Kutiyattam: in Retrospect and Prospect

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If the enactment of Sanskrit drama survived in Kerala as Kutiyattam, while totally disappearing from other parts of India, it was largely due to its being grafted into the medieval temple culture of Kerala with attendant rituals and entitlements given to specified communities entrusted with its performance. A comparison of stage manuals of Kutiyattam with the archetypal Natyasastra would reveal that a lot of changes must have taken place in the performance due to this adaptation, converting it to a ritual even while retaining the core element of Natya with four-fold abhinaya.

The performers of Kutiyattam had royal patronage and prestige on special occasions. Especially the Cakyar, who enjoyed some sort of immunity for his witticisms, had some social prestige.

But during the heyday of westernization, the type of knowledgeable audience shrunk in numbers and the actors had to be mostly content with an indifferent crowd of casual viewers within the temple precincts. It was the adaptation of the Malayalam language for the Vidusaka and his wit and humour which helped them to sustain the performance tradition amidst an audience alienated from traditional knowledge systems and scholarship.

When in the fifties of the last century, Kutiyattam was emancipated from temple precincts, an international audience was ready to greet the great art with enthusiasm. There was a paradigmatic shift in performance too. The vidusaka discourse came to be sidelined and performance related to aspects of classical drama came to be projected. It is an irony that it is outside Kerala, or for that matter outside India, that performance is receiving serious attention in modern times, since the traditional audience has been fast disappearing. Of course the recognition of Kutiyattam by UNESCO has greatly helped it to regain its lost glory. Most of the actors steeped in tradition are widely respected and enjoy immense social prestige, but this itself is not enough to enable the art to survive in the place of its origin.

Despite the UNESCO recognition the survival of Kutiyattam is still uncertain. So I suggest the following action plan:

1. Incorporation of the performance study in the curriculum in Colleges and Universities as apart of their Bachelor's and Master's programme, at least as a choice.
2. Adaptation of more and more plays to the fold of performance with a harmonic blend of tradition and the requirements of the contemporary audience, within a 3-hour framework, if possible.
3. Periodic international seminars/symposia involving artists and academicians to address specific issues related to performance.
4. Making available some inputs of the story as well as acting conventions in every performance (which is indeed done now).
5. Documentation of the performance of great maestros and making the material available to the general public by agencies like the Sangit Natak Akademi.
6. Ironic as it seems, the enactment of provision for performance in prominent temples of Kerala to be done by wealthy Devaswom Boards (because most of the Cakyars are very happy with the traditional organic surroundings which give them the necessary fillip). ❁