

The Sītā Svayamvara Episode of Rāmāyaṇa: Its Creative Interpretation in Bharata Natyam

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Abstract

Kāvya plays a very significant role in the abhinaya aspect of Indian classical dance. In this context, the Rāmāyaṇa occupies a very significant place. The episodes from the Rāmāyaṇa are narrated in dance in the form of dṛśya kāvya (visual poetry). The dancer interprets and re-interprets these stories making the characters come alive through the choreographic presentations. Several translations and versions of the Rāmāyaṇa are found in India. This research paper will be focusing mainly on the Sītā Svayamvara episode portrayed in the Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa and its interpretation in the Rāmāyaṇa of Kamban. This episode of the Rāmāyaṇa will be creatively interpreted in Bharata Natyam. The study will throw light on how, during the entire process of choreography, the dancer is also transformed into a poet. What is expressed in the Rāmāyaṇa through words, is manifested by the dancer- choreographer through mukhajābhinaya and śārīrābhinaya – thereby transforming poetry into ‘dṛśya kāvya’.

Introduction:

Abhinaya is the soul of Indian classical dance and it is deeply connected with kāvya. The element of nr̥tya or abhinaya is important to Bharata Natyam. Amongst the various kāvya-s, the Rāmāyaṇa finds a notable place in the Bharata Natyam repertoire. The focal point of this research paper is the study of the Rāmāyaṇa attributed to Vālmīki from the perspective of Bharata Natyam. Several versions of the Rāmāyaṇa sprung up which were based on Vālmīki’s Rāmāyaṇa. This paper will be a study of the Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa and Kamba Rāmāyaṇa – its analysis and creative application in the dance choreography of Bharata Natyam.

Rāmāyaṇa and Irāmāvatāram.

“Probably no work of world literature, secular in origin, has ever produced so profound an influence on the life and thought of a people as the Rāmāyaṇa” says, A.A. Macdonell in his Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics. (Goldman, 1984).

The Rāmāyaṇa is known as the Ādi kāvya and Vālmīki the poet to whom it is ascribed – the Ādi kavi. Vālmīki’s Rāmāyaṇa has been used liberally by later poets all over Asia, without tampering with the main story. Amongst the several Indian versions of the Rāmāyaṇa, Irāmāvatāram in Tamil by Kamban (circa 12th century AD) has been selected for the present study.

This paper looks at the Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa and the Kamba Rāmāyaṇa from an artistic viewpoint and how it is creatively adapted in Bharata Natyam choreography.

Sītā Svayamvara

The Bālakāṇḍam of the Rāmāyaṇa features the episode of the svayamvara of Sītā. A gist of the episode described in the Vālmīki and Kamba Rāmāyaṇa is mentioned here.

Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa –

King Janaka welcomes Viśvāmitra, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. Viśvāmitra introduces Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa to King Janaka saying that ‘these sons of Daśaratha’ are eager to see the ‘best of bows’ – “dhanuḥ śreṣṭham” (Section 66, Śloka 5). King Janaka then tells them the story of the bow and says that Sītā’s hand can be obtained by bending the bow. He tells them that many kings tried but none could succeed. If Rāma succeeds in stringing this mighty bow, then he will give his daughter Sītā’s hand in marriage to Rāma. The mighty bow is placed in a cart with eight wheels and 5,000 strong people draw the cart (Section 67, Śloka 4). With Viśvāmitra’s permission Rāma opens the case, looks at the bow and asks,

“īdam dhanurvaram divyam saṁsprśāmīha pāṇinā |

yatnavāñśca bhaviśyāmi tolane pūraṇe’pi vā ||”

“Shall I touch this divine bow with my hand and try to wield and draw it”

(Section 67, Śloka 14)

Having got the permission, in the presence of thousands of spectators, Rāma, with ease takes hold of the bow, fixes the string and draws it. The bow snaps in the middle producing a terrible sound like thunder. Janaka promises to give Sītā’s hand in marriage to Rāma. Envoys are sent to Ayodhyā to convey the news to King Daśaratha and seek permission for this alliance. Joyfully, the King, along with Bharata, Śatrughna and sages goes to Mithilā. King Daśaratha is greeted respectfully by the Lord of Mithilā. Preparations for the marriage are commenced. Sītā, decked with various ornaments is brought near the agni and to the chanting of mantra-s, sound of the kettle-drums and showering of flowers, the marriage takes place. (Arya, 2002).

Irāmāvatāram –

Viśvāmitra, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa enter Mithilā and see many wonders. They then see Sītā standing in the balcony of the palace. Both Rāma and Sītā look at each other and their souls become one. Kamban goes to describe Sītā as Goddess Lakṣmī and how once this pair were together on the milky ocean, had been apart a short while and were now together again. After they separate, the viraha of Sītā and Rāma’s mind troubled by the thoughts of the beautiful Sītā is described by the poet. Later, Viśvāmitra requests King Janaka to show the bow. 16,000 men of strength carry it on supporting poles. The huge mighty bow is seen with wonder by all. Some are doubtful whether Rāma would be able to string it. Rāma effortlessly lifts the bow, fixes the string and the sound of the breaking of the bow is heard. This news is conveyed to Sītā by her maid. After hearing Rāma’s description, Sītā is sure that it is the same man she had glanced the day before and vows to herself that she will end her life, if Rāma is not the same man. (Jagannathan, 2002).

Artistic Interpretation in Bharata Natyam:

A particular pattern of choreography is followed in Indian classical dance. The lyrics are analysed at three levels -

- Padārtha / Primary meaning = word to word meaning
- Vinyāsa / Secondary meaning = elaboration of a word
- Sañcārī / Suggestive meaning = episode.

