the archeological sites of Mohen-jo-daro, Harappa, Lothal etc. There are seals and tablets that have been found from these places which
have inscriptions in a language which has not been very successfully deciphered. But scholarly investigations have brought to light the fact that this was a highly advanced civilisation. They brought with them their language which is Sanskrit but with elements that are not to be found in the later Sanskrit which very naturally, must have borrowed from the local languages which are call the Prakrits (the natural language as against Sanskrit which means the cultured language.

Similarly in the south of the country there were other, older established cultures having Ancient Tamil as their language.

Though Sanskrit is considered to be the “Mother Of All Languages,” it acquired great rigidity due to its very strict grammar; it also remained the language of the court and the elite. As against this the Prakrits, being the languages of the masses, flourished albeit by borrowing many elements and words from Sanskrit. This saw the decline of Sanskrit amongst the majority of inhabitants.

Yet there existed, and still exist, devoted people who devoted their lives to Sanskrit. Similarly the Sanskrit theatre based on plays written in Sanskrit declined. In its place the local theatrical practices flourished reflecting the cultural ethos of each area. For a good change, the Natyashastric rules came to be adopted in these regional practices to a greater or a lesser extent.

One such tradition flourished in Kerala—KUTTIYAATTAM— which retained the ancient Natyashastric practice to a very large extent but adapted within its fabric the elements of the Kerala culture. Somehow it has managed to survive against heavy adds. Today it receives great patronage from both, the state and the central government but its popularity is very restricted to a handful of faithfuls.

Objectives:
After studying this unit you should be able to:

a) Appreciate the tremendous values of the tenets laid down by Bharata.
b) Fully understand the evolution of cultures down the history lane.
c) Be able to enjoy a performance of Kuttiyaattam if you get a chance to see it.

1.2 KUTTIYAATTAM

Kuttiyaatam is often described as the traditional presentation of classical Sanskrit drama. It is believed to be India’s oldest continuously performed theatre form presented in Sanskrit, the classical language. Plays by famous playwrights of ancient drama (naatya) like Bhaasa, Harsha and King Mahendra Vikrama Pallava are popular plays performed.

From the point of view of what the performance communicates, Kuttiyaattam may be described as ‘the theatre of imagined reality’.

The entire body of the actor, his very distinctive costuming (aahaarya) are used to convey communication between the actor and his spectators. The actor, with the active support of the drummer has to arouse the imagination of the spectator. Thus when the actor pretends to look at the sea which he imagines to be in front of him the spectator should not have a negative attitude and should not say that there is no sea on the stage. The actor, by the use of all the four abhinayas—angika, vachika, aharya and saattvika creates a supramundane (alaukika) world which is not very directly mentioned in the original text. It is the actor who is supreme. Kuttiyaattam thus is the actor’s theatre par excellence.
It is this highly talented and dedicated band of actors who have kept Kuttiyaattam alive facing great difficulties and almost a total lack of either patronage or popularity. These actors are usually hereditary and belong to the Chaakkyaar caste who are Brahmins.

Kuttiyaattam lays a good deal of emphasis on religious rituals. At the same time it is a skillful combination of naatyadharmi and lokadharmi.

Traditionally Kuttiyaattam is performed within a specialised theater called Kuttaambalam which is one of the five structures attached to a temple which has been sanctified by specially ordained religious rituals. The practice and performance were traditionally the prerogative of actors from the Chaakkyaar and Nambyaar communities. Kuttiyaattam is performed as one of the ritualistic aspects of the religious rituals of a temple, it can also be performed as an annual performance. Kuttiyaattam thus becomes a ritualistic theatre naaty yajna which once commenced, cannot be stopped in the middle; it must be successfully completed.

Before a performance starts, the main priest blesses the actors. Then the lamp on the stage is lighted with a wick from the Sanctum sanctorum (garbha griha). There are three wicks in the lamp signifying the presence of the Trimurtis in the heaven the devas, in the Naimishaaranya the rishis and on the earth the Brahmins.

1.2.1 Brief History

As far as its history of origin and development are concerned, it is believed by some scholars that in its earliest form Kuttiyaattam existed in the 3rd or 4th century A.D. since there is a reference to a Kuttachakkyan who performed in the honour of the king Cheran Shenguttuvan when he visited Cheranaadu (Kerala). This evidence is interpreted as a proof that a Chaakyaar (Chaakkyan) performed Kuttu.

