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Hierarchical Art: A Study of Hierarchy in Kathakali and Koodiyattam

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Dr. Jaison P. Jacob**

Kerala has always proved to be a fertile ground for research in the field of culture studies. Performing art forms of Kerala play a crucial role in the making of this fertile ground. The artistic diversity of performing art forms of Kerala is well-known. However, the underlying cultural politics in them seldom gets noticed. The multiple art forms of Kerala follow a super imposed hierarchy as a result of Kerala's rigid caste system. The art forms patronized by the upper castes became privileged. Eventually these art forms were perceived to be 'high art'. Art forms with lower castes as the key participants got pushed to the margins. These art forms were denied social approval and visibility. Apart from the rigid caste system colonial modernity also has equal blame to share in imposing a hierarchy in the realm of Kerala's performing art forms. The colonial mode of nomenclature, distinction and organization introduced the idea of 'civilization'. This resulted in a system where certain things became civilized and others were tagged uncivilized and inappropriate. This new mode of classification also favoured the dominant class and their art forms. The paper titled "Hierarchical Art: A Study of Hierarchy in Select Art Forms of Kerala" is an investigation of the politics which brought about an invisible yet omnipresent distinction in the art forms of Kerala with a special focus on two performing art forms- Kathakali and Koodiyattam.

Key words: Kathakali, Koodiyattam, hierarchy, Kerala, caste system

Introduction

Quickly, as if she were recalled by something over there, she turned to her canvas. There it was—her picture. Yes, with all its greens and Blues, its lines running up and across, its attempt at something. It would be hung in the attics, she thought; it would be destroyed. But what did that matter? She asked herself, taking up her brush again. She looked at the steps; they were empty; she looked at her canvas; it was blurred. (Wolf, 2000, p.167)

Artist Lily Briscoe in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* liberates herself from confining thoughts after the completion of a painting. Protagonist in James Joyce's *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* experiences moments of epiphany with the perception of aesthetically pleasing objects. These meta-narratives (they talk about the process of creation within a creative piece of work) talk about a higher power contained in art. There are many instances in literature where the impact of art and imagination on human mind is validated. Literature being a creation of the human mind is undoubtedly a piece of art. Though the impact of art on human mind/body is subjective, the details of this impact are frequently analyzed, discussed and theorized. However, there are many areas related to art that are scarcely discussed and researched. These unknown and untraded territories excite theorists and researchers rather than the known truths about art.

The cave paintings having a history of several thousands of years showcase the strong link between art and humankind. The Oxford English Dictionary defines art as the “use of the imagination to express ideas or feelings, particularly in painting, drawing or sculpture” (Art Noun - Definition, Pictures, Pronunciation and Usage Notes | Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary at Oxford Learners Dictionaries.com, n.d.). As the human race evolved, the mode of expression for their imagination also expanded. Cinema, photography and literature are such newly evolved modes of expressions. The attempt to achieve a precise definition of art and a thorough understanding of what all comes under the purview of art can be of

two kinds. One, a naïve attempt to have a firm grasp on the ever expanding domain of art. The other, an authoritarian tendency to name, label, categorize and exclude. As a result of these diverse attempts there were many theoretical discourses as to what contributes to art and what not. There were also scholarly attempts to impose a hierarchy by classifying art into high and low as seen in the works of critics like Matthew Arnold. What is conceived in theory gets solidified in practice. Thus the high/low distinction got many visible manifestations in various social superstructures. The 'art s spectrum' of Kerala is one such visual manifestation of this high/low distinction.

Evaluation of art

The focal point of discussion for a long time in art theory surrounded on what art is and how art must be evaluated. The subjective notions that colour up these discussions gave rise to many theories and discourses in the field of art criticism. These theories are undoubtedly products of the author's own notions regarding good/bad, right/wrong, imagination/dullness and moral/immoral. Consequently, majority of the available theories in art prescribe formula for deciding what a great art is and what is not. Plato's dislike for poets, Aristotle's idea of tragedy, Horace's artistic decorum and Longinus's sublime are all products of such subjective perceptions. Though these insights laid foundations for literary criticism, they are narrow- minded, adamant and inconsiderate. One can easily choose one among the many art theories available in order to critically evaluate a piece of art. But this approach lands oneself in what one can call 'objective fallacy', that is to objectively define art and carefully exclude all the other items that do not obey the given definition. This completely neglects the quality of subjectivity which lies at the core of any piece of art. Another useful way is to regard art as an extension of the society/culture. The architectural model of Marxist theory comes to the rescue here. Marxist thinkers vouch for an economic base and a super structure (social institutions which includes art too) reflecting the economic base. When stretched beyond a level, the architectural Marxist model gave way to vulgar Marxism (adamant notion of a one-to-one co-relation between base and superstructure) despised by many art enthusiasts.

