

CHAVITTU NATAKAM : A TRADITIONAL CHRISTIAN THEATRE TEXT AND ITS ANALYSIS

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Chavittu natakam is considered as a dance form prevalent among the Latin Christians of Kerala. It is an art form that is more than four hundred years older and also an art form of resistance of the downtrodden minority of the coastal area in Kerala. It can be called an amalgam of both the Western and Eastern theatre concepts and practices. Every art form is inseparably related to its culture and life-styles. It has been observed that, Chavittunatakam, which is a musical drama based on the heroic emotion is similar to the martial art of Kalaripayattu in some respects and also to The Yakshagana of Karnataka in a broader sense. Also, this dance form with its orientation towards Sanskrit theatre techniques, brings to our mind the opera of Europe, writes Sebina Rafi(2010:13). The influences of the techniques of Kalaripayattu and Porattunatakam can be seen in it. This dance form can be qualified as a new product born as a result of the combination of the martial art tradition and the various dance culture in Kerala and the realistic sense of Greek theatre. Not surprisingly it is the only form of visual art in the world that uses the biggest stage (36 feet width and 135ft length).

HISTORY AND TEXTS

Chavittunatakam can be viewed as a symbol of the tradition, culture and art sense of the Latin Christians in Kerala. The Christian missionaries who came to Kerala in the 16th C. brought with them the seeds of this art form, since most of them had imbibed the essentials of the Greek theatre. The Portuguese merchants who came to Kerala in the end of 15th c found most of the local Christians to be good soldiers and experts in martial art. Gouveaⁱ, the famous Portuguese

historian, records that the youth of Kerala, had undergone compulsory military training from the age of eight to twenty five. It is believed that there was a *Swaroopam*ⁱⁱ named 'Villarvettam' near *Kottai kovilthkunnu* at Kodungallur in Thrissur as the heads of the Kerala Christianity till the mid 15th c AD. The Christians under these extra skilled war heroes met Vasco-de-Gama when he came to Cochin and they were enlisted to the Portuguese army. The Dutch, who came to Kerala after the Portuguese also enrolled them to the army and conferred titles such as Captains, Commandant and so on. In the beginning, Chavittunatakam was popular among this tradition of Christians. Thus, this art form grew along the coastal areas of Kerala from Chavakkad in the North to Kollam in the South. The practitioners of Chavittunatakam in places such as Gothuruthu near Kodungallur and Aleppy have been making new experiments and reformatory attempts in this art form.

History says that visual arts originated from religious rites across the globe. Musical dance dramas originated in the temples of Dionysus in the Ancient Greece. Dance dramas began as psalms to Gods during an abundant and happy harvest seasons later transformed into Operas. Likewise, from the ancient times onwards musical forms such as Margamkalippattu, Kalyanappattu, Pallippattu, Rambanpattu and Odippattu were conducted based on the religion and its conventions among the Christians in Kerala. Chavittunataka thus, arose against a religious, social and military background. Chavittunatakam, in its developmental periods was staged in a devotional atmosphere especially in connection with X'mas and Easterⁱⁱⁱ

Even though the Chavittunatakam was developed as a result of the influence of the European missionaries, like any other art, at its various stages of origin and development, a strong influence can be found from numerous local and classical art forms. The influence of Kalari tradition cannot be negated^{iv}.

Like the classical art forms of Kerala, Koothu, Koodiyattam and Kathakali and Chavittunatakam is also an art form where performance, dance, music and rhythm are beautifully harmonized^v. If Sravya(hear) and drusya(visual) are given a key status in musical dramas, a royal status is given to Nruthya and equal status to Natya and Nrutha are given in Kathakali^{vi}. But like Koodiyattam, Chavittunatakam gives importance to facial expressions and hand gestures to a certain limit for the explication of the *pada*. Subverting to the dictum of saga, Bharatha in Natya sashtra, odious and silly scenes such as death, war and siege of metropolis must not be presented

on the stage. Classical arts such as Kathakali had presented battles and war cries on stage. The special heroic temper and war heritage of Kerala offers a space for such performances. These factors play a key role in art forms like Koodiyattam and Kathakali. This also shows the audience's positive response and interest to such elements. We can trace that Chavittunatakam also follow a tradition.

