

Dramaturgical Structure of Usha Parinayam: A Comparative Study of the Kuchipudi and Melattur Bhagavata Mela Traditions

Mrs. Kadali Sri Rajarajeswari Devi¹, Dr. U. Himabindu²

¹Research Scholar, Department of Music, Dance & Fine arts, Sri Padmavathi Mahila Viswavidyalayam, Tirupati

²Assistant Professor, Department of Music, Dance & Fine arts, Sri Padmavathi Mahil Viswavidyalayam, Tirupati

Abstract

Usha Parinayam, a celebrated narrative derived from the Bhagavata Purana, occupies an important place in South Indian dance-drama traditions, particularly in the Kuchipudi and Melattur Bhagavata Mela traditions. Though both traditions originate within the broader matrix of Bhakti devotional performance and Sanskritic dramaturgy, they evolved distinct theatrical vocabularies shaped by regional aesthetics, linguistic influences, ritual frameworks, and performative conventions (Vatsyayan, 1977; Kothari and Pasricha, 2001). This paper undertakes a comparative study of the dramaturgical structure of Usha Parinayam in these two traditions. Through an examination of manuscripts, performance texts, nattuvangam traditions, and oral narratives, the study analyzes plot organization, characterization, scene construction, literary composition, and dramatic progression. Special attention is paid to the influence of the Nāṭyaśāstra, Vaishnavite Bhakti traditions, temple-centered ritual performance, and regional literary cultures in Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. The paper argues that while the Kuchipudi version emphasizes performative dynamism, expressive dialogue, and audience engagement, the Melattur Bhagavata Mela adaptation retains a more ritualized dramaturgical structure rooted in liturgical enactment and Sanskritic orthodoxy (Varadpande, 1987; Kothari, 1989). The comparative analysis demonstrates how identical mythological material acquires divergent dramatic identities through regional performance histories.

Keywords: Usha Parinayam, Kuchipudi, Bhagavata Mela, dramaturgy, Nāṭyaśāstra, Bhakti traditions, dance-drama, South Indian theatre.

1. INTRODUCTION

Indian dance-drama traditions represent a synthesis of literature, music, movement, ritual, and theatrical narration (Vatsyayan, 1996). Among the many narratives adapted into performative traditions, Usha Parinayam—the story of the love and marriage of Usha, daughter of Banasura, with Aniruddha, grandson of Krishna—occupies a unique place in South Indian theatrical culture. The narrative originates in the Bhagavata Purana and evolved into various literary and performative forms across regions (Raghavan, 1978).

Two major South Indian traditions preserving and performing Usha Parinayam are the Kuchipudi Yakshagana tradition of Andhra Pradesh and the Melattur Bhagavata Mela tradition of Tamil Nadu. Although both traditions are Vaishnavite in orientation and share common roots in Sanskrit dramaturgy, they differ significantly in dramaturgical organization, narrative progression, and theatrical execution (Kothari, 1989).

Kuchipudi, historically associated with the Brahmin Bhagavatulu community of the village of Kuchipudi in Andhra Pradesh, evolved as a vibrant dance-drama tradition characterized by expressive dialogue, stylized dance, improvisation, and audience interaction (Vatsyayan, 1977; Krishnayya, 1983). Melattur Bhagavata Mela, centered in Tamil Nadu and associated with temple festivals, developed a more ritualistic and liturgically structured dramatic form emphasizing devotional enactment and preservation of classical theatrical norms (Kothari and Pasricha, 2001).

This study comparatively examines the dramaturgical structure of Usha Parinayam in these two traditions with special focus on:

- Plot organization
- Character delineation
- Scene divisions
- Narrative progression
- Literary composition
- Sanskrit, Telugu, and Tamil influences
- Dramatic conventions
- Ritual and Bhakti frameworks

The study further investigates how the Nāṭyaśāstra and regional devotional cultures shaped these dramaturgical forms (Bharata Muni, 1967).