Treating art as an extension of the society makes it a reliable link for connecting the missing dots in history. The Post-structural vision of history /history writing is that of a continuous process in the present. The resultant heterogeneous, fragmented, multi- faceted and non- linear history is both dynamic and inclusive. They add newer paradigms in knowledge systems.

As art began to be a source of historiography, the field of cultural history emerged. Many phenomenal works in this field critically examined an acclaimed historical juncture through the lenses of art and other cultural artefacts. Jacob Burckhardt's *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, Johan Huizinga's *The Waning of the Middle Ages* and Roger Chartier's *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution* are only a few to name.

Hierarchy in Art and Culture

Hierarchical thinking for a long time was considered natural in human cognition. Categorizing entities and ranking them according to certain criteria was supposed to be the way in which human mind worked. Naturally enough, this artificially formed hierarchy was seen in the works of earlier critics. Aristotle delimiting the works to be called a tragedy, Longinus's sublimity and Horace's decorum are all attempts to hierarchically arrange literary works. These attempts were more glaring when thinkers began to speak about high culture and low culture. Matthew Arnold in his "Culture and Anarchy" solidified this notion by calling culture a condition of "perfection and of harmonious perfection, general perfection and perfection which consists in becoming something rather than in having something, in an inward condition of the mind and spirit, not in an outward set of circumstances"(Arnold,2009, p.15).

The notion "culture is ordinary" (Williams, 1989, p.4) was path breaking in the field of culture studies after Arnold's reductive concept. The lived conditions of a society then became crucial in the field.

The notion of hierarchy also underwent scrutiny. Poststructuralists questioned hierarchy and proved it to be an artificially imposed tool for manipulation. Derrida while calling out the violent hierarchy in Western Philosophy claimed it to be an external textual

intervention. Hierarchy becomes a sign of hegemony and power in the writings of thinkers like Foucault.

Kerala's Art Forms and Hierarchy

Kerala being a land of artistic diversity is a fertile ground for the study of art. The performing arts tradition of Kerala is globally acknowledged. The multiple performing art forms found in Kerala tell diverse stories. Geographical, political and social atmosphere of Kerala played a crucial role in the evolution of these performing art forms. Many of them are religious in origin because of the indispensable role religion plays in the social structure of Kerala. Beneath and beyond the visual glamour of Kerala's performing art forms, there is an acceptable hierarchy. This unwritten and yet accepted hierarchy in the performing arts of Kerala is a product of caste system and colonialism.

The socio cultural history of Kerala depicts how religious institutions were open only to a few privileged sections of the society in the years before reformation. In Kerala caste was the criterion by which privilege was measured. Upper castes were the privileged lot and the lower castes formed the under-privileged section. Since only the upper castes entered worshipping centers, their art forms were staged there. That's how a terminology like 'temple art forms' (art forms performed in temple premises) evolved. If caste system established the hierarchy among Kerala's art forms colonial modernity solidified it. A close examination of Kathakali and Koodiyattam can show the role of caste system and colonialism in the establishment of a super-imposed hierarchy among the performing art forms of Kerala.

Kathakali and Koodiyattam: A Legacy in Social Inequalities

Kathakali and Koodiyattam are two significant performing art forms belonging to Kerala. Kathakali, translated as playing of a story, enacts stories from Indian epics. Koodiyattam, translated as a group performance, is the oldest surviving Sanskrit theatre. Performers adorn elaborate costumes in both Koodiyattam and Kathakali. The popularity of these two art forms invited a lot of research in the field. The research concerning Koodiyattam and Kathakali are limited to textual interpretation, structural analysis and historical enquiries.

