

Prabandham to āṭṭakkatha: Tradition of performance texts in medieval Malayalam

The paper looks at the history of the origin and evolution of texts used in performance practices in Kerala from the medieval to premodern age. I have two points to make: during the twelfth-thirteenth down to the eighteenth centuries, a new form of literary expression emerged in Kerala known as prabandha which, though it had vital links to earlier literature, was also connected to its performance tradition. I look at how this literary form became the axis in which recitative-performative forms like Pāthakam and Kūttu evolved, and how its impact extended to arts like Kathakali that developed later, around the seventeenth century and to its performance text, called *āṭṭakkatha* (story for performance). I have had some familiarity with Kathakali over the years, seeing hundreds of stage performances of Kathakali plays, many stories perhaps many times over. A stint at learning and performing on the stage decades back has also been an advantage to me that I cannot discount.

When one makes a survey of textual tradition from Kerala that served as the basis for performances from earlier times, one has to begin with the history of performance itself. For a long time down history, the resonances of the versatile *pāṭtu* (recited, sung) form integrating local meters and homegrown language have been reverberated in the performing arts of Kerala. Alongside innovative forms of poetry, many forms of *āṭṭam* (performance) developed and flourished in Kerala in multiple ways, linked to work and leisure, social functions and harvest, worship and ritual, and entertainment. The narrative power and impact of poetry receives a reciprocal energy in *āṭṭam* when the lines are recited, sung and performed.

A strong tradition of *pāṭtu* (song) literature of different kinds told stories as performances in Kerala, right from early days. These include local legends and tales of heroes, social functions and celebrations in worship to different deities. The *tottam* songs for Teyyam, the eighteen *niram* songs in Pūrakkāḷi, the songs of *nāgāradhana* in Puḷḷuvan *pāṭtu*, *amṛtamanthana* in Ayyappan Tiyāṭtu, the story of Bhadrakāḷi in Mudiyeṭtu, *māṭan* and *maruta* in Padayaṇi. Among the Teyyam dances propitiating animal spirits, Nāgatteyyam, devoted to the worship of the serpent, has wide prevalence. This ritual performance has two protagonists, Nāgarāja and Nāgakanni who have make-up and costumes which bear resemblance to the figure of a serpent.

Śiva being the presiding deity of hunting, is a favourite god with the forest communities of Kerala. Śiva's association with the myth of the primordial process of creation as a wild hunter is well-known, but in the local mythology, it is his disguise as Kirāta, the wild hunter, that has gained popularity with the forest people of Kerala. Śiva and Pārvati disguising themselves as Kāṭṭāla and Kāṭṭālatti (jungle-dwellers) testing the devotion and prowess of Arjuna in deep meditation of Siva is a tale that gets itself repeated in the poetry, songs and dances of Kerala in different traditions, including *prabandha* and *āṭṭakkatha*.

Another prevalent story is that of Kāḷi and Dārika (Dārūka), which finds its early reference in Liṅgapurāṇa and comes down in different versions of stutis, mātmyas and stotras across different regions, perhaps the most popular being in Bengal. However, it is interesting that though the story gets repeated in Teyyam, Paṭayaṇi, Kāliyūṭṭu and other ritual arts from Kerala, there is no direct evidence that Kūṭiyāṭṭam and Kathakali have not included it in their vast repertoire¹.

In this paper, we are concerned with the rise of *prabandha* literature in Kerala and how it may have influenced the performance culture of Kerala and how it lead to the emergence of *āṭṭakkatha* as a distinct genre, developing into a full-fledged form with its own literary idiom and performative grammar. As in the other south Indian languages, *prabandhas* began to appear by the beginning of the twelfth century, in Sanskrit and also in *maṇipravāḷam*, and there are more than a hundred *prabandhas* of varying length and quality written by the authors of Kerala. The most important feature of a *prabandha* work is that it tells a story— usually episodes extracted from a purāṇic text. Combining the *padya* (śloka) portions with *gadya* of varying numbers, length and quality, these *prabandhas* were composed in an ornate yet appealing language of Sanskrit and *maṇipravāḷam*. The *gadya* portions mostly have long, descriptive passages, imbued in many instances with a strong local flavour. It certainly seems that the *padya* portions are meant to be read, or acted out, and that the writers were aware of their histrionic potential. The rich *maṇipravāḷam* literature produced *accīcaritams*, *sandeśa kāvyas* and *sthalapurāṇas* which Kesavan Veluthat asserts are very much in the *kāvya* tradition of Sanskrit—no, that it *is* Sanskrit poetry, written in *maṇipravāḷam* (Veluthat: 77-105). We have evidence that some *prabandhas* came to be written, both in *maṇipravāḷam* and in Sanskrit, presumably for the sake of performing/reciting on the stage.

¹ *Rasasadana Bhāṇa* of Koṭuṅṅallūr Godavarma mentions a Cākyaṛ performing the story of Kāḷi and Dārika, but there is no mention of the name of the *prabandha*.

It is easy to ascertain that prabandhas were used for public recitation from the beginning and also for stage performance

1. What Ulloor calls as bandhaśloka: An introductory stanza or a couple of stanzas, providing the context of the poem, usually at a grand assembly where the poet is invited to recite his work. He is uncomfortable and has stage fright, but then he spots his friend among the audience, and feels better.
2. Introduction of gadya portions with descriptive passages, explicating a situation, very much Cākyār-style, for example, Sītā Svayamvaram in Bhāṣā Rāmāyaṇa Caṃpu
3. Framing, alliterations, gadya, pratiśloka, passages that are more drama than poetry
4. Colloquialisms, Kerala-based references, which may have been the model for Kuñcan Nambiar for his *tuḷḷal* works at a later time. This could be the topic of another study.
5. The description of a performance in *Rasasadana Bhāṇa* of Koṭuññallūr Godavarma goes like this:

*Madhye dīpajvalana madhure pārśvataḥ pāṇighastrī-
citrībhūte sarasahṛdayeir'bhūsureir'bhāsurāgre
pṛṣṭhe mārddāṅgika vilasite raṅgadeśe praviṣṭaḥ
spaṣṭākūtam naṭayati naṭaḥ kopi kañcit prabandham*

(The lamp glows in the middle of the stage, and on the side sits the Naṅṅyār playing cymbals. In front of a riveted audience consisting of brahmaṇas, the drummer stands behind with a mṛdaṅga. An actor seated on the stage performs a prabandha with clear expressions.)

In any case, the prevalence of maṇipravāḷam śloka much earlier than that points to the fact that it was because of a connection with Kūṭiyāṭṭam or some form of Kūttu, the narration of stories. The terms Kūttu, naṅṅyār were familiar from the ninth century onwards, as copperplates and literary references tell us. However, it is possible that Kūttu has become prevalent from the time of *Līlatilakam* itself (Ulloor, p. 48). The Nambiar community used to perform *Pāthakam* (interpretive narration), and their narrative prabandhas came to be referred to as “Tamizh”. It is likely that bhāṣa śloka (with Malayalam as the primary language) were used in Pāthakam from those days. Ulloor mentions that there is difference opinion among scholars on this point, however he is of the opinion that the bhāṣa prabandhas (like Abhimanyu

Vadham which is yet to be discovered) were popular on the Pāthakam/Kūttu stages. The first family of actors, called Cākyārs, established their lineage by adopting children born from unauthorized union in the orthodox classes, for example, the union of a brāhṃaṇa girl with a non-brāhṃaṇa boy, which was strictly forbidden according to societal norms. The art of the Cākyārs, Nañnyārs and Nambiars was made into a hereditary occupation, thus ensuring its sustenance and continuance. Koothu transformed itself into three allied arts—Prabandha Koothu, Nangiar Koothu and Kūṭiyāṭṭam.

