

The Kathakali Renaissance: A Study of Vallathol's Cultural Contribution

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Abstract

Art and culture are an integral part of life. In its broadest sense, the theme and purpose of art is a form of communication. What the artist intends to communicate is expressed and shaped by the materials, techniques, and forms it uses, as well as the ideas and feelings it creates in the audience. Kathakali is one of the visual art forms of performance attributed to the sage Bharata. Historically, Kathakali as a dance drama originated in the seventeenth century in Travancore, Kerala, India. Colorful decorations, gestures, and postures are an essential part of the traditional Kathakali performances. Functional components and sections of Kathakali are derived from ancient Sanskrit literature such as Natya Shastra. The term 'Kathakali' from Sanskrit word 'Katha' which means 'story or a conversation, or a traditional tale', and 'Kali' means 'performance' or 'play'. The performances are based on the epics and the Puranas and chronicle the lives, love, and conflicts of Indian mythological gods and other supernatural beings. The dance symbolizes the eternal fight between good and evil forces. Vallathol Narayana Menon (1878–1958), the renowned Malayalam poet and the father of the Renaissance classical art forms of Kerala happened to witness a Kathakali performance at his friend's house at Kunnakulam. He was shocked and saddened to see the vain performance that made the Kathakali dance look disgraceful. This experience made Vallathol patronize the unique art form by starting a new society at Calicut in 1927 and dedicated the rest of his life to the revival of Kathakali. Later, he played a significant role in reviving and modernizing Kathakali in Kerala by setting up the Kerala Kalamandalam at Cheruthuruthy, near the banks of the Bharathapuzha River. The paper tries to highlight and make an in-depth study of this art form's highly stylized movements, including intricate footwork, rhythmic swaying, and hand gestures called mudras with musical instruments- Chenda, Maddalam, Chengila, and Elaththalam with suitable costumes and its impact on the public sphere as a modern popular art form after the much need revival by Vallathol.

Keywords: Katha, Kali, Bhavana, Navarasa, Natyashastra, Mudras, Chenda, Maddalam, Chengila, Elaththalam.

Introduction

Kathakali is a traditional dance-drama developed during Kerala's sixteenth to seventeenth centuries. Kathakali emerged from temple art forms such as Kudiattam, Krishnanattam, Kalaripayattu, and

also *Ramanattam* with devotion, drama, dance, music, and beautifully decorated costumes. Philip Zarrilli mentions in his book, *Kathakali: Dance –Drama Where Gods and Demons Come to Play*, “*Kathakali* dance —drama is like a vast and deep ocean. Some may come to a performance with their hands cupped and only be able to take away what doesn’t slip through their fingers. Others may come with a small vessel and be able to drink that. And still others may come with a huge cooking pot and take away so much more” (Zarrilli). Vallathol Narayana Menon (1878-1958), popularly known as Vallathol, belongs to the last category. Though Vallathol was born in Chennara, a small village in Kerala, he excelled as a poet, reviver of *Kathakali*, and social philosopher. In this paper, I shall discuss his role in reviving *Kathakali*, and before I do so, I shall discuss *Kathakali* itself.

In Malayalam, ‘*Katha*’ means story, and ‘*Kali*’ means play; hence, *Kathakali* means ‘story-play’. During the *Kathakali* performance, hand gestures (*mudras*) are used to speak the dialogue of the characters, whereas the emotions of the characters are conveyed through facial expressions (*bhavas*). Twenty-four alphabetical *mudras* exist in *Kathakali*, which may be used singly, doubly, or in combinations. There are three varieties of *bhava*: Transitory emotions, or *Sanchari bhava*; Temperamental emotions, *Satwika bhava*; Dominant emotions, or *Sthayi bhava*. There are thirty-three *Sanchari bhavas*, eight *Satwika bhavas*, nine *Sthayi bhavas*, and nine *Rasas* (Kutty and Asiatic Society (Kolkata). Playwright-composers in highly Sanskritised Malayalam write *Kathakali* plays in *Kathakali* performances. Music is played based on the characters’ moods through its melodic lines, basic rhythmic patterns, speeds of performance, and percussive accentuations. Three types of musical drums are used in *Kathakali*: *Centa*, *Maddalam*, and *Itekka*.