2. Sources and Methodology

The present study employs a comparative textual and performance-oriented methodology. The primary materials include:

- Manuscripts and printed librettos of Usha Parinayam
- Kuchipudi Yakshagana scripts
- Melattur Bhagavata Mela performance texts
- Nattuvangam notes and oral recitation traditions
- Recorded performances and oral interviews with practitioners
- Secondary scholarly studies on South Indian dramaturgy

The analysis draws upon principles of classical Indian dramaturgy as articulated in Bharata's Nāṭyaśāstra (Bharata Muni, 1967), along with regional performance studies and Bhakti literary traditions (Varadpande, 1987).

Comparative parameters include:

1. Structural organization of acts and scenes
2. Character hierarchy and dramatic function
3. Integration of dance, music, and dialogue
4. Ritual dimensions of performance
5. Linguistic and literary styles
6. Audience engagement and performative aesthetics

3. Mythological Background of Usha Parinayam

The narrative of Usha Parinayam derives from the Bhagavata Purana and narrates the love story of Usha and Aniruddha (Raghavan, 1978). Usha dreams of a young prince and falls in love with him. Her companion Chitrlekha identifies the prince as Aniruddha and magically brings him to Usha's palace. Their secret union is discovered by Banasura, leading to imprisonment, warfare between Krishna and Banasura, and eventual reconciliation culminating in marriage.

The story possesses all major dramatic elements described in the Nāṭyaśāstra such as Śṛṅgāra (romantic sentiment), Vīra (heroic sentiment), Raudra (furious sentiment), Adbhuta (wonder), and Karuṇa (pathos) (Bharata Muni, 1967). Its emotional richness made it suitable for adaptation into dance-drama traditions emphasizing both Bhakti and theatricality.

4. Dramaturgical Structure in the Kuchipudi Tradition

4.1 Narrative Organization

Kuchipudi adaptations of Usha Parinayam generally follow the Yakshagana format with flexible episodic construction (Kothari, 1989). The structure emphasizes dramatic progression through alternating sequences of daruvus, dialogues, dance passages, and narrative recitations. The dramaturgical movement is relatively fluid and permits improvisation by performers (Vatsyayan, 1977).

The dramatic sequence generally includes:

1. Invocation and Ganapati prayer
2. Introduction of Banasura's court
3. Usha's dream sequence
4. Chitrlekha's identification process
5. Secret meeting of Usha and Aniruddha
6. Discovery and imprisonment
7. Krishna–Banasura battle
8. Marriage and conclusion

The dramaturgy prioritizes performative continuity and audience engagement rather than strict textual segmentation (Krishnayya, 1983).

4.2 Character Delineation

Kuchipudi dramaturgy places strong emphasis on vivid characterization through expressive abhinaya and spoken dialogue (Vatsyayan, 1996). Chitrlekha often emerges as a dramatically significant character owing to opportunities for humor, wit, and narrative exposition.

Sutradhara-like functions are occasionally integrated into performer dialogue, allowing commentary and interaction with spectators (Varadpande, 1987). Characters exhibit emotional spontaneity and individualized personality traits.

The female roles traditionally enacted by male Brahmin performers historically contributed to stylized characterization emphasizing expressive gesture and vocal modulation (Meduri, 1988).

4.3 Use of Language

Telugu dominates the Kuchipudi version, though Sanskrit verses appear in invocatory and devotional sections (Krishnayya, 1983). The use of colloquial Telugu expressions enhances accessibility and audience rapport.

Musical compositions include:

- Daruvus
- Padyams
- Keertanas
- Yakshagana-style prose dialogue

The literary style reflects the Telugu Bhakti tradition and courtly poetic aesthetics (Narayana Rao et al., 1992).

4.4 Dramatic Conventions

Kuchipudi dramaturgy integrates improvisation, audience interaction, humorous interludes, stylized dance sequences, and musical narration (Kothari, 1989). The dramatic mode remains highly kinetic and performative. Dance functions not merely as ornamentation but as a narrative device advancing emotional and dramatic progression (Vatsyayan, 1977).