A Socio cultural study of Kathakali and Koodiyattam will offer new insights into the established hierarchy in the performing arts of Kerala. Kathakali and Koodiyattam have always enjoyed positions of privilege. For centuries they were performed within the compounds of temples and palaces. Therefore these two art forms rightly got the name temple arts. Kathakali and Koodiyattam are also called ‘anushtana kalakal’ (performing arts that are akin to rituals). The greater social visibility and wider Global acceptance received by these two performing art forms are not naïve achievements. Evaluating kathakali and Koodiyattam on the basis of Foucault’s categories determining the formation of an object [“surfaces of their emergence” (Foucault, 1972, p.41), “authorities of delimitation” (Foucault, 1972, p.41) and “grids of specification” (Foucault, 1972, p.42)] will expose the politics behind the social visibility and global acceptance of Kathakali and Koodiyattam.

Object formation for Foucault was a deliberate and equally manipulated project where vested social interests play a pivotal role. The known paradigms of language define object as a lifeless entity and subject as a living entity. Object and subject in Foucault’s writing transcend the conventional boundaries of meaning to implicate the bigger politics at work. Foucault in his work *The Archaeology of Knowledge* argues that three parameters/categories determine the process of object formation in a society. The categories he mentions are “surfaces of emergence” (Foucault, 1972, p.41), “authorities of delimitation” (Foucault, 1972, p.41) and “grids of specification” (Foucault, 1972, p.42). Foucault says:

First we must map the surfaces of their emergence: show where these individual differences, which, according to the degrees of rationalization, conceptual codes, and types of theory, will be accorded the status of disease, alienation, anomaly, dementia, neurosis or psychosis, ‘degeneration, etc., may emerge, and then be designated and analysed. These surfaces of emergence are not the same for different societies, at different periods, and in different forms of discourse... We must also describe the authorities of delimitation... the major authority in society that de-limited, designated, named, and established madness as an object... Lastly,

we must analyse the grids of specification: these are the systems according to which the different ‘kinds of madness’ are divided, contrasted, related, regrouped, classified, derived from one another as objects of psychiatric discourse. (1972, p.41-42)

The “surfaces of emergence” (Foucault, 1972, p.41) is in other words the place of origin. Both kathakali and Koodiyattam originated in palaces. Story of the origin of Kathakali is a story of rivalry and authority. King of Calicut in the seventeenth century remarked that none at Kottarakkara palace could appreciate Krishnanattam which sparked the rivalry between the two and culminated in the birth of a prototype for Kathakali. Prince of Kottarakkara having felt insulted with King of Calicut declining his invitation to the Krishnanattam Troup (performances based on the life of Lord Krishna) developed Ramanattam based on the life of Lord Ram. As the later composers began to include stories from other Puranas, the need for a new terminology was felt and hence the term Kathakali was coined.

The earlier composers of Kathakali (Kottarakkara Thampuran, Vettathu Raja, Kottayam Thampuran, Aswathy Thirunal, Iringalakkuda Rama Warriar, Unnayi Warriar, Kaplingattu Narayanan Namboodiri) belonged either to the royal families or to the privileged upper castes. E.M.S. Namboodiripad in his work *Keralam Malayalikalude Mathrubhumi* (Kerala, the birthplace of Malayali) remarks in the same way that the famous poets of Malayalam literature are either members of royal families, or beneficiaries of royal patronage or Namboodiris who were at the highest pedestal of caste system in Kerala (1905, p.90).

Speaking about a point of origin in the case of Koodiyattam is hard. The exact date of origin of Koodiyattam is unknown. Koodiyattam is the oldest surviving Sanskrit drama tradition. It was Kulasekhara Varman also known as Kulasekhara Alwar who reformed Koodiyattam from the Sanskrit drama tradition. His work *Aattaprakaram* speaks about the conventions to be followed in Koodiyattam. Kulasekhara Varman along with his Brahmin friend Tolan composed two plays (*Subhadra Dhanamjaya* and *Tapati Samvarana*) for Koodiyattam. Kulasekhara Varman is supposed

to have ruled from 800 to 820 AD. From Kulasekhara Varman to the seventeenth century Koodiyattam underwent many changes to reach the form many know now.