Many scholars have mentioned about Tolan the brāhṃaṇa friend of Kulaśekhara who is supposed to have helped him with the choreography of the plays Subhadrādhanañjaya and Tapatīsaṃvaraṇa and also left a corpus of ślokas and pratiślokas, but it is possible that the pratiślokas and descriptive ślokas used in Kūṭiyāṭṭam, though attributed to him, may not all have been his (Leelavathy). In fact, the name Tolan itself could have been fictitious, and may even refer to a form of literature with hāsya as the main rasa (p.40). It is also possible that many of the ślokas attributed to Tolan may have been the creation of Cākyārs themselves, at different points of time. I feel that the pratiślokas in Cākyār Kūttu and Kūṭiyāṭṭam deserve a separate reading from historical, theatrical and literary points of view. In any case, there is the legacy of the two dhvani treatises, for Tapatīsaṃvaraṇam and Subhadrādhanañjayam, and evidence of their staging from the twelfth century onwards. The elaboration of the role of the Vidūṣaka in the newly evolved art of PrabandhakKūttu expanded the repertoire of texts, both in maṇipravāḷam and Sanskrit. There was a heightened awareness of new forms of expressivity.

A bit about the evolution of Kūṭiyāṭṭam seems relevant here: During the post-Kulasekhara times, the performance of Kūṭiyāṭṭam underwent major changes. The performance grammar became highly stretched out and features like nirvahaṇam and pakarnnāṭṭam became the core of Kūṭiyāṭṭam. The role of the Vidūṣaka was enlarged considerably. With the freedom to use local language of Malayāḷam and the sanction to criticize anyone through the medium of humour, his role arguably became more important than the hero. Performance manuals called *āṭṭaparakārams* and *kramadīpikas* which codified the performance of Kūṭiyāṭṭam appeared around the fifteenth-sixteenth centuries, which have since been preserved in Cākyār families and handed down from generation to generation through a master-disciple tradition. These may have been compiled over quite a long period and probably had multiple authorship with patron-choreographers and actors playing an important part, not only in the creation of the text, but in setting the guidelines of acting and transmission.

While kramadīpika is by and large an account of logistical matters such as stage organisation, stage production, use of costumes and payment to the artists, āṭṭaparakāram vividly describes the method of action, movement, recitative mode, gesture, elaboration and every other detail of performance and is the real performance text of Kūṭiyāṭṭam. The excessiveness of scope for the actor and the multiple impersonation of roles for the actor came in for severe censure at the hands of the author of *Naṭāṅkuśam*, literally, a goad for the actor. But that is another story. In later years, Kathakali, though more accessible and perhaps less convoluted than Kūṭiyāṭṭam adopted several elements from Kūṭiyāṭṭam when it came to the nuances of abhinaya, including interpretive action through a highly developed code of gestures and facial expression.

It is possible that the practice of treating full-fledged plays into single acts in Kūṭiyāṭṭam may have had a direct influence on the composition of prabandha works that emerged in Kerala. In this sense, I would like to see *prayoga* as the basis for this kind of literature, or at least a major part of it, in Kerala. The story, or the stories within the stories, becomes important at this stage, either spoken verbally or performed through elaborate āṅgika acting. The introduction of *puruṣārthas*² into Kulaśekhara's plays and the elaboration of Mantrāṅkam became part of the new performance. As we know, *puruṣārthas* are a take-off from the play texts of Nāgānanda, Subhadrādhanañjaya and Tapatīsaṃvaraṇa.

Mantrāṅkam, the third Act of Bhāsa's *Pratijñāyugandharāyaṇa*, integrates many stories such as *pekkathakal*, *viḍḍhikkathakal*, the stories of Uṇṇyārāṇan and Iṭyārāṇan, apart from the twenty-one day narration of the Rāmāyaṇa, based largely on the compiled text called Rāmāyaṇa Prabandham. The text here becomes part of the context. It is a loosely integrated text, perhaps put together at different points of time as per the needs of individual families of Cākyārs (for example, how the Ammannūr version of the text is different from the Māṇi one) and the text differs in length and possibly content. (David Shulman calls this "elastive inclusivity."³)

Rāmāyaṇa Prabandham depicts is the full story of the Rāmāyaṇa, unlike the prabandhams of Melputtūr which treats single episodes as complete text. Ammannūr Kuṭṭan Cākyār says⁴ (unpublished talk on Rāmāyaṇa Prabandham, May 2019) that unlike other stories, this prabandha is accessible for both young students

² Vidūṣaka's verbal narration of the four 'aims of life'—introduced in Kūṭiyāṭṭam, in the plays mentioned above.

³ David Shulman, "Mantrāṅkam". Unpublished paper.

⁴ unpublished talk on Rāmāyaṇa Prabandham, May 2019.

and expert performers alike, and in this sense it is more significant to a Cākyār's repertoire than even the great prabandhas of Melputtūr. Prabandhas are important not to be just heard, but to be seen also. It is not merely *what* is said, but *how* it is said that matters.

Coming back to the Vidūṣaka's performance, there is every reason to believe that the audience of the Kūttu had prior knowledge of what was expected, and the emphasis was to see how each of the verses are played out, explicated interpreted by the actor. In turn, there were demands on the audience also. To give an example, the account of Iṭyārāṇan in Puruṣārtha Kūttu begins by the Cākyār re-counting the five modes of listening to a story:

1. Āyāte keḷkkaṇam--listen from the beginning to the end
2. Piḷayāte keḷkkaṇam--listen well, so that you are not getting it wrong
3. Mukham tannu keḷkkaṇam--face directly when the person telling the story
4. Cevi koṭuttu keḷkkaṇam--lend him your ears, listen carefully
5. Mūḷi keḷkkaṇam--respond to him, by appreciative sounds

Some of the earlier prabandhas are Amogharāghava Caṃpu (13th century), Pūrvabhārata Caṃpu, Uttarakāyaṇa Caṃpu, and those by Melputtūr Nārāyaṇa Bhaṭṭatiri. After Melputtūr, there is a long line of prabandhakāras and literary works both in Sanskrit and maṇipravāḷam, some of the other notable prabandha poets being Iṭavaṭṭikkāṭṭu Nārāyaṇan Nampūtiri (Rukmiṇī Svayamvaram), Aśvati Tirunaḷ (Santānagopalam, Kārttavīrya Vijayam), Keralavarma Valia Koil Tampuran ((Kaṃsa Vadham), Koṭuṅṅallūr Kochuṅṅi Tampuran (Bāṇa Yuddham) among others.

