

Body Centric Knowledge: Traditions of Performance and Pedagogy in *Kathakali*

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Abstract

Most traditional Indian performance forms are characterised by distinct modes of embodied knowledge that increase in intensity with the degree of systematization present in their performative practices and also problematize the mind-body hierarchies that are inherent to most modern schemes of thought. The instance of *Kathakali*, the traditional performance form of Kerala, is taken to consider how a repetitive training regimen that inscribes in the young student a comprehensive language and aesthetic of performance is employed to establish a distinctive ‘body mind’ and a ‘body memory’ that almost entirely elide the participation or intervention of the ‘conscious mind’. There is also the inherent expectation that this formal embodied knowledge will come to be informally enriched in performance by a greater awareness of the aesthetic, emotive, thematic and other significant aspects of performance, as the student acquires life experience and matures both as a person and as a practitioner. Underlying this pedagogy is a certain relationship between the teacher and the student, characterised by the exercise of hierarchical power and violence from one side, and submissive compliance and deference from the other, which is at once both an extension and a recreation in an instructional setting of a set of social relations and certain paradigms of social power, class and patronage that are to do with the time in which the form evolved. The paper also examines the tensions that have developed in these pedagogic practices today in the context of modern institutions and the vastly different modalities of teacher/student subjectivities and relationships.

Key words: Embodied knowledge, *Kathakali*, Pedagogy, Traditional training.

1. INTRODUCTION

In a conversation with the late Kalamandalam Ramankutty Nair, the veteran *Kathakali* actor, I happened to ask him about what

goes on his mind when he is performing his famed role of Ravana in *Rāvanolbhāvam* (‘The Origins of Ravana’).¹ The question arose from the knowledge that *Rāvanolbhāvam* is probably one

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¹Written by Kallekulangara Raghava Pisharody, *Rāvanolbhāvam* was the first *Kathakali* play to have a haughty, anti-heroic character as the protagonist. Drawing its plot from the *Uttara Kāṇḍa*, the final canto of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, it deals with the origins and rise to power of Ravana, the anti-hero of the epic *Rāmāyaṇa*, and presents an extensive array of events leading to the establishment of the second *rākṣasa* empire by Ravana, who through proud valour and strength acquires from Lord Brahmā the power to be victorious over all the three worlds. Of particular note in the play is the scene *thapassāttam*, ‘the performance of penance,’ which through its immense performative popularity has become the most important scene in *Rāvanolbhāvam* and customarily the only one presented these days. As a consummate portrayal of Ravana’s majestic arrogance and his intense penance to acquire divine blessings from Lord Brahmā, the crucial feature of *thapassāttam* is that the events are presented as if it is after their occurrence, and in the form of Ravana’s recollections of his immediate past. This recollection of the past progresses through a series of self-directed questions and answers, and depends on a distinctive technique known as *pakarnnāṭṭam*, ‘transferred acting’, where the actor playing Ravana assumes the roles of all the other characters who figure in his remembrance.

of the most, if not the most, difficult of plays to perform in the Kathakali repertoire, with the lead actor being the sole presence on stage for a continuous four hours in a physically and mentally demanding role, the pace and power of which escalates steadily till it reaches a crescendo of vigorous movement and thunderous percussion. It is undoubtedly a supreme challenge to all Kathakali actors, requiring levels of maturity, stamina, and sustained intensity that would test even the best and the most experienced among them. At the same time, the question was also prompted by the awareness that Ramankutty Nair's presentation of the role is almost a touchstone for other actors and that even at the age of seventy his performance surpassed the best efforts of many others. However, when the question was posed, Ramankutty Nair looked a little nonplussed and appeared as if he didn't quite understand it. So, I was forced to explain that what I had in mind was if he ever thought about the effort required to get through the role, whether he planned in advance or during the performance about how best to distribute his efforts over the entire length of performance, whether he prepared mentally before entering each successive phase where the tempo and intensity of performance rose to the next higher level, whether he consciously tried to conserve and harness his energy with the aim of making sure that he completes the role without fatigue, etc. On hearing this, a light of recognition dawned in his eyes, and prompt came the reply:

“When I am onstage for ‘*Rāvanolbhāvam*,’ my mind is a *blank*.² It is not once or twice that I have trained in ‘*Rāvanolbhāvam*,’ but more than a hundred times. I don't need the mind; my body knows what to do.”