“The authorities of delimitation” (Foucault, 1972, p.41) refers to the persons who designed the object. As evident from their stories of origin for Kathakali and Koodiyattam these authorities belonged to the royal family and upper castes. The composers of the performance were mainly from the royal family and the upper castes performed these art forms. “Grids of specification” (Foucault, 1972, p.42) means the systems that defined the object. Caste system and colonialism played pivotal roles in the shaping of Kathakali and Koodiyattam. The caste system in Kerala was a defining factor during the evolution of both Kathakali and Koodiyattam. A close look at the socio cultural conditions existed during the evolution of Kathakali and Koodiyattam is needed to establish this point further .

Koodiyattam flourished in Kerala from 11th to 17th century. Kathakali originated in Kerala between the 16th and 17th centuries. Up until the political awakening in Kerala during the second half of nineteenth century small kingdoms and feudal households used to function as the administrative centers here. Born in palaces, practiced in temples, Kathakali and Koodiyattam performances were not open to all sections of the society. Koodiyattam was reserved for the chakyar and nambiar community. Though no such specific reservations existed in the case of Kathakali, performers were from the upper sections of the society. During the initial stages of Kathakali, kaliyogams maintained by wealthy upper caste families carried out the project of instruction. Artists belonged majorly to the Nair community as it was considered inappropriate for a Nambodiri or Brahmin to adorn a Kathakali ‘vesham’(costume). As a testimony to this fact Kathakali Artist Nelliyo Vasudevan Namboodiri tells about the caste prejudices he had to endure for being a Kathakali Artist that too specialised in Kathi veshams (demonic characters).

The lower sections not only were denied performance access but also spectatorship access in the case of Kathakali and Koodiyattam. Kathakali plays were earlier performed in temples, royal courts and

courtyards of feudal families. Koodiyattam performances were restricted to koothambalams only. Koothambalam is a dedicated performance hall alongside a temple constructed as per the guidelines prescribed in chapter two of Bharata's *Natya Shastra*. The performance sites of both Kathakali and Koodiyattam were not public spheres. They were reserved only for a certain sections and there is no disregard for status. Domain of common concern and inclusivity are also not applicable to these sites. These performance sites are hence "refeudalized public sphere of civil society whose characteristic feature, according to Schelsky's observation, is that the large-scale organizers in state and society "manage the propagation of their positions" " (Habermas, 1993, p.200).

For kathakali and Koodiyattam to be inclusive, temple had to be democratized; also Kathakali and Koodiyattam had to deviate from their structural rigidity which mandated performances only in some designated sites. These two incidents happened much later in history. The Temple Entry Proclamation Act democratized the temples in Travancore only in 1936. Temple Entry Proclamation happened in Cochin much later on 20 December 1947. Up until these proclamations Kathakali and Koodiyattam never reached the lower sections of the society. Kathakali had a tradition of being performed in family courtyards outside temples. Therefore, it was easier for Kathakali to step outside the temple and reach the masses. Koodiyattam left the four walls of temple much later. Mani Madhava Chakyar, a renowned Koodiyattam artist, in 1955 performed Koodiyattam outside the designated place for its performance, the koothambalam for the first time.

Kathakali and Koodiyattam were conceptualized and propagated by the upper castes. In order to sustain their caste hegemony the upper castes monopolized these art forms. Caste system initiated this monopoly and colonialism perpetuated it. Colonialism had its fair share in the establishment of hierarchy in the performing arts of Kerala. The colonial rule undoubtedly made many social reforms in India and especially in Kerala. Kerala due to its wide coastline and spices attracted foreigners quite earlier on. The establishment of modern machinery, introduction of English education and abolition of

unjust practices are only a few to name. Often the notion of morality introduced by the colonial rule goes unquestioned amidst these positive measures. The colonial system of organization demands everything to be categorized, organized, labelled and codified. Colonial rulers came with their re-instilled sense of morality which got rigidified in the Victorian era. Their notion of right and wrong got easily transformed into the realm of art in Kerala. Art forms with rigid structure, sophisticated language and appealing costumes were approved by the colonial eye easily. Kathakali and Koodiyattam hence got privileges (which they had been experiencing prior to colonial rule) during this phase also. Other tribal art forms and art forms from the lower sections like ‘poorapattu’ and ‘theri pattu’, were neglected and excluded from the purview of art. Just as the performing art traditions from the lower sections of the society like ‘poorakkali’, ‘theyattu’ and ‘thira’ being barred from the temple courtyards due to caste system, the art forms from the lower sections were denied social visibility and acceptance during the colonial era.

