

28. The Art of Kathakalakshepam (Sankirtana)

Kathakalakshepams and Bhajanas are two of the most important institutions in India meant to keep alive the religious and ethical instinct in the life of the people in general. Till a few decades ago there was practically no village or street in which there were not some regular bhajanas going on, and all the people used to take part in them as well. Purana-patanam, the earlier form of Kathakalakshepam of the present day, was similarly a regular feature of the daily life of the community. Kathakalakshepam in the present form came to the south from the Maharatta countries and was shaped into a distinctive institution by the famous Krishna Bhagavathar of Tanjore and later by Tiruppayanam Panchapagesa Sastriar; in their hands it became a unique art, in which various elements of the other fine arts, such as music, dance, drama were combined to produce a striking effect. This used to be very popular too, in fact more popular than music concerts. Several musicians of repute changed over to Kalakshepams on this account, as for example, Palghat Anantarama Bhagavatar.

Muthia Bhagavatar and Vedanta Bhagavatar. Due to this popularity several "Bhagavatars" began to enter this field, whether they were competent to do it or not. As used to be remarked then, these novices converted the Katha into a "standing kacchery"—concert of standing musicians!

The chief object of Katha is usually to impart religious instruction, including of course, any kind of moral teaching. But it is not merely that. It is very much more. If I may put it, it is a didactic Art in the sense that it is an Art used for didactic purposes. In drama also there is this didactic element. But Katha can be Art and may be made an Art. After all, Katha is only monodrama. In it we have all the elements which go to make a good drama. Even without music Katha can be made to assume an artistic value by properly handling the theme and working it out on the basic principles underlying dramatic Art. Here again, music is of great value and certainly goes a very long way to make the Katha effective not only as story telling but also as a great Art. In this aspect of Kathakalakshepam music plays a very important part, and hence one cannot be too careful in fitting music into Kathakalakshepam. Being a monodrama, the Kathakalakshepam worked on the basis of Art presents great difficulties which are easily got over on the stage. On the stage we depend for effect upon not only the capacity of the actor, but on several elements which go to make the complete whole. We have the different characters, dressed and made up to look as nearly as possible the personages they represent, there is the stage setting, the scenery, the colour scheme, all of which tend to produce the dramatic illusion into which the audience fall. This makes the work of the actor easy and helps him to a large extent in producing the required effect. But in the case of Kathakalakshepam the performer has none of these conveniences on hand. He has to depend upon himself and his resourcefulness. Here lies the real difficulty in perform-

ing a Kathakalakshepam as a piece of Art. The performer has to be an actor and an actor of no mean parts. He has to act not only one part but several parts, and he has to do this without any dress or make-up or back-ground or other stage settings. But still a good performer should be able to produce the necessary dramatic effect if he pays attention to some of the essential points which have to be borne in mind in this connection.

Let me here enumerate some of these points which I have found very useful myself.

(1) When we choose a story for the Kathakalakshepam, be it Puranic or not, it has to be carefully worked in different stages as in a drama. I generally work it out in a number of scenes, choosing the essential situation in each scene and working up the part of the story pertaining to that scene to the climax. Shortening or lengthening will only depend upon hurrying through or dropping or elaborating some of these scenes. Of course, there will be some scenes on which the whole story stands and we cannot afford to touch them. In introducing different parts of the story and presenting them as scenes to the audience great care should be taken to give an effective description of the particular scene, something like a word picture, so that the audience, though they are not in front of a stage with all the necessary setting, feel almost as if they are witnessing that scene.

(2) Except where the description of the kind referred to above is involved, it is desirable to avoid indirect form of narration as far as possible. I have very often seen some effective story telling being spoiled by the indirect narration adopted by the performer. If you act the different persons who are coming in a particular situation properly, you can avoid to a very large extent the need for indirect narration.

(3) Again, as in the case of the drama, the musical element must be very carefully chosen. Being a monodrama.

Kathakalakshepam requires that every song introduced into it must be carefully introduced, tunes and talas being properly chosen. As Kathakalakshepam is not a musical concert (though several performers are trying to convert Kathakalakshepams into concerts of an extremely technical nature) care should be taken to avoid unnecessary technical pieces which involve a high degree of musical proficiency and which in a Kathakalakshepam are likely to mar the total effect. Elaborate Ragalapana, singing swaras, introducing too many standard kirtanas in and out of season, giving too many occasions for the display of the drummer's skill, all these have to be avoided if Kathakalakshepam is to be a work of Art.

Also every song must be carefully worked into the narration. It should not appear to be an interpolation. It must be so worked that the audience do not feel where the prose ends and the music begins. Very often musical pieces are introduced after a sudden stop and the narration begins again after some interval after the music is over. This takes away much of the effect. Of course, I am not a puritan to advocate the total abolition of extraneous music from the Katha. Where there is a natural break in the development of the story we may certainly have extraneous musical pieces even of a technical nature with swaras and mridangam display and all that. But it is not an essential part of the Katha. It is only something like an interlude in a drama—something like a "curtain raiser."