However, coming back to the role of performance of prabandhas, the Vidūṣaka now becomes a central figure

1. describing previous story, for example in Mantrāṅkam, the third Act of Bhāsa's Pratijñayaugandharāyaṇa, on the thirteenth day about how King Udayana came to be imprisoned in Mahāsena's kingdom,
2. elaborating on philosophic discourses as in Bhagavadajjukam (Śaṅḍilya's verbal action, which is said to have gone for thirty six days) and social commentaries as in PuruṣārthakKūttu and in the end, connecting it to the context of the story of the main play
3. reciting Sanskrit ślokas from the play, interpreting them in Malayāḷam

4. using humor as the medium to narrate and interpret poetry and prose, through indulging in ridicule, jokes, satire, counter-poems (pratiśloka) and other interpolations
5. interpreting texts as in Prabandha Kūttu, using the great prabandha literature

Among the corpus of prabandhas, Rāmāyaṇa Prabandham for example is very popular on the Kūttu stage. It is part of the training curriculum for a Cākyār not merely to know the entire verses of the prabandha but to interpret them according to the format expected of prabandha Kūttu, couched in a metaphoric language yet imitating ordinary speech, and inter-referencing with the dramatic situation of the play. The convention of the Vidūṣaka as the commentator of action afforded him with the sanction to directly address the audience, sometimes make personal references to them and also ridicule them when an occasion arose. It may be seen as a sort of inversion deliberately integrated into the 'high' art of Kūṭiyāṭṭam, perhaps understood in its collective rather than individual form. It reduces social criticism to a joke, and caricatures social norms.

It is perhaps a regular feature of both Sanskrit and maṇipravāḷa prabandhas from Kerala to borrow and adapt verses from other Sanskrit texts. Ramāyaṇa Prabandham and Punam's Bhāṣā Rāmāyaṇa Caṃpu freely adapt verses from Bhaṭṭikāvya, Māgha, Bhoja, Śākuntala, Raghuvamśa, Anargharāghava and many others, for enhancing dramatic effect, for embellishing the situation. . (Manu: For example In his upodghatam to the Sita Svayamvaram (NBS edition) of Bhāṣā Rāmāyaṇa Caṃpu, Vettinad Sreedharan Nair gives a list of lifted verses in Punam's text, as 588 in number, ranging from 9 in Udyana Praveśam to 77 in Rāvaṇa Vadham.) The practice of adapting verses from other earlier sources has often been criticised by several scholars, as shameless borrowing. The cause and context for such interweaving becomes the matter of another paper, so I am leaving it there. (de-contextualizing, changing the meaning, re-configuring, and/or enriching the text).

Melpputtūr Nārāyaṇa Bhaṭṭātiri is credited with having the most number of prabandha texts in Kerala Sanskrit literature, more than twenty prabandhas but the number varies, ranging from ten, to twenty one. While some of them have the endorsement of his authorship, many of the others have been ascribed to him.

The prabandhams of Melpputtūr popular with the Cākyārs include Kirātam, Rājasūyam, Pāñcālīsvayamvaram, Subhadrāharaṇam, Kalyānāsaugandhikam, Dūtavākyam, Śūrpanakhāpralāpam. Following him, may other poets like

Rāmapāṇivāda, Aśvati Tirunāḷ and Koṭṭārakkara Valiya Koil Tampurān wrote prabandhas. However, among this repertoire, the prabandhas of Melputtūr have unparalleled popularity with the Cākyārs and their audiences alike. . His prabandhas are of varying length—there are longer ones like Rājasūya, Pāñcālī Svayamvara and Dūtavākya, and shorter ones like Sundopasundopākhyāna and Śūrpaṇakhā Pralāpa. Dūtavākya is part of the repertoire of the Cākyars, and has interesting gadya portions. Kṛṣṇa’s entry into Kaurava sabha and his mediatory efforts, have unmatched dramatic quality, which have perhaps become the basis for the āṭṭakkatha Kathakali play of Duryodhana Vadham, where this scene becomes a pivotal point. In fact the failed *dūtu* mission and the gadya description of Kṛṣṇa’s *viśvarūpa* have unparalleled dramatic force, which finds resonances in later poetry, including āṭṭakkatha and tuḷḷal.

Melputtūr mentions in his Śūrpaṇakhā Pralāpa Prabandha that he wrote it for the sake of his friend, the actor Ravi, who is identified as Kuṭṭanceri Iravi Cākyār. The verse is

*Anunāsika rahitāni vyatanot etāni gadyapadyāni
Nārāyaṇābhidhāno dvijapoto ravi naṭeśādeśāt*

(I, a brāhmaṇa youth named Nārāyaṇa, am writing a few *padyas* and *gadyas* without nasal sounds, at the instance of Ravi the actor)

This prabandha with its story taken from Araṇyaparva of the Rāmāyaṇa is about how Śūrpaṇakha goes ranting and raving to Rāvaṇa, her brother, after Lakṣmaṇa cuts off her ears, nose and breasts. Since the text has only one conversation by Śūrpaṇakha, reporting to Rāvaṇa her brother about her nose-less condition, the prabandha is composed without nasal sounds. (Last year we read this short but beautiful prabandha in Delhi as part of a reading workshop.) I have heard this *niranunasika* prabandham in performance by the great Painkulam Rama Cākyār in the early seventies, where he talked about the first verse:

*Ha, ha! rākṣasarāja, duṣparibhava grastasya dhik te bhujā
vidyujjihva vipattireva sukarā kṣudrapratāpa, tvayā
Dhvastāpatrapa! paśya paśya, sakaleir cakṣuṣbhiḥ etādṛśī
jātā kasyacid eva tāpasaśiśōḥ śastrād taveiva svasā*

(King of *rākṣasas*! To hell with your inept, pathetic hands.

They are good only to knock down Vidyujjihva. Your glory has diminished.

Shameless one, see this—look with all those eyes of yours,

how your own sister has become like this
by the arrows of some juvenile hermit.)

While reciting the text, the Cākyār is said to have unwittingly pronounced the feminine “bhujā” instead of the correct “bhujān”. When questioned about it later, he had the presence of mind to say that it was a deliberate usage, because it was meant as a scathing insult from Śūrpaṇakha, that Rāvaṇa’s arms are feminine hands and that he has lost his power, which the poem also bears out. In this manner, in the prabandhas, the Vidūṣaka recites and interprets the entire text in a manner that is intimately linked to the audience. With humour, twists and turns in language to enhance comic effect (for example, he can play on the words “Vāsubhadra” as Arjuna addressing Kṛṣṇa, into “vā Subhadrā (come, Subhadrā!), exaggeration and a deft use of satire, he contrives situations that appear true to the context of the narrative and also sometimes to contemporary times.

Kirāta prabandha for example (to provide example) has the Śiva as hunter episode. We will find this at a later stage while discussing āṭṭakkatha..

Āṭṭakkatha

However, without pausing here too much, I would like to talk now about the relationship between prabandhas and āṭṭaprakārams to a form of literature that developed in Kerala by the second half of the seventeenth century and flourished well into the twentieth century. This is the genre of āṭṭakkatha which as the name suggests, the source text of Kathakali.

Before I try to explore the links between āṭṭakkatha and prabandha literature, I would like to point out some obvious similarities, in general terms, between the two forms: both are narrative literary forms that adapt episodes from the purāṇas and other well-known works. Since they are written for stage performance, they are both visual and dramatic in nature. The language, a mix of Sanskrit and Malayāḷam, lends itself to choreographic re-interpretations. Āṭṭakkatha has a complex aesthetic, based on the social and cultural environment that moulded the tradition.