The play is mainly important in a *Kathakali* performance based on the dramatic text. As the royal obligation of the Indian kings was to conduct wars, most of the *Kathakali* performances were based on wars and killings. Both connoisseurs and ordinary people attract *Kathakali* performances. As *Kathakali* is an intricate art form, it can be understood by connoisseurs knowledgeable in Sanskrit, complex *mudras*, and *bhavas*. Though ordinary people cannot fully understand Sanskrit, complex *mudras*, and *bhavas*, they can enjoy other aspects of *Kathakali*, such as colorful makeup, unique costumes, vibrant music, and devotional songs. Hence, the audience of *Kathakali* dramas includes both Connoisseurs and ordinary people.

Role of Patronage in *Kathakali*

From the sixteenth to the seventeenth century, *Kathakali* evolved from its earlier forms, such as *Krishnattam* and *Ramanattam*. During this period, royal and high-ranking Nayar and Kshatriya families patronized *Kathakali*. Patrons actively provided social and economic support and composed and performed the art. There were many reasons for the patronage of *Kathakali*: personal devotion and performing the traditional role of royal patronage; patrons needed activities which were appropriate to their status; to acquire favor from the royal family; middle-ranking Nayars were involved in patronage and special titles were given to them. The titles *Panikkar* which means martial arts teacher and *Kurup* means martial master, who were given training in martial arts, *Kalaripayattu*. Royal families expected them to prove their bravery on the *battlefield*.

By the end of the eighteenth century, most of the performance techniques and conventions had been established in good form, and these are still used in *Kathakali*. During this period, distinctive makeup, elaborate costumes, and characteristic behavior were introduced to identify each character easily to the audience. For example, the makeup done to the leading characters such as Rama was changed to emerald green from the usual blue colour, the palm-sheath headdress was replaced with a golden crown, and masks of demons and monkeys were replaced with painted facial makeup. The elaboration of *Kathakali* text was introduced during this period of elaboration to impress and give pleasure to the audience by showing the expressive capabilities of the performers. During the same

period, Pattiyakkantoti Ramunni Menon (1881- 1949) introduced interpolation, which was new to Kathakali. Interpolation is similar to ‘flask-back’ in present-day cinemas and was used to enhance the understanding of the dramatic situation, adding extra flavor to the Kathakali performance.

Kathakali evolved into an all-night popular show. By the end of the 19th century, several distinctive *Kathakali Sampradayams* (styles) developed. During the reign of Utham Tirunal Maharaja which lasted from 1815 to 1861 two major styles were identified. Among which, the *Kidangoor* style was patronised by him and the *Kalluvayi* style was designed by Unniri Panikkar and patronised by the Namboodiri Brahmins. Initially, *Kathakali* was performed inside the temples where high-caste people were allowed to enjoy the performance, but *Kathakali* was popular among all sections of the public; it was also performed outside the hall walls. When *Kathakali* was performed on a public stage, more restrictions were followed, particularly regarding seating arrangements concerning caste and gender, as the social hierarchy was strictly followed.

The glorious period of Kathakali prevailed until the mid-nineteenth century, but trouble started approximately 1860. Many social and economic changes occurred from 1860 to the beginning of the twentieth century; due to British colonial rule. social reformers and political movements were against child marriages, disparities, and injustices in the caste-based social order in Kerala. Due to this, British rulers reformed marital and inheritance laws. By the 1920s, the old socio-economic order which was based on ‘house and land’ played a major role in legislative and social reforms. Due to these socio-economic and political troubles, connoisseurs and land-holding families found difficulties in patronizing *Kathakali*, thus leading to a new form of institutional patronage.

Establishing Kerala Kalamandalam

By 1923, *Kathakali* troupes, performers, and performances were in trouble and needed money, patronage, and revival. During this time, Mukundaraja, a devoted cultural activist from the royal family in Kunnankulam, invited Vallathol to witness a *Kathakali* performance. The quality of the performance was average, which made Vallathol unhappy. After this incident in 1927, Vallathol spent his life in the revival of this Dance art. Unfortunately, the crucial period of The Great Depression that prevailed after the First World War, became the cause for the arts like Kathakali to get further ruined.

Kathakali could not attract talented youth because it did not offer a decent livelihood. It was not a surprise that Vallathol was shocked by the performance by the artists at Kunnankulam. But this unexpected shock paved the way to the further progress of Kathakali. Along with his friends, Vallathol decided to start a new society for *Kathakali*. In 1927 Vallathol registered the society at Calicut and it was named as “Kerala Kalamandalam”. He felt raising funds was not an easy task for an institution like Kalamandalam without gaining monetary return. Mahakavi Vallathol, turned to C.P. Ramaswamy, who was the Minister for Law (Madras) during that time and approached him with a special permission to raise funds through the means of lottery ticket sale. Vallathol aimed to raise two lakh rupees.