5. Dramaturgical Structure in the Melattur Bhagavata Mela Tradition

5.1 Ritual-Centered Narrative Structure

The Melattur Bhagavata Mela tradition evolved within temple-centered ritual performance contexts (Kothari and Pasricha, 2001). Consequently, the dramaturgy of Usha Parinayam exhibits greater structural discipline and ritual sequencing.

Performances are closely associated with annual temple festivals and devotional observances (Younger, 1995). The dramatic structure is often divided into clearly demarcated sections with formalized entrances and exits.

The narrative unfolds at a comparatively measured pace emphasizing devotional contemplation rather than theatrical dynamism (Williams, 1984).

5.2 Characterization

Characters in Bhagavata Mela are archetypal and devotional rather than psychologically individualized (Varadpande, 1987). The dramaturgy foregrounds dharmic symbolism and spiritual ideals.

Usha embodies devotional longing, while Aniruddha represents divine grace and heroism. Banasura is portrayed not merely as antagonist but as a participant in cosmic divine play (Kothari and Pasricha, 2001).

Unlike Kuchipudi, comic improvisation remains minimal. Character presentation follows codified conventions influenced by Sanskrit drama and temple ritual (Bharata Muni, 1967).

5.3 Linguistic Composition

The Bhagavata Mela texts exhibit greater Sanskritization (Williams, 1984). Though Telugu remains important due to the migration history of Bhagavata communities from Andhra regions, Tamil devotional influences are also visible (Narayana Rao et al., 1992).

The literary composition includes:

- Sanskrit ślokas
- Telugu verses
- Devotional kritis
- Carnatic musical structures

The language reflects liturgical solemnity and devotional refinement (Kothari and Pasricha, 2001).

5.4 Theatrical Conventions

Bhagavata Mela dramaturgy emphasizes ritual purity, codified gestures, devotional immersion, classical music integration, and temple-oriented performance aesthetics (Younger, 1995). Dance passages remain

restrained and subordinated to devotional intent. Theatrical spectacle is secondary to sacred enactment (Williams, 1984).

6. Comparative Analysis

6.1 Plot Organization

Kuchipudi adopts a flexible episodic narrative structure encouraging dramatic spontaneity, while Bhagavata Mela employs a more structured and ritualized dramaturgy (Kothari, 1989; Kothari and Pasricha, 2001).

6.2 Narrative Progression

In Kuchipudi, transitions occur dynamically through dialogue and musical interludes. Bhagavata Mela progresses through ceremonially ordered scenes (Varadpande, 1987). The pacing in Kuchipudi is faster and emotionally varied, whereas Bhagavata Mela maintains contemplative progression.

6.3 Character Treatment

Kuchipudi characters demonstrate emotional immediacy and theatrical individuality, while Bhagavata Mela characters symbolize spiritual and moral ideals (Vatsyayan, 1996). The comic and improvisatory dimensions in Kuchipudi contrast sharply with the liturgical seriousness of Bhagavata Mela.

6.4 Literary Features

Kuchipudi privileges Telugu literary expression and performative dialogue (Krishnayya, 1983). Bhagavata Mela exhibits stronger Sanskritic orientation with devotional lyricism (Williams, 1984). Tamil influence in Bhagavata Mela appears mainly through performance context and devotional environment rather than direct linguistic dominance.

6.5 Audience Relationship

Kuchipudi maintains active audience engagement through humor, dialogue, and improvisation (Kothari, 1989). Bhagavata Mela cultivates devotional spectatorship akin to ritual witnessing (Younger, 1995).

7. Influence of the Nāṭyaśāstra

Both traditions reveal substantial influence from Bharata's Nāṭyaśāstra through their use of rasa theory, abhinaya techniques, codified gesture systems, musical integration, and dramatic sequencing (Bharata Muni, 1967).

However, their application differs significantly. Kuchipudi adapts classical principles within a flexible folk-classical synthesis (Vatsyayan, 1977), whereas Bhagavata Mela preserves more orthodox dramaturgical patterns aligned with ritual enactment (Varadpande, 1987).

The deployment of śṛṅgāra and vīra rasas differs in intensity and execution. Kuchipudi accentuates performative expressiveness, while Bhagavata Mela emphasizes devotional sublimation (Raghavan, 1978).