Padārtha – Here the literal or primary meaning of the sāhitya are expressed through hasta-s (hand gestures) and dance movements.

Vinyāsa – Here, those words that are important in the lines of the sāhitya are identified and is briefly described. In other words, adjectives are added to these words.

Sañcārī – If in the vinyāsa, important words are highlighted, in the sañcārī the most relevant idea or phrase is selected by the dancer-choreographer and a story/episode connected with the idea/phrase is portrayed. The sañcārī is the most important and interesting component of classical dance choreography. Technically, it is the sañcārī that arouses the sthāyībhāva (basic mental state) leading to the creation of Rasa. It is here that the dancer-choreographer also becomes a poet. The sañcārī reflects the dancer-choreographer's pratibhā (creative imagination).

Several episodes taken from the Rāmāyaṇa are depicted in Bharata Natyam through mukhajābhinaya and śarīrābhinaya – thereby transforming the poetry of the epic into visual poetry of the dance. Mukhajābhinaya means wherein, the communication of the emotions pertaining to the story takes place through the various limbs of the face – eyes, eyebrows, eyelids, nose, cheeks, etc. Śarīrābhinaya is where all the limbs of the body, in other words, the entire body plays a significant role in communicating the story. One of the most popular episode in the Rāmāyaṇa is the Sītā Svayamvara. But the manner in which this episode is often interpreted, depicted in Bharata Natyam is unique. The choreographic interpretation does not usually restrict itself to any one version of the Ramayana. The sañcārī that is presented contains elements of drama. The entire episode is presented in a very dramatic manner by the solo dancer. In Bharata Natyam the solo dancer is the narrator. At the same time, the dancer also portrays different characters, changing from one to the other in quick succession as per the requirements of both, the story as well as the choreography. The solo dancer wears the traditional Bharata Natyam costume (ekāhārya) throughout the presentation. The following is the artistic interpretation of the Sītā Svayamvara in the sañcārī of Bharata Natyam:

Choreography of Sītā Svayamvara –

The court of King Janaka is depicted, wherein Kings from different kingdoms, far and wide are present. Viśvāmitra along with Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa are also present. Sītā too is present at the court. King Janaka announces that whoever lifts the great bow of Lord Śiva shall win the hand of his beautiful daughter Sītā. The first king gets up and walks with great confidence. He looks at the mighty bow and says it is a very easy thing to do. Rubbing his palms together, he attempts to lift the bow several times but he fails. With his head hung in shame he leaves. The second king, proud of his strength, looks at the bow and decides that he can do the feat effortlessly with one hand. With great pride he tries lifting the bow with one hand but fails. Slowly he uses the other hand too but is again unsuccessful. Dejected, he leaves. The third king walks up to the bow, but one look at the mighty bow fills his heart with fear. He starts trembling. He looks at his hands and then at the bow and decides that he does not want to risk an injury. With a foolish smile on his face, he tells all those who are present to give it a try and returns to his seat. Another arrogant king enters and boasts about the many battles that he has fought. He inspects the bow and proclaims that this is a very easy task for him. But the moment he attempts to lift the bow, he slips and falls down. Angrily, he leaves the place. Thus, none could lift the bow. At that time, Viśvāmitra tells Rāma to lift the bow. Rāma gets up and with great humility, he bows down to Viśvāmitra, the august audience and offers his salutations to Lord Śiva and his bow. Using one hand, with the greatest of ease, he lifts the bow and bends it in order to string it. At that time the bow breaks with a huge, thunderous sound. The entire sabhā is astonished and happy to behold the remarkable strength and prowess of Rāma. Flowers are showered from the heavens. King Janaka requests Sītā to garland Rāma. The bewitching, graceful Sītā garlands Rāma.

Observations:

In the Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa – Rāma and Sītā do not meet each other before the wedding. The wedding is a very simple ceremony as described by Valmiki. Sītā is not present at the venue when Rāma breaks the bow.

In the Kamba Rāmāyaṇa - There is an elaborate description of Rāma and Sītā meeting each other for the first time (before the Svayamvara) and a poetic description of love at first sight, its effect on the couple, and the sufferings due to love and separation. Again, Sītā is not present in the sabhā when Rāma breaks the bow. The wedding of Rāma and Sītā is very elaborately described.

As per the details mentioned earlier in this study regarding the svayamvara episode in the Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa and Irāmāvatāram, it can be observed that the dance choreography, while remaining true to the basic story of the epic, adds a lot of small detailing which may not be found in the above. It is this detailing that makes the presentation very interesting. The above episode is not just a presentation of vīra rasa but it also brings in some elements of hāsya.

Conclusion

It is the emotional content of kāvya that makes dance a fascinating art form. The process of dance choreography takes the kāvya of the kavi to a different level. The very same bhāva-s of the kāvya are interpreted by the dancer-choreographer making the process of choreography seem like a totally new creation. The dancer-choreographer too becomes a poet, a sahrdaya. Traditionally, Bharata Natyam being ‘ekāhārya’, it is more challenging for a single dancer to portray different characters in few seconds. Because if he goes too deep in one character, then it is challenging to switch roles.

There are several interpretations of the Rāmāyaṇa which have been explored to a large or small extent in Bharata Natyam. The dancer- choreographer with his pratibhā – artistic imagination gives wings to his creative thoughts, making him also a poet. And it is this kāvya of the kavi and the visual interpretation of the dancer-choreographer that converts the technique of dance choreography into an aesthetic experience. The kāvya of the kavi through the skill and creative imagination of the dancer-choreographer gets transformed into a ‘dṛśya kāvya’!

References

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