However, one can say that a typical āṭṭakkatha has some distinguishing features of why it is considered more excellent, literary merit not perhaps the most important of them. Being primarily stage-oriented, it exists as a foundation on which the play is anchored, and it has to arouse and tease the imagination of the spectator. Sometimes, a “bad” literary text succeeds as good Kathakali, and a “good” text need

not always work well on the stage. It is a combination of literariness, diversity of characterization (I mean on the stage--whether there are all types of characters), potential for manodharma (elaborate acting) by the main characters, dramatic conventions like śṛṅgāra padam, varṇanas (descriptions of a woman, a peacock dance, vanavarṇana and others) paṭappurappād, yuddham. Musicality--the right rāgas for the evocation of right bhāva, appropriate dance sequences and tāḷa patterns--perhaps all these elements work together to create a good āṭṭakkatha.

Kathakali, or Rāmanāṭṭam as it was known in the beginning, originated sometime in the early part of the seventeenth century. Kathakali developed down the years through the efforts of patron-authors such as Koṭṭārakkara Tampurān, Koṭṭayattu Tampurān, Irayimman Tampi, Aśvati Tirunāl and evolved its theatre language through the choreographic and acting skills of several master-actors. As in every act of creation, there is a popular myth about the origin of Rāmanāṭṭam. Mānaveda, the king of Koḷikkode had a flourishing repertory Kṛṣṇāṭṭam the performance of the Bhāgavata cycle of plays based on Mānaveda's Sānskrit text Kṛṣṇagīti. When the King of Koṭṭārakkara (Koṭṭārakkara Tampurān) requested Mānaveda to send the troupe to him for a performance, Mānaveda refused, perhaps because of an earlier booking or due to lack of heed, which became a matter of shame for the King of Koṭṭārakkara. A devotee of Rāma, he wrote the cycle of eight plays based on the Rāmāyaṇa story and choreographed them for stage presentation. Whether the story is right or wrong, Koṭṭārakkara Tampurān's Āṭṭakkatha is structured along similar lines as Kṛṣṇāṭṭam, with eight stories Putrakāmeṣṭi, Sītāsvayamvaram,, Vicchinnābhiṣekam, Kharavadham, Bālivadham, Torāṇayuddham, Setubandhanam and Yuddham. Gradually Rāmanāṭṭam repertories sprang up in royal families such as Veṭṭam and Kurumbranād, and Nampūtiri houses like Orlāśseri, and with patronage Kathakali flourished across Kerala, mainly in the South, up to Tiruvanantapuram. Though the Koṭṭārakkara cycle of plays became the genesis of Kathakali and the King became the pioneer of this new form of performance, these plays are not considered significant in literary merits (Ulloor stamps them as *eṭṭu poṭṭakkathaka!*). The more popular on the stage are Sītāsvayamvaram, Bālivadham and Torāṇayuddham.

It is important to briefly talk about the performance structure of Kathakali at this point. Going through tremendous transformation in choreography down the years under its patrons and practitioners, Kathakali evolved as a syncretic art, adapting the performance structure from Kṛṣṇāṭṭam, elements of acting from Kūṭiyāṭṭam, music from the sopāna tradition of temple singing, make-up and

costume from the existing performance art forms such as Teyyam, Muḍiyettu and Paṭayaṇi and also visual arts like painting. The format that emerged through long years of intervention from patrons and connoisseurs is that two singers at the back of the stage sing the lines of the text, and the actors enact the meaning, to the accompaniment of drums such as chenḍa, maddalam, cheṇṇila and elattālam. The actors have elaborate make-up and costume representing character-types (pacca, katti, tāḍi, kari, minukku). The performance, traditionally lasting through the night with a single or sometimes two stories, starts with araṅṅukeḷi (announcement) and invocatory dances like todayam and Purappād. Purappād usually has verses from Rājasūyam āṭṭakkatha and has three performers --Kṛṣṇa, Balarāma and Subhadra. Meḷappadam as the name suggests is the drumming preamble which also displays the skill of the chenḍa and maddalam artists. It is interesting that the *Gītagovindam* padam beginning with “maṅjutara kuṅjatala keli sadane..” is interpolated into the sequence of meḷappadam, and makes one wonder how and where that came from. After meḷappadam, the singers take position behind the curtain and sing nilappadam, introducing the play and the main character and then maṅgalaśloka, the invocatory verse. For the plays of Koṭṭayam Tampuran and almost all the others, the standard maṅgalaśloka is:

*“Mātaṅgānanam, abjavāsaramaṇīm, govindamādyam gurūn
vyāsam, pāṇini, garganāradakaṇḍādāyaān munīndrān, budhān
ḍurgām cāpi mṛdaṅgaśailanilayām śrīporkkalīm iṣṭadām
bhaktyā nityam upāsmāhe sapadi naḥ kurvantvamī maṅgalam*

(The elephant faced god, the woman who lives in the lotus, Govinda the teacher, gurus such as Vyāsa, Pāṇini, Garga and Nārada, the scholars and connoisseurs, goddess Durga, goddess Śrīporkkali—the [*paradevata*] deity of Muzhakkunnu [*mṛdaṅgaśailanilayā*] who grants all wishes--I worship all of you with great reverence. May her give benediction to all of us!)

The invocatory verse venerating Porkali bhagavati also acknowledges the gods and goddesses starting with Gaṇapati, while establishing his provenance in the region of Koṭṭayam in North Malabār.

Kathakali, like prabandhas, are episodic, narrative and sequential. The main task of an āṭṭakkatha writer is to tell the story from start to finish, dividing into scenes, enhancing the dramatic effect. The rangams (scenes), are punctuated by śloka—the narrative, linking portion in the story—and padam, the dialogue between two or more characters. This format is all too familiar, right from Gītagovinda and

many South Indian texts. In Kerala, Kṛṣṇagīti adapted this śloka-pada format in the performance of Kṛṣṇāṭṭam.

In Koṭṭarakkara's Sītā Svayamvaram, A closer look at the text of Paraśurāma Vijayam in Rāmāyaṇa Prabandham and Sītā Svayamvaram will reveal the intimate connection between the two texts, in ideas, and even in lines.

Rāmāyaṇa Prabandham:

*"Mārgam dehi vibho" "kva yāsyati bhavāṇ" "Yasmād ihāyātavān"
"Sītā dāsyasi ced prayāhi" "bhavatā samyak na co'ktam mune!"
"Yuddham dehi na ced" "vṛtheiva kalahe ko vā vidhatte matim"
"Rāmo dāsarathir bhavet tribhuvane rāmo'thavā bhārgavaḥ"*

("Please allow me to go." "Where do you want to go?" "From where I came here." "If you will give Sītā to me, you can go." "O hermit, such words do not suit you." "In that case, give me battle." "Why should anyone want to fight, without a cause?" "In the world, let there be only one Rāma--the son of Daśaratha, or Bhārgava.")