8. Bhakti Traditions and Temple Performance Practices

The Bhakti movement profoundly shaped both traditions (Narayana Rao et al., 1992). Vaishnavism forms the theological core of Usha Parinayam performances.

In Kuchipudi, Bhakti combines with performative entertainment and public engagement (Kothari, 1989). In Bhagavata Mela, Bhakti assumes ritual centrality and sacred intentionality (Younger, 1995).

Temple festivals, patronage systems, and devotional communities influenced dramaturgical evolution.

The Melattur performances particularly retain the sacred atmosphere of ritual theatre, where performance itself becomes an offering to the deity (Williams, 1984).

9. Regional Influences on Dramaturgy

The Andhra cultural environment encouraged performative openness, linguistic accessibility, and theatrical vitality in Kuchipudi (Krishnayya, 1983). Tamil Nadu's temple-centered ritual ecosystem shaped Bhagavata Mela into a conservative and devotional theatrical form emphasizing preservation of tradition (Kothari and Pasricha, 2001).

Thus, regional cultural histories transformed a common mythological narrative into two distinct dramaturgical identities (Varadpande, 1987).

10. Conclusion

The comparative study of Usha Parinayam in the Kuchipudi and Melattur Bhagavata Mela traditions reveals the dynamic adaptability of Indian dance-drama traditions. Though both derive from the same mythological source and share foundations in Bhakti and Sanskrit dramaturgy, their dramaturgical structures evolved along divergent regional trajectories.

Kuchipudi emphasizes performative flexibility, expressive characterization, and audience interaction, resulting in a vibrant theatrical experience (Vatsyayan, 1977). Melattur Bhagavata Mela preserves ritual discipline, devotional solemnity, and classical dramaturgical order, creating a sacred theatrical environment (Kothari and Pasricha, 2001).

The study demonstrates that dramaturgy in Indian performance traditions is shaped not only by textual inheritance but also by ritual context, regional literary cultures, audience expectations, and evolving performance histories. Usha Parinayam thus becomes an important case study illustrating how identical narratives acquire diverse performative lives across South Indian traditions.

Further research involving field documentation, performance ethnography, and manuscript comparison may deepen understanding of the transmission and transformation of Indian dance-drama heritage.

References

1. Banham, M., 1995. *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
2. Bharata Muni, 1967. *Nāṭyaśāstra*. Translated by Manomohan Ghosh. Asiatic Society, Calcutta.
3. Kothari, S., 1989. *Kuchipudi*. Abhinav Publications, New Delhi.
4. Kothari, S. and Pasricha, A., 2001. *Bhagavata Mela Natakam: Dance Drama Tradition of Tamil Nadu*. Marg Publications, Mumbai.
5. Krishnayya, M., 1983. *Kuchipudi Bhagavatamulu*. Telugu University Publications, Hyderabad.
6. Meduri, A., 1988. "Bharatanatyam as a Reinvented Tradition." *TDR*, 32(4), pp.1–17.
7. Narayana Rao, V., Shulman, D. and Subrahmanyam, S., 1992. *Symbols of Substance: Court and State in Nāyaka Period Tamil Nadu*. Oxford University Press, Delhi.
8. Raghavan, V., 1978. *The Number of Rasas*. Adyar Library and Research Centre, Madras.
9. Soneji, D., 2012. *Unfinished Gestures: Devadasis, Memory, and Modernity in South India*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
10. Vatsyayan, K., 1977. *Traditional Indian Theatre: Multiple Streams*. National Book Trust, New Delhi.
11. Vatsyayan, K., 1996. *Indian Classical Dance*. Publications Division, Government of India, New Delhi.

12. Varadpande, M.L., 1987. History of Indian Theatre, Vol. II. Abhinav Publications, New Delhi.
13. Williams, G.M., 1984. The Arts of India: Ritual, Drama and Music. Asian Humanities Press, California.
14. Younger, P., 1995. The Home of Dancing Śivan: The Traditions of the Hindu Temple in Citamparam. Oxford University Press, New York.