On the one hand, the statement offers a glimpse into the inimitable personality of Ramankutty Nair, especially in the touch of humour present in his unexpected use of the English word *blank*, and the remarkable confidence with which he approaches and performs his roles. However, on the other, and probably much more significantly, it also provides a sense of the process of embodiment that is part of many traditional performance practices, of how they are forms of embodied knowledge where the body is expected to know what to do without the intervention or determination of the conscious mind. It is an observable fact that most traditional Indian performance forms³ are characterized by such distinct modes of embodied knowledge that increase in intensity and depth with the degree of systematization that has come to be associated with their performative practices. The statement also offers an idea of the repetitive/reiterative training practices – pedagogic practices – that go into the creation and constitution of such a body and of how the rigour, intensity and length of these practices increase in proportion to the degree of stylization that is present in the form. It may be safely said that the more conventional the form is, the more rigorous and reiterative its training systems are.

2. THE TRAINED BODY

When we come to the specific instance of Kathakali, it can be seen that the training consists of a repetitive/reiterative physical regimen, the aim of which is to inscribe in the body of the young student a comprehensive language and aesthetic of performance. It proceeds through a steadily escalating set of prescribed exercises that develops progressively in pace, intensity and complexity, and that focuses on specific parts of the body and

² Even though the conversation was entirely in Malayalam and Ramankutty Nair's knowledge of English is pretty meagre, here he used the English word *blank*, accompanied by an emphatic gesture of erasure with his right hand.

³ This aspect of embodiment is as true with many other traditional performance and martial forms in different parts of the world, such as the Japanese Noh and Kendo, Cambodian Dance, etc., as with Indian performance forms.

specific types of movements and postures, wherein each part of the body – hands, legs, torso, face – is put through distinct structures of exercises that are done initially in isolation and subsequently in combination with others. Latent in this division of the body into a number of distinct parts is a *Nāṭya Śāstra*-based concept of the three-fold division of the body into *aṅga* (the main parts), *upāṅga* (the secondary parts), and *pratyaṅga* (the subordinate, connecting parts).⁴ For example, a major part of the training is that of the eyes, where the five basic movements – upwards-downwards, sideways, diagonal, rotational, diagonal-rotational (almost tracing the feature of the numeral) – are done repeatedly, at first with the teacher guiding the movements with his hand and later by the trainee himself with no external assistance. Likewise each part of the body is individually put through exercises specific to it, and later linked with exercises of the other parts so that gradually each part learns to work in unison with the others as part of an overall structure. It is apparent that the exercises prepare, train and groom the body of the trainee into a structure of flexibility and form that is appropriate to the requirements of performance and is finally realized in the actuality of the performative situation.

Actually, implicit in the training is a target image, a target form of the body that is finally arrived at as a result of the training regimen and which shall fit into the specific performance culture of *Kathakali*. It is a performative body that can move in certain pre-determined manners, assume a certain stance, and have a particular balance of the body that is centred around the base of the spinal cord and the lower abdomen (*nābhīmūla* – the base of the navel), a point that is fixed and firmed up through the regimen of exercises and thus becomes a still centre which provides not only poise and balance but also frees the rest

of the body – the lower limbs, the upper torso and the upper limbs – to essay the actions required of them. The still centre thus becomes the ground upon which the very dynamicity of the body is constructed. Vital to this conception of bodily form is the idea of *vāyu* or ‘breath energy’ which is considered to flow from the still centre to other regions of the body infusing them with a controlled power that imparts to their actions the necessary vigour and force. The control of the internal circulation of *vāyu* and its judicious channelling to various parts of the body as occasion demands is a major aim of the repetitive training in both *Kathakali* and *Kalarippayattu* (from which historically *Kathakali* training has evolved), and that which imparts power and poised felicity to the actions of the fully-trained practitioners of both.