The Kathakali padam of Sītā Svayamvaram:

*Bhārgava, munitilaka, povatinneniykku
mārgam nī tareṇamallo māmuni kuleśa!*

*Alpanāta rājanyakumāra, nī eviṭeyippon!
povānāy mārgatte codiccatu colka*

*Munnam eṇṇu ninnu ñān iṇṇu poyennāl
aṇṇu tanne pokunnatinnāy mārgatte tarika...*

("Bhārgava, the great sage, please give me the way to go."
"Worthless prince, tell me, where do you want to go?"
"From whichever place I came from, to go elsewhere—
please move away so that I can go back there itself..")

In the episode of Paraśurāma obstructing Rāma's path while he proceeds to Ayodhya after Sītāsvayamvaram, Paraśurāma rebukes Rāma with the lines,

Viṣṇu tanṭe 'hum'kārattāl bhagnamāya cāpam

duṣṭa! nī muriccatinnu śauryam koṅṭalletum

(The bow was broken because of the ‘hum’ sound uttered by/arrogance of Viṣṇu, not because of your prowess.)

This line gives a context for the actor as Paraśurāma to describe in detail the abiding rivalry between Śiva and Viṣṇu over who is the more powerful one, the fight that ensued between them, the breaking (loosening the string) of the bow by Viṣṇu’s ‘hum’kāra and judging Viṣṇu as superior, a miffed Śiva handing over the bow to King Janaka of Videha for safekeeping in the palace.

In Kathakali, usually the śloka is recited behind the tiraśśīla (hand-held curtain). The actors do not speak words but enact the meaning of the verse, punctuated by simple or complex patterns of dance movements called kalāśams at the end of each pallavi, anupallavi and caranam. There are also occasional daṇḍakas for example in Naḷacaritam (when Naḷa goes to meet Damayantī for the first time, under the cover of tiraskariṇī), Kucela Vṛttam (a soliloquy in which Kucela while on his way to meet Kṛṣṇa, wonders whether Kṛṣṇa will recognise him, after all the years spent not seeing each other) and Kīcaka Vadham (where at the orders of Sudeṣṇā, Mālinī the sairandhrī--the disguised Draupadī--goes to Kīcaka’s quarters, to fetch *madhu* for the queen.

In Punnāgavarāḷi raga:

*Dānavāri mukundane..sānandam kaṅṭitān vipran
tāne naṭannītināne cinta ceytu:*

*“sūnabāṇa suśamanām ānanda mūrttiye cennu
nūnam ṅan kaṅṭitunnuṭtū nissandeham
Nāḷikākṣan tanne etranāḷāyitṭū kāṅān ṅanum
miḷita santoṣattode mevīṭunnu*

*Ācāryālayattil ninnu mociccatil acyutanām
ṁecakavarannane kaṅṭittillā ṅanum*

*Prākṛta bhūsuran tanne kāṅum neram uḷḷil sarva
lokanāthanuṅṭākumo vismṛtiyum?
Antaṅgaril ettam kṛpāsantati mukundanuḷḷa*

cinta mūlam bandhurāṅgan māniccīdum”

(With great joy, the brāhmana set out alone to see Mukunda, the enemy of Dānavas, and kept thinking to himself:

*“Beyond doubt, I am going to see the Embodiment of Bliss,
Kṛṣṇa, as beautiful as Kāma.*

*How many days I have been waiting,
eager to see the lotus-eyed one!*

*After leaving our guru’s home (completing studies)
I haven’t seen him, the cloud-hued one.*

*Seeing this decrepit brāhmana,
Would the lord of all the worlds have forgotten me?
After all, Mukunda has immense respect for brāhmanas.
So he will certainly be cordial towards me.”)*

The daṇḍaka of Sairandhrī in Kīcaka Vadam:

*Kṣonīndra patniyuṭe vāṇīm niśamya punar-
eṇīvilocana natuṅṅī
mizhiyiṅa kalaṅṅi, vivaśatayil muṅṅī
palataṭavum atinu punar avaḷoṭu paraṅṅaḷavu
paruṣamozhi keṭṭutan aṭaṅṅī*

*Dāsyam samastajana hāsyam ninaccu punar
āsyam namiccu punareṣā
vijitasurayoṣā vigataparitoṣā
Śramasalila bahulatara nayanajalamatiluṭane
muzhuki bata! malinataraveṣā*

*Gātram viraccitati mātram karattil atha
pātram dhariccaviṭe ninnū
paricoḍu naṭannū, pathiyilapi ninnū
Hiraṅaripuvarasahita dariyiliha pokumoru
hariṅiyuṭe vivaśata kalarnnū*

*Niśvasya dīrgham api viśvasya nātham api
viśvasya cetasi sujātā
dhṛtirahita cetā dhṛta puḷaka jātā
Sūtasutanuṭe maṇiniketam atil avaḷ cennu
bhīti paritāpa paribhūtā*

(Listening to the words of the queen, the doe-eyed one shuddered. Her eyes became moist, and she was agitated. Even after making several excuses and pleas, when she was harshly reprimanded, she quietened down. Thinking about the pathetic state of servitude, she—who excels all celestial women—stood there, joyless, with a bent head. She was sweating profusely because of her strain, and her eyes were filled with tears.

Her body was shaking. She took the pitcher in her hands, and stood still for a moment. Then she started walking, and paused, while proceeding on her path. She was like a deer going into a lion’s den.

Inhaling deeply, the high-born lady finally put her faith on god, the protector of the world. Her mind was blank, and her hair stood on edge. She reached the grand house of the son of the charioteer, her mind mixed with emotions of fear and sorrow.)

In any case, what she gets is an exhilarated welcome, whether she likes it or not:

Kāamboji raga:

*Sabhājana vilocaneiḥ samanipīta rūpāmṛtām
Sabhājanakarāṃbujām savidhamāgatām pārṣatīm
Sabhājana purassaram samupasṛtya sūtātmajaḥ
Sa bhājanamatho mudām sarasameva ūce vacaḥ*

This śloka and Kīcaka’s next padam beginning with “harinākṣī jana mauli maṇe...” set in Kāamboji rāga are an all-time favourite with Kathakali lovers. Kīcaka incidentally reminds one about Rāvaṇa as he is characterised in a typical Kūṭiyāṭṭam play, a katti character who diminishes all the others and usually performed by the main actor. In this situation, Kīcaka is consumed with love, and is capable of risking his own life to be with her.

The pada goes like

hariṅākṣijana mauli maṇe..ennarikil varika mālinī..

Kamani ninnuṭeya sañcāra dūnatara

caraṇa naḷina paricaraṇaparan ṅān

...

Mandiram itu mama mahitamāy vannitu

māmaka janmavum saphalamāy vannitu

The crest jewel of doe-eyed beauties,

please come near me, Malini!

Beloved one, I want to massage and caress your feet

weary after such a long walk..

This home of mine has become glorious

And my birth/life has also become meaningful now.