Another point to note in this connection is to avoid as far as possible having to expound the meaning of the musical pieces sung, except where the language of the piece is different from the vernacular of the major portion of the audience. By properly mouthing the words of the song accompanied by the necessary gestures one can convey easily the meaning of the piece to the audience. As a rule, except where the words are abstruse, songs in local verna-

culars ought to be left without any commentary or annotation. This again involves care in introducing songs.

(4) The use of proper gestures by the performer is a matter of a very great importance. Katha being a monodrama, it is essential that the performer should carefully choose his gestures in dealing with the various personages of the story. The gestures ought to be suggestive, graceful and natural. Necessity for narration, for expounding musical pieces and such other things can be very easily avoided and the effect enhanced considerably by the use of gestures. The Katha performer has perforce to be an actor of parts.

(5) The accompaniments must be absolutely secondary. I am one of those who think that even in a musical concert the accompaniments should not be allowed to usurp places not meant for them. In a Kathakalakshepam the reasons are all the greater. Music on the whole is only a handmaid to the monodrama. If the accompaniments of the musical part of the Katha are allowed to dominate, the effect will be anything but artistic. In some situations it may be even necessary to disregard the accompaniments altogether. In some pathetic or very quick moving situations the performer may have to get on without any regard to the accompaniments. This is a point which needs very careful consideration at the hands of performers who wish to make the Kathakalakshepam a real Art.

(6) To make the Art side of the Katha prominent it is also necessary to see that too many long sermons on ethical principles should be avoided. Even where the story brims with situations convenient for such appeals they must be made very dramatically and not become sermons or lectures. The obvious moral lessons will easily go home to the people even without the performer's sermonising upon them, if he had worked the story carefully and effectively. At times, the point goes home to the audience more effectively unsaid than by a long detailed peroration from the

performer. Where it is possible, even this moral may be left to some of the characters to bring out.

(7) One aspect which has to be kept in mind, but which is usually forgotten nowadays, is that the music of the Katha is of a distinctive character, it has its own "Melam", unique to the institution. The tunes best fitted for a Katha are of the type used in Maharatta countries—Saki, Dindi, Anjanagita, Savai, Ghanakshari and so on. These are simple, crisp and effective tunes. Jalar, Kulitalam (with its own sweet tinkling sound) and chapla are essential to produce the proper atmosphere. It is essential to maintain this Katha "atmosphere" throughout. Also in doing the talam, time is not measured as in a concert by beats and pauses. Generally Desadi and Ushitalam are used. Very often 7-beat talams (ezhadi talam, as it is called) are also employed. The effect of these is tremendous, as anyone who has heard will realise. Of course, it requires some training to use these talas with ease and skill. In my own view, no one can take to Katha performing who is not used to these tala varieties which make the very life of the institution. Also there are some typical moharas or muthyppus in mridangam which are characteristic of the Katha-melam. It is very unfortunate that these are going out of use nowadays. The All India Radio is to some extent responsible for these specialities getting out of use; in their studios there do not seem to be available accompanists who can provide these features distinctive to the Katha music.

The Kathakalakshepam item in the All India Radio is becoming almost a farce; it is not a concert which you can cut short as you like; it is an organic whole, several parts of it are woven into a set pattern. But for this the story telling will become an insipid, flat affair. One cannot work out the whole without building up the various parts so as to fit them in the general structure. Generally speaking, to perform a Katha in 45 minutes is converting it into

a ritual or formality to be gone through just to fill the time. This elementary point seems to have been ignored by the All India Radio.

I have tried to throw out some of the ideas which came to my mind in thinking about this subject. Kathakalakshepam has appealed to me more as an Art than as mere story-telling. Of course devotion has to be given a prominent place. One finds it easier at times to produce a devotional atmosphere through music than by mere story telling, and dramatic presentation proves also very helpful in adding to the devotional aspect. I feel that this aspect of the Katha requires a little more attention at the hands of the performers than is given to it at present.

Kathakalakshepam is a glorious institution in the cultural life of India, meant to keep alive the soul of the nation. Once it was a very popular institution. Most unfortunately its popularity has declined of late; this is not a healthy sign. Our greatness lies in our special culture and not in spurious imitations. And this institution was a very powerful factor in our cultural life. True patriotism and reverence for our ancient culture require that this art should not be allowed to decline or degenerate into a mere money-making affair. While our Music Sabhas go in for all kinds of shows of doubtful usefulness they do not seem to give sufficient encouragement to this art. If there is proper demand there will be adequate supply also. Let me hope that our Sabhas will become more alive to their responsibility in this matter.