At the same time, these exercises are not merely exercises, they are also movements, postures, stylized actions, rhythmic dance steps, all of which will be used later in more advanced levels of training when actual plays are rehearsed and finally in their performance, and thus comprise the essential ‘language’ or ‘code’ of the form. So, in effect what these exercises do, in fact what the entire training does, is to inculcate in the student an ‘alphabet and grammar of the body’ that is at once also an ‘alphabet and grammar of performance,’ which can be elicited as and when required in various performative permutations and combinations. It is almost reminiscent of a banking system of education where various spatial and movement practices are deposited or invested in the body for them to drawn out later and employed whenever necessary.

3. THE ABSENT MIND

It is crucial that in the training process described above, there is seldom any attempt to

⁴ The *Nāṭya Śāstra* divides the body into six *aṅga* (the head, the palms, the waist, the chest, the ribs, and the feet), six *upāṅga* (the eyes, the eyebrows, the nose, the lips, the cheeks, and the jaw), and seven *pratyaṅga* (the shoulders, the arms, the stomach, the buttocks, the ankles, the thighs and the neck) (See *Nāṭya Śāstra*, Chapter 8, Verses 10 & 11).

address the mind, or pass on knowledge of a conceptual nature to the trainee. There is practically no explanation or clarification given by the teacher to the student about why a certain exercise is being done, about its physical significance or its performative potential. The teacher merely shows what is to be done, and the student does it – effectively imitating the form of the action – till he gets it right, and then repeats it till it is formally inscribed in his body. A notable case would be that of the enactment of *sṛiṅāra* – the erotic *bhāva* – which is taught primarily as a set of facial and eye movements with little explanation of or allusion to the mental or emotional state that it refers to. Basically, it boils down to a consort of actions that include the enlargement of the eyes, the quivering of the upper cheeks, the curling of the lips into a smile, and a certain specific tilt of the head. Even the directional phrases used in training, such as ‘*kannu vikaṣippikkuka*’ (enlarge the eyes), ‘*thadam ilakkuka*’ (vibrate the upper cheeks), ‘*ilikkuka*’ (spread your lips), etc., are quite indicative of this ‘pure body’ understanding implicit in the practice. Sometimes even the name of the *bhāva* that is being practiced may be unknown to the student at the time of learning; he learns it merely as a set of performative expressions/actions to be employed in association with a certain play segment or a certain situation and which can be resorted to in other similar segments/situations. In the conventional *kalari* the teacher does not initiate any discussion or instruction about possible interpretations, or any of the conceptual issues connected with plays, segments, characters or acting practices. Nor are usually any questions asked – no clarifications of doubts, no further information sought – by the student; fear being a major factor in this ‘passive’ learning process, what matters most here is an unquestioning obedience.

One reason attributed to this passive system of learning is that the intense physical

culture of *Kathakali* necessitates that training start at an age when the musculature and the bone structure of the body are still flexible and can be moulded into the desired target form, before they settle into adult firmness. In its ideal state, training starts at a very tender age (between nine and twelve years) and concludes even before the student has attained maturity, much before he is mentally and intellectually capable of comprehending and appreciating the complex thematic, emotional, or aesthetic significance of the actions, characters and stories that he is performing. Hence, such conceptual knowledge, even if imparted at that stage will not only contribute mighty little to the learning process, but also divert valuable time and attention from the essential task of grooming the body. If, on the other hand, training is delayed till the mental horizons of the trainee are developed enough to grasp the conceptual world of the plays, situations and characters, it may turn out to be too late for the thorough physical grooming required for the form, as has been evidenced in the instances of a number of amateur artists who started learning the form after they had attained maturity and found the physical aspect of *Kathakali* too challenging. It is literally a case of non-correspondence or non-simultaneity of physical and mental potential; or, in other words, an instance of ‘when the body can, the mind cannot, and by the time the mind can, the body cannot.’ Hence *Kathakali* training focuses almost exclusively on the body and almost all the actions that the trainee learns are imparted as mere bodily techniques without any reference to their conceptual contexts or significance.

