

KATHAKALAKSHEPA THROUGH THE AGES

Sri Krishnaswamy, Sri Pattabiraman, Sri Aravamudan, Sri Kumar, Madam Maithreyi and Dear Friends

During my research way back in 1979, it was a pleasant experience to meet the great performers of this art apart from reading whatever articles were available. Two veterans Banni Bai and Sri Embar were the only artists with whom I developed a Sishya daughter bondage. I could not frequent Shrirangam due to the distance but even in Madras, Mint was far away. But from 1979 to 1984, I went at least once a week and spend more than three hours. The time I spent with Banni Bai was most enjoyable because the songs I learnt, the anecdotes I heard, the jokes, the punning of words all the nice things she lovingly gave me to eat, especially the pālkōva, kārābūndi, pakoda - hot from the North Indian shops. All these extended even after my research was over. They became as close as my family members. I can go on and on like a Harikatha but what I would like to say is that there are some who are born artists. In the sense that Banni Bai personality and her graceful looks, it is just not beauty alone, the radiance was such that she had it even when she was 80. The very expressive face and becoming one with the character which she portrayed, the songs full of bhava, the natural humour, her majestic voice, her linguistic excellence especially Sanskrit, Marathi, Telugu (her mother tongue), even Tamil, Hindi and Kannada, her style of narration, all cannot be just imitated by everyone even the disciples. What we could assimilate was the style and the tradition the methodology of performance, the metrical forms in their traditional tunes and the nirupanas which she meticulously taught us. I could not closely adhere to her impasses, because she would not like me to change even a word and the way she learnt was to get it by heart, the old system of learning at the initial stage. As a tribute to her narration of music, I have excerpts which I shall play for a few minutes

1. a song she rendered for the film 'Cakkubai' (1959)
2. her definition and explanation of Harikatha – a lecture at the University in 1984
3. a composition of 'Citrakavi Sivaram' which she recorded in 1996

Before playing the audio cassette I wish to thank Narada Gana Sabha for all the help and encouragement they have always given to SUNANDA. I individually thank Sri Krishnaswamy, Sri B.R. Kumar, Smt. Pattabiraman, Madam Maithreyi and Sri Aravamudam for readily accepting our request to

The art form Kathākālakṣēpa is known as Harikatha, Kālakṣēpa, Kathākālakṣēpa and Harikatha Kālakṣēpa. This is a performing art where stories from Epics and Purānas are narrated by the Bhagavata, interspersed with musical forms. What started as a method of communicating, the religious and moral truths substantiated by stories and myths to people at large, gradually blossomed into an art form full of classicism of the highest order. The written text, the narration and the songs is called as Nirupana or Katha Nirupana. This art form is known as Harikatha popularly due to the themes which are mainly drawn from Ramayana, Bhagavata and Bharata. It consists of story exposition, musical forms, upakathas and humorous anecdotes.

According to Dr. V. Raghavan “when Ramayana or Bhagavatam is expounded as Pravachana, large crowds gather, the feeling is purely religious. When there is music performance in which songs of Tyagaraja are sung, people come in large numbers and the appeal is purely artistic. In a Harikatha there is a combination and synthesis of both an art form which communicates all that is best in both in the Pravachana and the music concert’.

The etymological meaning of Kathākālakṣēpa is spending time (kṣēpa) listening to katha.

Kālakṣēpo na kartavyaha kṣinamāyuhu kṣaṇē kṣaṇē

Yamasya karuṇā nāsti kartavyam harikīrtanam

Listening to interesting and inspiring stories narrated by a scholar was a common practice during the Vedic period. Such discourse was termed as ‘Ākhyana’.

In the Aikreya Brahamana there is a reference to Sunersepopākhyāna, where the story of Sunerspa was narrated by the Hotṛ priest at the Rajasūya sacrifice. Mention is also made to the Ākhyāna – vid as one who is well versed in Ākhyāna.

In the Chandogya Upanishad the word 'Katha' is referred to in the sense of a philosophical discussion.

The Vāyu and Padma Purāna tell us how ancient genealogies takes and ballads were preserved by the Sutas and they describe the sutas duty.

The Vāyu Purāna (1-31-2) says the suta's special duty as perceived by good men of old was to preserve the genealogies of Gods, Rishis and most glorious kings and the traditions of great men, which are displayed by those who declare sacred lore in the Itihasas and Purānās. The Padma Purāna makes similar observations.

In the Ramayana there are references describing Lava and Kusha rendering the Story of Rama to the accompaniment of stringed instruments and cymbals.

It is believed that the first reciters and narrators of the story of the Ramayana were Lava and Kusha themselves.