The anti-hero (represented by a *katti* in the typology of characterisation) is in most cases the real hero of a Kathakali play, with Rāvaṇa, Duryodhana, Kīcaka, Dakṣa, Urvaśī, Lalita (the disguised Pūtana, Simhika or Nakratuṅḍi) taking the lead roles and where Rāma, Kṛṣṇa or Sīta have comparatively minor roles to play. This goes against the view that Kathakali exemplifies bhakti in any remarkable manner. There is no divine presence of a god on the stage. Unlike Kṛṣṇāṭṭam which celebrates Kṛṣṇa's life in the cycle of nine plays, when Rāmanāṭṭam was written and choreographed, it is interesting that there are no eulogies and celebratory passages to the god. The emphasis of the play is in the progression of the story, with elaboration of the high points of drama unfolding with magical intensity, scene by scene, through interlocking domains of the āṭṭakkatha (verbal text), abhinaya (actor's body and mind), rāga (the musician's singing), tāla (the rhythmic ensemble consisting of chenda, maddalam ceṅṅila and elattālam).

So daṇḍaka describes an extended activity or occurrence, somewhat like perhaps the gadya portion in a prabandha. The ślokas and padams are configured according to specific rāgas; the padams are set in tālas in different tempos, and the emphasis is on the evocation and enhancement of the mood for the actor. After the pada sequence of a scene, there is provision for manodharma or otherwise termed iḷakiyāṭṭam, where the two characters, not bound by the formalities of padam, can freely indulge in conversation. This can range from simple conversation to extended description (varṇana) of the beauty of a woman, of the forest, of elaborate cooking in the case of

Naḷa in Naḷacaritam. Usually this is an occasion for the actor to display his mastery over his āṅgika skills. What is usually familiar to Kūṭiyāṭṭam audiences, including kailāsoddhāraṇam and pārvatīviraham, and ājagarakabalitam are also part of Kathakali.

In Bāli Vijayam of Kallūr Nambūtiripad, for example, Nārada informs Rāvaṇa that though everyone in the world fears and respects him, a silly monkey named Bāli alone defies his authority, saying that Daśāsya and a shoot of grass are alike to him. In great indignation and fury, Rāvaṇa sets out to destroy the monkey, not realizing that he is actually the noble monkey king, the son of Indra—the one who helped churn the Milk Ocean. While starting out to meet Bāli, he takes up his sword Candrahāsa and explains the circumstances by which Śiva presented it to him. This gives him an occasion to elaborate on Kailasoddhāraṇa and Pārvatīviraha, very much in the Kūṭiyāṭṭam mode which many of us are familiar.

Kathakali drew on the āṭṭaparakāram or extended acting style of Kūṭiyāṭṭam in that some basic acting elements like pakarnnāṭṭam are adopted in the case of heroes such as Rāvaṇa in Rāvaṇolbhavam (Kallekkulangara Rāghava Piṣāroṭi), or Naḷa in the description of viraha (verpāṭu) from Damayantī in Naḷacaritam Day II. However, while the basic text of Kūṭiyāṭṭam is the Sankrit play along with the āṭṭaparakāram of single Acts, āṭṭakkathas (Kathakali plays) are exclusively written for the staging of Kathakali, and are mostly episodes from the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyaṇa. Unlike Kūṭiyāṭṭam, Kathakali does not base its drama on extended acting of a single character spread across several days, but is focused on performing a story from start to finish, confined to a single night, and so the plays are composed in an episodic manner.. So it is limited in scope but has an extensive audience base. While Kūṭiyāṭṭam is a more intimate theatre and Kathakali appeals to the wider spectrum of the mind. This is perhaps Kathakali demands a larger field of and setting, while Kūṭiyāṭṭam works best with a small yet engrossed audience.

Performing arts like Kūṭiyāṭṭam or Kathakali make great demands on the actor, and gives limitless freedom to explicate an idea, and analyse it from different, even contrary, perspectives. Rather than through the physical setting or costumes, the actor through the technique of elaborate acting explores every nuance and detail and *interprets the idea* for benefit of the spectator. The dance of ‘Keki’ (the dance of the peacock), and the elaborate acting of “ājagarakabalitam’ (a narrative sequence in Nīlakaṇṭha’s Kalyāṇasaugandhikam choreographed in Kūṭiyāṭṭam and adapted later into the action of Koṭṭāyam Tampuran’s Kathakali play Kalyāṇasaugandhikam

involving a tussle between a lion, an elephant and a python) are two examples of this mode of acting.

Keki in Kathakali forms a part of the dramatic convention of a 'srngara pada', where the hero of the play addresses the heroine with expressions of his love. In the play *Rāvaṇa Vijayam*, Rāvaṇa is praising the beauty his wife Maṇḍodari: "Seeing the beauty of your hair, the peacocks (mistaking it to be a thick mass of clouds) dance in joy". This line affords the actor in the role of Rāvaṇa to display his histrionic ability to depict the dance of the peacock. Set in the fixed convention orchestrated in increasing tempos and vigorous movements, keki is a sight to watch, where he elaborately depicts the actions of a peacock, including the postures, actions like combing the feathers with the beak, spreading the plumes, swaying from side to side and strutting.

After Koṭṭarakkata Tampurān, the writer of āṭṭakkatha was Koṭṭayattu Tampurān whose four plays Bakavadham, Kalyāṇasaugandhikam Kirmīravadhā and Kālakeyavadham made a great mark in the āṭṭakkatha repertoire not merely for their literary quality, but for their choreographic excellence also. In fact these four plays still continue to be the favourites on the Kathakali stage for a specialist. Perhaps he represents a typical characteristic of the *maṇipravāḷam caṃpu-s* in written in Malayāḷam from roughly the beginning of the fifteenth century--the growing predominance of the qualities of Sanskrit literary style. In his āṭṭākkathas, the śloka portions are always in Sanskrit, and padas are composed in maṇipravāḷam poetry.

For the plays of Koṭṭayam Tampuran and almost for all the other attakkatha writers who followed him, the standard maṅgalaśloka at the beginning of a play is:

*"Mātaṅgānanam, abjavāsaramaṇīm, govindamādyam gurūn
vyāsam, pāṇini, garganāradakaṇḍādāyaān munīndrān, budhān
ḍurgām cāpi mṛdaṅgaśailanilayām śrīporkkalīm iṣṭadām
bhaktyā nityam upāsmāhe sapadi naḥ kurvāntvamī maṅgalam*

(The elephant faced god, the woman who lives in the lotus, Govinda the teacher, gurus such as Vyāsa, Pāṇini, Garga and Nārada, the scholars and connoisseurs, goddess Durga, goddess Śrīporkkali--the [*paradevata*] deity of Muzhakkunnu [*mṛdaṅgaśailanilayā*] who grants all wishes--I worship all of you with great reverence. May her give benediction to all of us!)

The invocatory verse venerating Porkali bhagavati also acknowledges the gods and goddesses starting with Gaṇapati, while establishing his provenance in the region of Koṭṭayam in North Malabār.

Koṭṭayam Tampuran set the model for a good Kathakali play. In the four plays he wrote and choreographed, he integrated good poetry with the potential for good acting, codified the ragas for each pada sequence, and fixed conventions (citta) of performance, to such an extent that even now the same tradition of acting, called Kallaṭikkodan citta, continues to this day. The śloka describing Urvaśi approaching Arjuna to express her love for him in Kālakeyavadham applies both to Urvaśi and to what is expected of good poetry:

*Sulalitapada vinyasā
rucirālaṅkāraśālinī madhurā
mṛdulāpi gahana bhāvā
sūktirivāvāpa so'rvaśi vijayam*

(1. With light graceful steps, the beautiful one, adorned with beautiful ornaments, though soft-natured, in a deeply engrossed manner went to Arjuna, like a beautiful poem.