Whether this interpretation is accepted or not but according to the prevalent Kerala belief it was the king Kulashekhara Varman who was responsible for reforming the Sanskrit stage in Kerala. His date is approximately 900 A.D. The king was ably helped by a Brahmin scholar called Tolan. The king himself wrote two plays Subhadraa dhananjayan and Tapatisamvarana.

For Kuttiyaattam, besides the tradition handed down from generation to generation regarding the staging of Sanskrit plays, there are actual texts dealing with the various aspects of the stage-craft. The most important among them are the kramadeepikaas and the attaprakaaras. The kramadeepikaas are written in either Malayalam or Sanskrit or both; they explain the procedure to be adopted in the staging of plays and deal with the songs, dance movements raagas and other stage directions. There are other texts which are called kriyaakramas which indicate the manner of acting, the meanings of verses and dialogues etc; these enable the actor to represent the role or situation by correct hand gestures (hastas) and other movements.

1.2.2 Actors

The real actor in Kuttiyaattam are the Chaakkyaars and Nangyaars (women of the Nanbyaar caste). The male Nambyaar plays on the big drum called Michaavu with his bare hands – hence he is called paanivaada. The Nangyaar not only enacts the role of the female characters in the play but also sings accompanying songs and play on the small cymbals (taalams). In some literary pieces of the medieval era, there are several references to Nangyaars being great dance exponents.
1.2.3 Theater

These Sanskrit plays are traditionally performed in the vicinity of temples, they were developed essentially as a temple art. Some of the big and important temples have a theatre which is called 'Kuttaambalam' inside their precincts. In temples where there is no 'Kuttaambalam' the performance takes place in the big halls.

1.2.4 The stage

On one side is the green-room and in front of it is the stage; the spectators sit in front as well as on the sides of the stage. At the rear portion of the stage, behind the actors are kept two large drums called Mizhaavu which are actually oblong pots made of copper with leather tied over the mouth. They are placed in wooden frames. There is a high seat for the Nambyaar to sit upon while playing on the drum with his hands. At the back of the stage are two doors, one an either side of the stage which connect it with the green room.

The decoration of the stage is done with tender leaves of the coconut tree, bunches of tender coconuts, plaintain trees with fruits, red silk, the cylindrical measuring vessel called paraa filled with rice with husks intact etc.

Before the first entrance of the central characters a curtain is held by two people, the characters making entry from behind the curtain.

A huge lamp, about four feet high made out of bell metal is placed in front of the stage. It is lighted with 3 wicks – two facing the actor and one facing the spectators.

1.2.5 Preliminaries

Right in the beginning the huge lamp is lighted. After placing eight auspicious things near the lamp the Mizhaavu is tuned. The Nambyaar starts playing on it accompanied by the singing by the Nangyaar in praise of Ganapati, Sarasvati etc. Next the Nangyaar gives a summary of the story in Malayalam. Then the cleansing of the stage takes place. Then the entire life of the main character is narrated by way of songs.

After this, the actor makes his appearance behind the curtain accompanied by the orchestra. Now he recites his speech which is followed by certain steps and movements.

1.2.6 Nirvahana

The preliminaries and the first introduction of the main character are over on the first day. Then from the second day starts the Nirvahana of the hero (naayaka). It is the description of the earlier life of the hero prior to the incidents which are going to be staged. This is accompanied by angika abhinaya.

Next is the first introduction of the vidushaka (jester). He starts his Nirvahana with vaachika abhinaya where he describes all the incidents of the previous scenes. It is similar to mono acting. The hero uses more of angika abhinaya whereas the vidushaka gives prominence to vaachika abhinaya.

1.2.7 Angika Abhinaya

Angika abhinaya, which is the representation ideas through movements and gestures of the different limbs of the body, plays a very important part in the staging of Kuttiyaattam. It is not only the word meaning but also the suggested ideas and the detailed explanations of the ideas which are represented through gestures. The hand gestures (hastas) are from the text called Hastalakshana deepikaa.
1.2.8 Aharya Abhinaya

Aharya abhinaya consists in the make-up and costumes appropriate to the characters. The aharya is similar to that in Kathakali but is simpler. The chutti round the chin and cheeks is smaller and so is the head-dress (kireetam). The dressing is very artistic.