There are numerous similarities and dissimilarities between the classical art of Kathakali(17th C) and Chavittunatakam. Dravidian dance styles have been accepted in both Kathakali and Chavittunatakam. While the characters sing and act simultaneously in Chavittunatakam, the actor in Kathakali transfers the emotional intensity of the song in play back to the audience through facial and bodily gestures^{vii}. If Kathakali is about the super human characters in purana, Chavittunatakam contains characters that appeared in history or the events that could have happened in history. For instance, the characters including the protagonist in *Karalman charitham* are historically related to European history and Christianity. Hence, in its aharyabhinaya^{viii}, a suitable dress and makeup has to be chosen for the story and time of its occurrence.

As the characters in Kathakali are superhuman, they can be superhumanly and artificially represented. But the dress and makeup of Chavittunatakam remains to be an imitation of western character types. Sebina Rafi in a book titled 'Chavittunatakam' intriguingly compares and historically analyses the "Devil" character in Chavittunatakam and "Karivesham" in Kathakali^{ix}.

Local art forms are presented in temporarily erected stages. Chavittunatakam also such temporary stages, erected using narrow wooden planks. These planks are arranged in such a way as to produce the sound of drum beat when the characters make their dance movements. In the modern times Chavittunatakam is presented on the ordinary stage. In 'Karalsman charitham' Emperor Thoork and 25 kings and their retinue come together in a single scene. In famous chavittunatakam, 'Napoleon charitham' and 'Janoa charitham' between 30 and 40 characters come together at a time on the stage. It demanded a huge stage set up to accommodate a vast number of artists. But now, for the sake of convenience, the number of artists between curtailed to seven or eight.

Analysis

Composed in Chentamil language, Chavittunatakams are unprinted and transmitted from one generation to the next. From the first text Karalman charithum, Janova charitham and Brijitha charitham were written in vattezhutthu alphabets on palm leaves. Written in Tamil musical meters, these texts contain rhythms such as Ethuka, Mona and Iyaippu Mooran Alapadai and Adukkumozhi. The musicality of these texts is praiseworthy.

As Chavittunatakam exhibits violent masculine traits and the male characters shows heroic quality, hard instruments like Chenda, Madhalam and Ilathalam are used. For the modest and Lasya dance of the female characters soft instruments like Mrudangam, Tabla, Fiddle, Flute and Bulbul are used. Disciplined and definite dance movements, gymnastic flexibility of body, foreign narrative elements, interpretative possibilities for the director, devotional pleasure to holy men of Christianity, and the partnership of a whole local populace for the presentation undoubtedly enriches this theatre. In short, Chavittunatakam presents a cultural harmony of all the above.

ⁱ Gouvea was the secretary to Dr. Menasis, the Portuguese metropolitan and viceroy. He wrote a historical text based on Kerala culture titled Gouvea Journal (journal).

ⁱⁱ Dynasty

ⁱⁱⁱ In the surrounding regions of Kodungallur there were many stories spread about those who became insolvent by spending money for Chavittunatakam, selling their properties and cattles.

^{iv} The martial art culture of Kalaripayattu remains to be one of the strong presences in most of the classical folk art forms such as Kathakali, Theyyam, Patayani, Mutiyettu, Poorakkali and Velakali.

^v Natyam – the context of the story Transferred to the audience from the dialogues of the characters and acting.

Nrutyam is the mode of acting where every spoken word is acted using hand justers.

^{vi} Koodiyttam is a classical art form, 2000 years old and still persists. The plays of Bhasa are mostly used in Koodiyattam.

^{vii} Actors sang and acted in Ramanattam the prototype of Kathakali.

^{viii} Sage Bharatha, in Natyasasthra divided acting into four; Angika, Vachika, Aharya and Satwika.

Angika protocol is the appropriated movements of Limbs. Limbs are classified into main limbs and ancillary ones.

Vachika is the acting with words when ideas are presented in song form subtle emotional shades are easily brought forth.

Dress and makeup forms Aharya. It has been prescribed that the actors must be arranged well according to the story and its time in order to make them realities.

Swathwika denotes the exhibition of the emotions of the character through histrionics.

^{ix} .”Like the ‘Devil’ character in the Chavittunatakam,’ Kari vesham’ of Kathakali is too meant for arousing the nausea and hatred of the audience. That the entire Karivesham in Kathakali are Dravida characters is a note worthy factor. It might be a necessity of the creators of Kathakali to represent the defeated Dravidas as wretched characters”.(Sabina Rafi; *Chavittunatakam, Pranatha Books, Kochi, 2010:32*)

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