At the same time, in view of the fact that similar forms of rote learning and focus on the body which lay emphasis on the form of the practice rather than its content is found in a number of other performance forms such as *Kathak*, *Bharatanāṭyam*, *Odissi*, etc., martial arts such as *Kalarippayattu*, music genres such as Carnatic, and more interestingly, the learning of the *Vedās*,

the question does arise whether the argument of non-concord between physical and mental development can stand the test of scrutiny as the sole and salient rationale for the particular training system in *Kathakali*, whether the predilection for the body as the primary site of knowledge can be seen merely in terms of a childhood/maturity binary opposition or if there are further pedagogical and socio-cultural issues at stake here. To put it differently, is the pedagogic practice of embodiment predicated primarily upon the fact of childhood? The question assumes significance especially since most such explanations have come as retrospective rationalizations in contemporary discourses of a practice that originated and developed in an earlier age and as part of a different social formation and ethos. This is an aspect that the paper shall take up at a later point.

4. BODILY IMPLICATIONS

How then are we to see the body in play here? What implied notion of the body and its relation to the mind is present in this practice? It is possible to see this culture of embodiment as one in which it is not an *a-priori* conceptual knowledge or experience of emotional states or of character states that are then translated into bodily expression, but where it is the very bodily expressions and experience that constitute the specific emotional state or thematic content, first in the training and then in the performative context. It is through the body, with the body, that the particular experience – whether it is of an emotion, a character, or an action – is constituted. Even further, more than performing through the body or with the body, it also becomes performing ‘the body’, the specific body that is formally constituted in a particular manner through the training regimen, and thus is different from all other bodies, whether they are of other performing forms or of real life. A point to be noted here is that these enacted emotional states are mostly purely conventional and specific to the

performance form, and to read into them real life emotions or even parallels with real life emotions may be a mistake. They make sense – indeed they exist – only within and by virtue of their performative contexts and have little validity outside of it.

Are we then to think of these pedagogic practices as aiming at creating what Philip Zarrilli calls a distinctive ‘body mind’ or a ‘body memory’ which needs to be awakened and developed through the training, in which a certain corpus of knowledge is inscribed, which in its fully developed state will be able to ‘automatically’ perform the actions without any assistance of conscious thinking, and which in its ‘self-aware’ state knows instinctively and experientially whether a movement/action/expression has been executed correctly or not? (Zarrilli, 2004, p.661). This ‘body mind’ that diminishes, and in many instances almost entirely elides, the participation or intervention of the conscious mind, is then somewhat akin to the bodily knowledge of athletes and sportspersons, whose bodies are patterned in certain specific manners and who respond to stimuli in terms of those patterns, almost in an intuitive manner. Thus, it would tally with a phenomenological perspective that argues that the whole body itself is ‘pathic’ and “the body knows” how to do things (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p.87).