There are different types of make-up like Pacchha, Pazhukka, Katti and Kari. Kings of magnanimous character have Pazhukka make-up. Haughty characters like Raavana have Katti make-up. Princes like Arjuna have the Pacchha make-up. The female characters also have Pazukka make-up. The demoness Shoorpanakhaa has Kari make-up which is black.

1.2.9 Vachika Abhinaya

The vachika abhinaya consists in the correct and proper utterance of the words of the texts by the actors. This is very important in Kuttiyaattam. The Chaakkyaaars have a unique way of reciting the Sanskrit and Prakrit passages. It is a very slow recitation for which there are certain raagas fixed which are selected according to the context and the sentiments. These raagas are not the music raagas but are recitation raagas.

1.2.10 Sattvika Abhinaya

Sattvika Abhinaya occupies a very important place in successful representation (acting). It has a very realistic representation of the resultant or external manifestations of the internal feelings. It produces the correct responding mood in the spectator. In the Kerala tradition both Kuttiyaattam and Kathakali, the sattvika abhinaya is done with great care. With the help of delicate movements of the eyes, brows, cheeks, lips but without any gestures of the hands the actor is able to reproduce fully the facial expressions and the moods correctly. Many ideas are thus silently indicated even without the help of hand gestures.

The sattvika abhinaya takes place first; following it the verse is recited slowly and explained with the help of angika abhinaya.

1.2.11 Vidushaka

The vidushaka is the most prominent character in Kuttiyaattam so much so that he overshadows all the other characters of the play. He is the only person who speaks in colloquial Malayalam and thus explains the Sanskrit and Prakrit passages spoken by the other characters. Both by his words and actions, he adds the humorous elements.

The vidushaka has absolute freedom of speech. Personal references, pointed allusions and innuendos are his weapons and he uses them very freely without bothering whether his victims are princes or nobles or ordinary folk. For the good of the society, he thinks it fit to expose their conduct.

The vidushaka gets ample opportunities to criticise the administration, point out the defects of corruption like bribery with what can be described as a sharp tongue. His task is to explain the words spoken by anyone in his presence in Malayalam. In the case of Prakrit passages, he first gives the Sanskrit chhaayaa and then the Malayalam version. His own original words are first spoken in fluent Prakrit, followed by the Sanskrit chhaayaa and then the Malayalam version. His association are mainly with food and maid-servants and these two spheres, he constantly brings into enactment.
1.3 QUESTIONS

1. Fill in the blank spaces in the following statements using the words given below:

[ hereditary, nirvahana, vidushaka, Malayalam, Kerala, earlier, Sanskrit, prominent, Chaakkyaar, Brahmins, hero, kuttaambalam, temple ]

a) Kuttiyaattam is the ________________ theatre from ________________.

b) The actors are ________________ and belong to the ________________ cast who are ________________.

c) The theatre is called a ________________ which is inside the ________________ precincts.

d) ________________ is the description of the ________________ life of the ________________.

e) The ________________ is the most ________________ character who speaks in ________________.

2. Write in 5 lines on the sattvika abhinaya in Kuttiyaattam.

3. Write briefly on the importance of the Vidushaka in Kuttiyaattam.

Answers

1. a) Sanskrit, Kerala
   b) hereditary, chaakkyaar, Brahmins
   c) Kuttaambalam, temple
   d) Nirvahana, earlier, hero
   e) Vidushaka, prominent, Malayalam

2. Sattvika abhinaya holds a very important place in successful representation. It is done with a great care. With the help of delicate movements of the eyes, brows, cheeks, lips but without any gestures of the hands the actor is able to reproduce fully the facial expressions and the moods correctly. Many ideas are thus silently indicated even without the help of the hastas.

3. The vidushaka is so very important that he overshadows the other characters. He is the only person who speaks in Malayalam and thus explains the Sanskrit and Prakrit passages spoken by the other characters. He has an absolute freedom of speech and he can criticise the administration, point out the defects of corruption like bribery with very sharp words. For the good of the society he thinks fit to expose anybody’s evil conduct.
Kuttiyattam
Kuttiyattam
Ghaliram Kotwal