But the amount raised was seventy-five thousand rupees, which was used as capital for establishing Kalamandalam; but Kalamandalam steps into its functioning in November 1930 at Kakkattumanappattil house at Kunnankulam. Vallathol thought to broaden the premises of the institution with improved facilities. Manakkulam Mukundaraja volunteered and offered his Ambalapuram premises which was a few kilometers from Trichur house, the Kalamandalam. After the shifting of Kalamandalam, Vallathol settled there and devoted his attention to the students and teachers. By 1936, in continuation of this he felt the need for raising the size of the compound and it was built on the banks of the river Bharathapuzha at Cheruthuruthy. Later, this place was renamed Vallathol Nagar.

Curriculum in Kerala Mandalam

Students from different parts of the world came to Kalamandalam to get systematic training under the direct supervision of Vallathol himself. Distinguished personalities such as Uday Shankar, Ragini Devi, Alice Boner, and Beryl de Zoete came to Kalamandalam and were fascinated by the *Kathakali* training. The *Kathakali* style which Kalamandalam follows is *Kalluvayi*. Vallathol arranged great masters, like Pattikkanthodi Ramunni Menon, Guru Kunju Kurup and Kavalappara Narayan Nayar, as teachers to teach the students who were learning acting, Venkatakrishna Bhagavathar was assigned to teach music. *Centa and Maddalam* were taught by MoothamanaNamboothiripad and VenkachanPattar respectively. At that time, interpolation, which is a very important aspect in *Kathakali* performance, was first introduced by Ramunni Menon. As interpolation was new to *Kathakali*, he expected objection from the connoisseur. Still, instead, interpolation was accepted and applauded by the connoisseurs, and it became part of the *Kathakali* performance thereafter. This indicates that *Kathakali*'s performances are open to good changes.

Vallathol introduced top-ranking *Kathakali* performers such as Mathur Kunju Pillai Panikker. Kurichi Kunjan Panikker and Vechur Raman Pillai are performers who popularized *Kathakali* worldwide. Art forms such as *Mohiniyattam*, *Bharathanatyam* and *Thullal* were also taught in Kalamandalam, along with *Kathakali*. *Koodiyaattam* was added to the curriculum. Kalamandalam's contribution in the recognition that *Koodiyattam* gained from UNESCO for its cultural heritage is significant. As an institution Kalamandalam was envisioned to have the traditional *Gurukulam* style of teaching and learning. The training program included the following three styles:

- The training of the limbs and torso
- The training of the eyes and facial muscles
- The training of Abinayam

Vallathol insisted that the artists having adequate knowledge of Indian tradition and culture was important for the artists who trained at Kalamandalam. Vallathol was ecstatic when he celebrated the Silver Jubilee of the Institution in 1956 in the presence of the then Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. The Silver Jubilee Celebrations of Kalamandalam were an unforgettable event in its history. Nehru commended the contributions of Kalamandalam, an unforgettable event in its history.

Nehru commended the contributions of Poet Vallathol to Indian arts and culture and donated Rs.1 00,000 to Kalamandalam for its developmental activities. 1980 marked the completion of 50 years from the start of Kalamandalam and this Golden Jubilee celebration was inaugurated by then Prime Minister of India, Smt. Indira Gandhi. In 1990, Kalamandalam achieved its 60th year milestone and this was inaugurated by then Prime Minister Shri, VP. Singh. Kalamandalam is marching towards its Centenary Jubilee which will be celebrated in 2030. Although the institution grew in strength and reputation, its funds decreased. Vallathol made valiant efforts to raise funds through various tours both in India and abroad. But the money that came in was too little to sustain the institution. In 1942, Kerala Kalamandalam nearly closed. At that time, the Maharaja of Cochin, Diwan Shanmukham Chetty, intervened and took over the management of Kalamandalam through a royal proclamation. Since then, Kalamandalam has been sustained by an annual grant from the State Government. Yet there was much political interference in the Kalamandalam management, which reduced work to improve *Kathakali*. This led to a change in the patronage of *Kathakali*, especially after the demise of Vallathol. As a genre, *Kathakali* is open to changes according to the audience's needs. As a result, in the late twentieth century, different groups produced *Kathakali* performances based on different types of critical narratives, including current topics; Margi was one of the important *Kathakali* training centers that flourished due to the political disturbances in Kerala Kalamandalam.