The Mahabharata was narrated by Narada to the Devas, Śuka to Gandharvas, Rākṣasas and Yakṣās. Vaiśampayana narrates it for the benefit of humanity in the course of the great sacrifice conducted by Janamajeya son of King Parikshit.

In Padma Purāna Sri Śuka, the son of Sage Vyāsa narrated the Bhāgavata Mahatyam accompanied by Prahlāda, Nārada, Arjuna and others.

Śuka narrates the various deeds of Lord Krishna and the other episodes of the Bhagavata to King Parikshit.

Narada and Śuka have been popularly associated with story narration and this hoary tradition is said to have been carried on by the Sutas, Pauranikas and the Bhagavatars.

Story narration has been performed in many styles. Purāna Pathana was the earliest and is still prevalent in remote areas especially in Temples or Mutts. Here a Pauranika reads out from the text in its original mostly and expounds the concepts. This mood is rather serious. Such sessions were held in Royal Courts also.

In Sangita Upanyasa there is narration and music, mainly slokas which are sung in various ragas and a few songs. This may be performed with or without musical accompaniment.

In Harikatha, the Bhagavatar performs in a standing posture with chipla and jalra and enacts the characters of the story with emotional fervor. This art form prior to the Maratha rule in Tanjavur gave prominence to Bhakti alone. When the Maratha Kirtan was introduced in the 17th Century in Tanjore when it came under the rule of the Bhonsle Kingdom the Bhagavatars incorporated the element of Navarasas in the Kirtan along with some of the unique Maratha metrical forms and the special talas. The synthesis of blending the earlier katha form with the Maratha Kirtan was achieved by Tanjavur Krishna Bhagavatar (1804 – 1903) who is considered as the father of Tanjavur Harikatha Tradition. Many eminent performers who entered the arena inspired by him were Pandit Lakshmanacharya, Tiruppazharan Pancapagesa Sastri, Mayundi Cidambara Bhagavatar, Tiruvaiyaru Annaswami Bhagavatar, Sulamangalam Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar, Cidambara Srirangacharyar, his son Embar Vijaya Raghavacharyar and many others.

Smt. C.Saraswati Bai, Tirukkokarnam Kanakambujam, Smt. Padmasani Bai and Smt. C.Banni Bai (who recently passed were the illustrious lady performers of the art.

Today, this Tanjavur tradition of Harikatha is still being performed by Smt.Kamala Murti, Sri Kalyanapuram Aravamudan, Sri. Mannargudi Sambasiva Bhagavatar, Sri. N.Ramachandra Sarma and Sri. S.Janakiraman, Sri. T.S.Balakrishna Sastri and others.

I had the opportunity to go deep into the art and its various aspects for about eight years when I studied it for my doctoral thesis, which enabled me to perform the art in its traditional format having learning the various aspects from Smt. C.Banni Bai and Sri.Embar Vijayaraghavacharyar, though there are some differences in their format of presentations.

The tradition started by the Ākhyāna Vid was continued by the Suta Purusha, later by the Pauranika in the courts of the Kings and in the temples or even under a large tree in villages later on by the Bhagavatara whose stories were interspersed with a variety of songs in various languages as they also quoted from the vernacular texts along with the original Sanskrit epics.

Kāmada Chanda : This is a type of chandas out of which

Kekāvali : This is yet another Sanskrit metre used in Harikatha. This following example is sung in Ramadasa Caritram (Bhadrachala). The situation is that during the Samaradhana organized by Ramadasa to all the devotees his child accidentally falls into the pit of the hot thick starch liquid (that which is drained off from the rice). Grief stricken Ramadasa carries the child to the Sanctum Sanctorum of Lord Rama and this Kekāvali is sung in a sorrowful tune set to Yamunakalyani raga.

Arya : Arya is a Sanskrit metre with very few restrictions and is quite popular with verifies who work treatises in Science, Philosophy etc. This seems to have been used extensively immediately in the period after that of the Epics. It was originally a Prakrit metre and was called Gātha. This is not short like Anuṣṭub. An Arya stanza is a complete of unequal length and is made up of matrasgranās.

Examples

Mādhava Sāsana tomaya sadhuvinirmita kanakamaṇi sabhāyām

Śri dharmātmaja āste sādhu munindraisa sadaiva tuṣṭāyām||

The following are the various metrical forms named after the metre used in Harikatha alone. Sāki, Dindi, Ovi, Pada.

My focus today is going to be on some of the Sanskrit Metrical forms used in Harikatha namely; mattakokilam, arya, kānada chanda and kekāvali.