2. With the integration of elegant, simple words, and with graceful alaṅkāras and attributes such as mādhyura, though lucid, combined with deep meanings, good poetry achieves success.)

*Kalpadrukālpa drupadendra putrī-
sārasyasārasya nivāsa bhūmīm
nāḷikanāḷika śarārditā sā
mandākṣa mandākṣaram evamūce*

(“Drupada—like a kalpa vṛkṣa—
To the repository of the essence of love ḍrupada’s daughter—
She, smitten with the lotus-arrows of Kāma,
Said like this, her voice low because of shyness”)

Both the śleṣa and the yamaka alaṅkāras used in the ślokas bear out that but beyond that the expressivity of a play is beyond the literal, the literary.

Apart from Koṭṭayam Kathakal, the plays Paunḍṛaka Vadham, Pūtanā Mokṣam, Rukmiṇī Svayamvaram, Aṃbarīṣa Caritam (Aśvati Tirunal), Kīcaka Vadham, Uttarā Svayamvaram, Dakṣa Yāgam (Irayimman Tampi), Rāvaṇa Vijayam (Kiḷimānūr Rājarāja Varma) are some of the prominent āṭṭakkathas. Duryodhana Vadham, Kirātam, Narakāsura Vadham, Rukṃāṅgada Caritam, Pūtanā Mokṣam.. The corpus of Kathakali texts number about two hundred, with differing quality, and written at different points of time, from the early part of the seventeenth century. (New Kathakali plays still get written..)

The performance of Rāvaṇolbhavam (text by Mandavattu Iṭṭirāricca Menon) closely follows the text of Punam Nambūtiri's Bhāṣā Ramāyaṇa Caṃpu. Rāvaṇolbhavam describes the origin and making of Rāvaṇa, the despotic *asura* king, and how he came to achieve all that he attained. Rāvaṇolbhavam is a riveting performance on Rāvaṇa's journey from early years, to how he goes and does tapas to Śiva and wrested the boon of omnipotence from him. There have been attempts to give a political reading to Rāvaṇolbhavam, connecting the impulse and context of the writing of the play to the despotic yet dynamic reign of Śaktan Tampurān in Kerala, and seeing similarities between the two despotic kings (Narayanan, Mundoli). It all begins with Rāvaṇa's mother Kaikasi's sorrow that her own young son is weak compared to Kubera, his half-brother. One day, while the young Rāvaṇa is sleeping on the lap of his mother, she spots Vaiśravaṇa Rāvaṇa's half brother passing through the sky in his puṣpaka vimāna. Her tears awaken Rāvaṇa and he leaves along with his brothers to do intense tapas in the midst of the five fires. When the god does not appear, she starts cutting off his heads one by one and sacrificing into the fire. When he is about to cut off the last one, Śiva comes and gives him the boons he desires, and presents him the candrahāsa sword. Armed with the boons, he conquers Laṅka drives away Vaiśravaṇa and lives happily in Laṅka.

The *caṃpu* text has charged descriptions about the *tapas*, when Rāvaṇa goes through a process of self-transformation and realization. Described in twenty-four *ślokas*, Rāvaṇa's *tapas* follows the principles of Yoga śāstra and has the potency to destroy the world. During this intense meditation, his whole persona changes, achieving a rare glow, making even the sages wonder, and the Devas to quake in fear. However, the god is elusive; he has not appeared in front of the devotee yet. After going through multiple stages of anxious waiting, Rāvaṇa has had enough. Releasing his matted hair, he surveys himself, all over. His whole body with ten heads

and twenty arms, while chopping each head off as offering to the deity, are under the spell of an indescribable ecstasy.

*Vāṭīlammaṇḍahāsam nuti, bhaṇitika! teṭīlaho gadgadatvam
kotīlā cilli polum vadana daśakam ekeikam āsīt prasannam*

(“Never did the smile wane even once, no single sob emerged from the throat(s), the eyebrows did not shift up even by a fraction of a second—the faces retained their natural cheerful expression.”)

However, soon the moment of reckoning arrives: while during the act of slaying his own heads one by one, Rāvaṇa sees a strange sight. On his own head, in between the locks of scattered hair, in celestial script, he reads his own story, of the Rāmāyaṇa. This epiphanic moment, where Rāvaṇa becomes a reader of the text on himself, and a knower of his own destiny, does not weaken his resolve (*cittēnāskhalitena*), only escalates it. While the whole world trembles in fear, the great winds roar, and the waters are in spate, he takes up the sword for the last blow—to his tenth head. The god appears now, in panic, requests him to stop and gives him his desired boon of omnipotence.

Examples of adaptation and direct borrowing from prabandha and caṃpu are several, Santānagopālam (entry of the brahṃmaṇa in *Santānagopālam—Aśvati Tirunāl: Santānagopālam Prabandham*)

*Rājadvāri mrtam nidhāya tanayam “kvaste nirastatrapaḥ
Kṛṣṇaḥ strījanaḷampataḥ kvanu halī hālāmadāndhāśayaḥ”
Ityuccairgiramudgiran dvijavaraḥ kṣipram prapede sabhām
Nīrandhrāndhaka vṛṣṇivīra mukutīratnāṅkurodyat prabhām ..*

(“Placing the dead child at the door of the palace, he yelled, “Where is the shameless Kṛṣṇa, always going after women? Where is Balarāma, dead drunk all the time?” Abusing loudly like this, the brāhṃmaṇa swiftly reached the royal assembly which was shining bright with the light emitting from jewels on the crowns worn by Nīrandhras, Andhakas, Vṛṣṇis and others”)

Arjuna about himself, when he comes to offer help to the brāhṃmaṇa:

Nāham śaurirna khalu musalī nāniruddho na sāmbo

na pradyumno bhuvanaviditaḥ pāṇḍavaḥ phalguno'ham

(I am not Kṛṣṇa, nor Balarāma. Not Sāmbha, Pradyumna either. I am Phalguna, a Pāṇḍava, famous all over the world.)

Brāhmana to Arjuna, after he gets to know that the tenth baby dies at childbirth:

*Pūrvam garvasamanvitam mama puraḥ kim kim na sañjalpitam,
Vīramanya! vṛthā tvayā saśapatham mauḍhyena madhye sabhām
Āstām tatsakalam yathaiṣa viśahe pāpasthathā te pitā
Putrāpatti śucam śacīparivṛdhah soḍhā katham kathyatām*

(With great arrogance, standing in front of me, what things did you prattle on, with assertions of greatness. In the midst of the royal assembly, you foolishly took the oath. Anyway, let it be. How will your father, the husband of Śaci, suffer the loss of his son, just as I do now—please tell me.)

In this case, the Kathakali text almost reproduces the same idea and even words:

*Svargavāsika!kkum guṇam ceyyum
Phalgunane keṭṭariyunnillayo bhavān?
Kṛṣṇanallaham balabhadranallarika nī
Vṛṣṇivīranmāril ekanumallā
Jiṣṇu ñān divyāstradhṛṣṇu Vijayan vīran...*

(“Haven’t you heard about Phalguna who does a good turn even to the devas? I am not Kṛṣṇa, Balabhadra, or anyone from the Vṛṣṇi race. I am Jiṣṇu, the great Vijayan who has a divine arrow...”)