At the same time, there is also the expectation that this formal embodied knowledge will come to be informally enriched in performance by a greater mental awareness of the aesthetic, emotive, thematic and other significant aspects of performance, as the student acquires life experience and matures both as a person and as a practitioner. That a person/a mind/a subject will come to inhabit this body, who/which will inform and invest that body with a greater knowledge of the cultural/aesthetic/thematic and other associations and thereby supplement the training is thus an unspoken assumption, an assumption most often borne out in practice. It is

here that the notion of a performative or aesthetic surplus becomes important; that there is always an excess or even slippage that happens at the moment of performance – especially in successful performances. It is an indescribable, almost ungraspable, presence of something that cannot be taught or trained, but which is still an outcome of that training; something that goes beyond it but is unattainable without it. It is also something that can never be repeated, or imitated, while the trained structures can and are always repeated. As Philip Zarrilli observes:

In genres like *kathakali*, *odissi*, *kathak*, or *bharatanāṭyam* the entire whole-cloth of performance is deconstructed, broken down into its smallest units – the independent articulation of individual sets of musculature. Knowing how to articulate such muscles is necessary in such highly codified forms in order for the student to reach even a minimally acceptable level of expressivity and competence. [...] in all cases the constant repetition of set exercises [...] eventually leads to a level of ability beyond empty, vacuous, presence-less, and powerless mimicry. The student passes from sheer repetition to a reconstruction enlivened by proficiency.

Zarrilli 1990, p. 133

It is tempting to see this proficiency-led ‘presence,’ this aesthetic surplus in the folds of the performance, as a form of individuation, an unconscious attempt at expression of the actor’s subjectivity, of his endeavour to transcend the confines of a body constituted and patterned in a certain manner. However, in such a view there is the latent danger of an implicit contrast being drawn between structured performance and individual creativity; a contrast that could lead one to lose sight of the structured basis of creativity itself in such forms, - that it is the very proficiency in the structure that enables the surplus - and one if tilted too far in the direction of conscious creativity could lead to a rupture of the structure and a failed performance.

5. THE ABSENT BODY

It is here that we come across another problem, of what actually happens to the actor’s body in performance. Even while the body is foregrounded in performance with the gaze and conscious attention of the audience wholly engaged in it and its actions, the fully trained performer is largely not mentally conscious of the detailed mechanics of his performance, as indicated by Ramankutty Nair. The aesthetic form of the performer’s body and its actions are at the centre of audience attention, but the minute-by-minute modalities of that aesthetic form are carried out by the performer in an unconscious, automatic manner. In one sense then, when the performer’s body becomes most present to the audience, it becomes absent to the performer himself. In other words, the moment of its ultimate presence to the other is also paradoxically enough the moment of its absolute absence to the self. Presence is felt by the performer only when an error is committed, when the body is not functioning as it ought to or is expected to, or when there is a disruption in the structured progress of the performance score as he has been trained to carry out.

This is not to say that the performer is not conscious of his body, which indeed he is – there is certainly the consciousness that he is engaged in a performative practice that is distinct and separate from the practices of mundane, everyday life by virtue of its specific structured patterns, and that his body is at the centre of that practice – but a detailed consciousness of the actual intricacies of performance, including an awareness and conscious anticipation of what is to be done by the body the next moment or the moment after that is largely absent; the body is almost on ‘auto-pilot’ and so recedes from conscious awareness. This disappearance of the performer’s body from his own conscious awareness, or its actions becoming ‘second nature’ as in popular parlance, is made possible by the gradual inclusion through training of the actions and body language specific

to the performance form into the operation of *proprioception* – the “sense of balance, position, and muscular tension, provided by receptors in muscles, joints, tendons, and the inner ear” (Leder, 1990, p. 39) – a mode of perception which allows the ‘surface body’ to adjust its limbs, muscles, etc. appropriately to any motor task without usually having to think about it. As Drew Leder explains, this paradox of ‘presence to the other/absence to the self’ characterises most conditions of heightened activity:

While in one sense the body is the most abiding and inescapable presence in our lives, it is also essentially characterized by absence. That is, one’s own body is rarely the thematic object of experience. When reading a book or lost in thought, my own bodily state may be the farthest thing from my awareness. I experientially dwell in a world of ideas, paying little heed to my physical sensations or posture.

Leder, 1990, p. 1.