Structural complexity and visual grandeur contributed towards acceptance in the colonial eye for Kathakali and Koodiyattam. Complexity in the structures of both Kathakali and Koodiyattam also need to be investigated. This complexity is not inherent in nature but a product of hegemony. The hugely Sanskritised diction of Kathakali, completely Sanskrit text of Koodiyattam, elaborate costume and stage arrangements and professional training spanning many years demand resources. The upper castes had maintained a discourse that the resources demanded by these performing arts are cerebral resources which only the upper castes had. In reality, the resources demanded by these performing arts can be possessed by any irrespective of gender, class and caste in a socialist economy. Yet there existed a belief that only the upper castes had the intellectual resources to master certain ‘elite’ art forms like Kathakali and Koodiyattam. This is a clear case of what Stephen Greenblatt calls “improvisation of power” which is a “subversive perception of another’s truth as an ideological construct” (1980, p.228). Here the “another’s truth” (1980, p.228) was the intellectual backwardness of the lower castes due to lack of access to learning centers. The reason for this intellectual

backwardness was the monopolizing nature of learning institutions for a long period in Kerala. The monopoly of upper castes was carefully concealed and only the ideological construct of the lower castes lacking intellect was propagated as a public discourse.

Debarred from all the learning centers of the society, the lower castes naturally lacked the intellectual capacity to understand and appreciate Sanskrit as it is not the language used for daily exchanges. If one examines the history of education in Kerala, it is clear that the work of the Christian missionaries in the second half of nineteenth century and early twentieth century democratized learning in Kerala. Up until that time lower castes were illiterate and could not understand/enjoy Kathakali and Koodiyattam. Kathakali and Koodiyattam also demanded financial and mental resources. The extreme physical labour and utter poverty spared no time for elaborate leisure activities for the lower castes whereas the ancestral wealth and the entourage of bonded labourers provided with immense spare time for the upper castes. Consequently the performing arts envisaged by the upper castes tended to be structurally complex demanding more time and the art forms from the lower sections of the society tended to be much simpler.

Conclusion

The systems- caste system and the colonial rule- that perpetuated hierarchy in performing art forms of Kerala are now legally demolished. With India gaining political independence and untouchability constitutionally banned Kathakali and Koodiyattam reformed their unjust structures to some extent. The social reforms in Kerala and the establishment of Kerala Kalamandalam in November 1930 changed many unfair practices in the performing arts in Kerala and especially in Kathakali. Kathakali and Koodiyattam still carry along the tag of 'high art'/ 'elite art'. There are reports of famous temples preferring performers from the upper castes for a Kathakali or Koodiyattam recital (Binu Karunakaran et al., 2022). In 2015 Kerala High Court upheld Cochin Devaswom Board's verdict denying permission to stage a Kathakali performance on the life of Sree Narayana Guru at Tripprayar Sree Rama Temple (Haneef, 2015). There

was a recent court verdict on Koodiyattam that gave the patron upper caste families of Koodiyattam and ‘tantris’ of temple complete power in deciding who all can perform Koodiyattam inside koothambalams (Express News Service & Express News Service, 2024). Even today female roles only have limited scope in both Kathakali and Koodiyattam. This would not have been the case if Kerala’s steps towards achieving an egalitarian space for performing arts and artists were materialized. From the above mentioned incidents one can clearly say that there are many miles to go before finally achieving that egalitarian space. Social/caste prejudices still dominate the realm of performing arts. Caste prejudices are remarkably more in both Kathakali and Koodiyattam because of them being patronized by the upper castes for a very long time. Kathakali and Koodiyattam should eliminate the structural rigidity barring innovation in the themes of performances and a preference for the artists from the upper castes need. A performance gets acceptance and validation from the audience and the society. For Kathakali and Koodiyattam to be egalitarian, the society first needs to reform. For that, the unspoken, unwritten conservative mentality of an average Keralite should be replaced by a democratic outlook. After all, what is art but a reflection of the human mind and society?

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