Examples could multiply, and the point of this long chain of examples is to illustrate that āṭṭakkatha writers were drawing heavily on prabandhas for the composition of the plays. However, it was the choreographers who remodelled them by integrating theatric conventions that were essential to the performance of Kathakaḷi— and musicians, drummers, make-up artists and actors with aesthetic, creative and interpretive powers who translated the text into performance through years of rigorous training and expressive capabilities, and also saḥṛdaya audiences down the years who savoured, critiqued and intervened to make Kathakaḷi what it is today. (But that is another story.)

Last but definitely not least, I would like to come to Naḷa Caritam (Unnāyi Vārier) which is broadly considered as the best āṭṭakkatha and stage performance in the repertoire of Kathakali. Written as a source text for a Kathakali play, Naḷa Caritam is also regarded as one of the finest literary works in Malayalam. In one sense, it is a rare combination of the narrative sequence of the Mahabharata story, the high poetic excellence that features *Naiṣadhīya Carita* and the dramatic power that is required for a Kathakali play. In creating the lyrico-dramatic poem, Unnāyi Vārier has moved beyond the prescriptions of a typical *āṭṭakkatha*, transforming it into a poignant story of love, loss and retribution, replete with intensely dramatic situations. A comparative survey of Naḷa Caritam and *Naiṣadha* reveals the difference not only in mode and texture between the two, necessitated in the case of Unnāyi Vārier for the sake of the drama, but in the treatment of the narration. Citing this instance and several others Kuttikrishna Marar has done a penetrating study of Śrī Harṣa's *Naiṣadhīya Carita*, Mazhamangalam *Naiṣadha Caṃpu* and Unnāyi's *Naḷa Caritam*, examining aspects like characterization, propriety (*aucitya*), expressiveness, and astuteness in portraying delicate emotions in the three texts— and gives full marks to *Naḷa Caritam*. (to incorporate the reference)

An example will illustrate the point. When Naḷa goes to Damayantī as an emissary of the Devas to request her to accept one of them as her husband, in the Mahābhārata story, Naḷa reveals his identity to her right at the beginning. In Śrī Harṣa's text, however, he does so when he was caught in a dilemma, after Damayanti threatens to commit suicide and requests him to inform Naḷa about her demise. Whereas Unnāyi Vārier treats the scene with great subtlety and emotional intensity. The scene explicitly reveals the integrity and strength of her character, undeterred resolve and love for Naḷa. The whole scene is a play of wits and syllogistic reasoning between the two. When after failed attempts to convince her to accept one of the devas, the emissary finally threatens her that they might forcibly take her away, her simple question is, “*cati devakaḷ tuṭarnnīṭukilo gati āraṇṇitale?*” (if the gods resort to treachery, what is the course of action for people on the earth?” She further says that “*vallabhanuṅṅullil, purattilla kāṅmān, patisaman innorttu ninnoṭu uditam nerellām, iratanoṭu illatum orttavarōṭu sadṛṣam vada nī poy*” (I have a husband who dwells inside me, though not visible outside. I confided in you because you look respectable like him. I will not marry anyone else. You can go tell this to them). One can only imagine Naḷa's situation as he listens to these words from her:

Hearing her words, his mind becomes full, with astonishment, fondness, admiration and love (*..atyantam āścaryavum/vālsalyam, bahumānavum praṇayavum cīrttū nalannāśaye....*)

The love that sprouts between Naḷa and Damayantī is sensitively etched in the poem, with subtle yet complex emotions such as longing and desire, union and fulfilment, separation and anxiety, doubt, frustration, reaffirmation and reconciliation. It is an all-consuming love that transcends the obstacles created by even the gods, and in poetic treatment, as different from Harṣa's *Naiṣadha*, there is immense care to make it suggestive than explicit. Love is expressed in this poem more by what is unsaid. The śṅgāra padam starting with "*kuvalaya vilocane, bāle, kisalayādhare...*" set in the slowest tempo and is regarded as a high point of the entire play and doing it well a touchstone of the actor's virtuosity and even career. This is perhaps why unlike all the other plays, Naḷa Caritam is not part of the curriculum for an actor's training, even in institutions like Kerala Kalamandalam. It may be because the complexity of the characterisation of Naḷa and Damayantī cannot be "taught", but has to be imbibed through seeing how other masterly actors do it and by a process of internalization.

Even in the height of unconsummated desire after the wedding, Naḷa's passion is expressed in highly evocative lines such as:

*Induvadane, ninne labhiccu
atināl eniykku purā puṇyam phaliccu
iniyo nin trapayonne eniykku vairiṇī manye
taniye poyatum ozhiyato?*

*(Moon-radiant, I have secured you.
So have I been blessed (from my previous births).
Now your shyness is my only enemy, I reckon.
Won't it also wear off on its own, and subside?)*

The subtle intensity of this scene, as well as the final meeting between Naḷa and Damayantī after they settle their differences and are reunited are unparalleled in Kathakali. In the scene of the final reunion, Naḷa anxiously waits for Damayantī to come to him and when finally they see each other, there is eagerness and joy in Naḷa's mind, but Damayantī still has a hint of an apprehension whether this dark, dwarfed man is actually Naḷa himself. When Naḷa discards his disguise and reveals his real form, in delight she rushes to embrace him, only to be met with harsh words

from Naḷa, because his own mind is overshadowed by a lingering suspicion regarding the news of her second marriage.:

*Abhilāṣam koṅṭu tanne guṇdoṣam vedyamalla
paradoṣam pārṭtu kāṇān virutārkillāttū?
taruṇinām manassil mevum kuṭilaññal ārariññū?
tava tu matam, mama viditam...*

That you were in love with me does not prove your innocence and virtue.
After all, is there anyone who isn't adept at finding out another's fault?
Who knows the perfidies concealed in the hearts of women?
I have understood your intentions...

However, Damayantī, after all is no Sītā of the Rāmāyaṇa. After a series of pleas and explanations, she has had enough. She gathers courage, stands up for herself and faces Naḷa squarely:

*Nātha, nina kāṇaññū, bhītā ñān kaṅṭa vazhi
etākilentu doṣam? mātāveniykku sākṣībhūtā
sāparadhā ñānennākil ñān akhedā, dhṛta modā*

*My lord, in order to seek you out, frightened as I was then,
How does it matter, if I adopted such a course?
My mother is my witness.
If you still consider me guilty, I have no regrets.
On the contrary, I am happy, indeed.
Desirous of seeing this human incarnation of Kama, out of eagerness,
I have committed this act. Except for this there is no deception here.*

Finally, the aerial voice intervenes and clears the doubts about Damayantī's chastity, leading the play to a happy ending.

The relatively minor characters in the Mahābhārata story, such as the goose, Kārkoṭaka, the woodsman who rescues Damayantī from the snake in the forest, the merchant leader who directs her to the Chedi kingdom, King Ṛtuparṇa, Keśini the maid who acts as an emissary of Damayantī in the final episode, and Sudeva the brāhṃaṇa who takes Damayantī's message to Ṛtuparṇa's court—each of them has a specific role in bringing the story to its final resolution.

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