Kathakali Dance-Dramas by Vallathol

Even though Vallathol knew very little English, his intuitive capacity imbibed the spirit of romanticism, which gave new life to Malayalam literature. A classicist by discipline, Vallathol started composing Malayalam poems at the age of 13. His mature poems in Sanskrit and Malayalam appeared in 1910 when he was 32. He translated the Rig Veda into Malayalam at the age of 75. His major works include *Magdalena Mriam* (1921)- an exquisite narrative poem based on an episode in the life of Christ as depicted in the gospel. He is the author of the famous *Sahithya Manjari* and received the title 'Mahakavi' (great poet) for his 'Chitrayogam'. *Pingala* is another great poem he wrote. He was influenced by Rabindranath Tagore, Gandhi, and Karl Marx, as well as Sanskrit classics, and was awarded the prestigious honor of Padmabushan by the Government of India in 1955.

Vallathol revived several Kathakali plays which had become obsolete on the stage. These include the *Ramanaattam* plays, *Putrakameshti*, *Sita Swayamvaram*, and *Vicchinabhishekam*. The make-up and costumes the characters used were somewhat novel on the Kathakali stage, and all these plays were written and directed by Vallathol himself. In 1932, the Kalamandalam troupe was invited to perform at the Mysore palace to perform *Uttara swayamvaram*. It is interesting to note that the performance of *trigartha* (Red Beard) was specially appreciated by the ruler of Mysore. Kalamandalam was Vallathol's main preoccupation in his later years. He used to attend the *Cholliyattam* classes of the senior trainees every day. During this time, he introduced and popularized *mudras* for medicine and discipline. As mentioned in the book titled 'Vallathol's contribution to the Art and Craft of Kathakali' he composed descriptive passages to be used by Bhima in *Kalyanasougandhikam* for *Vana Varnana* (description of a forest), by *Arjunain Kalakeya Vadham* (The killing of Kalakeya) for *Swarga Varnana* (elaborate description of heaven) and by Nala in the second part of *Nalacharitham*.

James Clifford and his wife Betty, teaching at Pennsylvania University, USA, studied Kathakali at Kalamandalam for several years under the Fulbright program. P.B. Zarrilli, Professor of Theatre and Performance Studies at the University of Surrey, The U.K. did extensive research on Kathakali and published two books on the subject. There is a detailed discussion on Kathakali's origin, evolution, and description of plays. He has also published books on theatre performances other than Kathakali. Hence, Zarrilli considers himself a scholar of theatre performances. Zarrilli points out, "Tradition is 1) An inherited collection of established ways of feeling, thinking, and doing passed on through generations. 2) The active and ongoing process of transmitting what has been handed down orally, through entertainment, enculturation, and/or written records". Hence, in Zarrilli's point of view, Kathakali is a traditional performing art. Had it not been for Vallathol's contribution to this traditional art, it would have remained unknown to the world outside Kerala.

Recent Trends in Kathakali

From 2000 onwards, considerable changes have occurred in its performances. While taking into consideration the history of Kathakali, there is a necessary gap to fill up the link between modern and traditional arts for its further development on par with modern art forms of dances, concerning contemporary societal demands. Hence, the duration of these performances are restricted to a shorter period as a theatre performance by incorporating contemporary themes and stories and finally have been converted into traditional narratives. Further, to develop this art form focus is concentrated on conducting workshops by making fusion dance with other forms of dance without losing the core elements of Kathakali. Nowadays with the fast-moving science and technology era, any cultural artist brooding over the sustainability of traditional art forms in a modern context. As traditional typical performances consume lengthy time, a span of two to three hours there are

more chances of boredom for the spectators. Considering all factors, record trends are formed adaptations with reputed epics in condensed formats so that performances would be more catchy and creative to soothe their souls interestingly in the public domain.

In addition, performances are staged based on contemporary social sensitive issues with novel stage design and lighting, incorporating modern and traditional aesthetics. Like the conversion of conventional paintings into modern art, epic stories have been enacted as melodramatic plays with distinct make-up to make progressive social changes in the public domain. Mainly, it is to be noticed that the Kathakali performances will be performed with the traditional lamp which makes the performance gloomy and distracts our curiosity of watching hours-long performances. When infusing traditional and modern lighting on stage the conflict of interest naturally arises during Kathakali performances on the modern stage whether the traditional lamp should be used partially or discarded completely, in support of electric lights. The main flaw in the staging of Kathakali performance in the conventional way is not much welcomed by the younger generation in the Hi-tech world of sound and fury. Moreover, modern Kathakali lovers strongly opine that the conventional light settings used for the Kathakali performances are not optimum for covering large audiences to view in a broader sense. The lamp plays a key factor in all stage performances and gains great importance to show off dancers' postures, and movements while playing one after another in the presence of well- setup lighting. It also has coordinating and controlling functions based on the dance patterns.

But in conventional performances, while performing the Kathakali dance, according to Praveen.K.R, "the dancer's eye level is conditioned by the height of the lamp. The live flame of the lamp satisfies a distinct purpose in Abhinaya which is an important aspect of the Kathakali dance drama by making it beautiful and vibrant in its varied nuances. When discussing the Thiranokku or Curtain-look it is also a unique theatrical device for introducing remarkable heroes, the lamp flame swayed by the Thiraseela illumines their elegantly made-up faces and shows with great intensity their basic nature or swabhava and the subtle variations of the rasas. The traditional lamp in Kathakali provides a point of concentration which helps in enhancing the dramatic effect". (Praveen, K.R. 79)

In modern context, thus the modern style of light settings intend to highlight the intensity of performances in extraordinarily powerful situations, electric light can't be substituted effectively. It is crucial that there are a lot of practical challenges to the survival of this classical art in terms of getting and engaging young audiences. Having aesthetic sense is a difficult task for the promoters and stakeholders of this art to take this art to a further higher level. Another crucial point is with the changing socio- political, and cultural scenario, finding growth and evolution of this art in competence with Western arts is much more difficult. With the effect of modernization, and globalization, the quest for the compulsion to be modern is also remaining as one of the great challenges. Further, changing attitudes in young minds concerning self-esteem and self-satisfaction are also present in all sects of society. Hence, in the modern context, the artists and performers of Kathakali better be concerned about the future sustainability of Kathakali. As Kathakali artists slowly make this dance art as a self-employed business, it is noticed that from a literary point of view, "Art for art's sake" is a literary philosophy that encourages artists to create for the sake of creating, art rather than for any social or political purpose and that art too should not be judged on its relationship to social, political, or moral values, but purely for its formal and aesthetic qualities, encouraged by the French novelist Théophile Gautier. It is serious to think that this kind of conventional art was taught under guru Kula's system of education in ancient times which needed much dedication. In addition, having a keen interest, being pious and cultural, and learning the historical background of the conventional arts is essential for learning any conventional arts. From another, modern perspective, as we are

following the Aristotelian system of education system i.e. the Western education system, we have to move on towards the modern system of teaching-learning system of arts under a higher learning system through arts colleges and universities. While introducing courses and syllabi it has to fit into modern societal needs. So, we can introduce both Kathakali courses as conventional and also unconventional modes by providing certificate courses, diploma courses, degree courses, and also to the research level. After pursuing the Kathakali dance course, students can get good positions in jobs in theatre groups, film studios, dance institutes, dance training centers, etc. Another golden chance such as working as a freelancer and starting a dance academy also. It is the need of the hour to protect and glorify the art and also necessary initiatives to be taken to develop this elegant dance art in the future.

According to Ganesh Neela Kanta Iyer and Sachit Bharadwaj in the article titled, '*Kathakali Character identification –Using deep learning techniques and Web technologies for Indian Cultural Heritage*', rightly, as we are living in the technological world, it is wise to bring down every art under the artificial intelligence (AI) technology. By doing so, we can easily preserve four hundred years old art form Kathakali. Since technology advancements have proven that "to apply deep learning techniques for different aspects of characters in other art forms such as Chinese Opera, and by using artificial intelligence principles such as deep learning classifiers for Kathakali character identification" we can enhance teaching-learning process successfully in smart ways. By using AI technology, one can "initially develop a dataset of different Kathakali characters. All the images are our own captured from different live performances under varying lighting conditions, postures and artists over 30 years. This makes our dataset very vivid and appropriate for study" (Iyer and Bhardwaj). As far as the use of AI technology is concerned, we have got excellent results up to the accuracy of 97.5% results. We can adopt this kind of technology also to develop other art forms such as Bharathnatyam, Kathak, and all art forms. By developing a web platform also users can upload images of Kathakali (Iyer and Bhardwaj).

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