Such absence is not “restricted to moments of higher-level cognition,” but is equally present in our engagement in activities such as sports, physical labour, or the performing arts—dance, acting, live performance, etc. When “engaged in a fierce sport, muscles flexed and responsive to the slightest movements of my opponent . . . it is precisely upon this opponent, this game, that my attention dwells, not on my own embodiment.” (Leder, 1990, p. 1)

Apart from the above, there is also the question of what happens when the performer ‘becomes’ the ‘character’ in the particular play or thematic context that is being enacted. Performance studies theoreticians would probably see in this, a case of ‘liminality,’ of being between and betwixt, of being either/or, while at the same

time being neither/nor (Schechner, 2002, p. 57). While this may indeed be true with most performance forms, the actor-character dynamic of *Kathakali* is significantly different in that the body of the actor is entirely covered, camouflaged, masked, through the *ahārya*, the elaborate costume and make up. The actor is effectively reduced to one instance in a typology – a body typical of a class/category of characters such as *pacha*, *katti*, *thādi*, *minukku*, etc.⁵ – where one is everyone of a kind. To all purposes, what thus happens in performance is an erasure of the actor’s body – that specific, identifiable body which is the first mark of *his* identity. In this respect, *Kathakali* departs radically from the culture of other dances/performances, where there is always at least a semblance of the presence of the individuated body and the actor can be distinguished for who he/she is specifically. In *Bharatanāṭyam*, for instance, the dancer, even when she is Rādhā or Sītā in the performance context, is first and undeniably the individual dancer identifiable and recognized as such, and the character only subsequently. However, in *Kathakali*, the specific body of the actor is absent and a typological body takes its place; behind what is a manifestly visible presence is thus an abiding absence. Going back to the erasure of the mind, the erasure of subjectivity of the trainee in training, it now appears almost as a pre-figuration, a pre-enactment, of the erasure of the actor’s identity in performance: an internal erasure in training that anticipates the external erasure in performance.

This inherent erasure of individual bodily identity is probably one major reason why *Kathakali* has not been reconstructed/reconstituted as other performance forms, such as *Bharatanāṭyam*, have been in a modern,

⁵ Generally, the characters and their corresponding costumes and make-up in *Kathakali* fall into several distinct categories: *paccha* (green) and *pazhukka* (golden yellow) for noble heroes and kings; *katti* (knife), with a round ball attached to the tip of the nose, for high-born, haughty types; *chuvanna thādi* (red beard) for extremely evil or excessively angry characters; *vella thādi* (white beard) for monkeys; *karutha thādi* for forest dwellers; *kari* (black) for sub-human beings; and *minukku* (shining) for women, brāhmins and ascetics.

individuated manner and redeployed in accordance with the values of an urban, capitalist art market, where the performer is perceived as 'expressing his/her self' in performance, and in the process present and promote himself/herself as himself/herself. In such individuated performance forms the thematic personas or character guises that the performer assumes are all perceived as connected episodes in the long linear narrative of the artist's individual prowess and as instances that demonstrate his/her 'starhood,' the cultural significance of which phenomenon can be best understood in the light of Walter Benjamin's observations on the 'aura' of the actor and the way in which the cult of 'star-value' is fostered in the capitalist cultural marketplace. The fundamental impenetrability of the *Kathakali āhārya* has largely inhibited such accommodation into the rubric of urban individuation as also its concomitant celebrity culture. However, it also has to be noted that while attempts at individuation in an institutionalised manner in the external form have been largely precluded, there have indeed been 'surreptitious' efforts to sidestep or circumvent the relatively inflexible external form and bring in alterations in the latent form that can only be described as stealthy attempts at assertion of the individual subjectivity of the performer. Several instances in recent times of actors developing their own individual modes of rendering the gestures, actions and movements, or making additions/emendations within the space and scope of the existing structures of performance, can perforce be seen in this light, with the example of Kalamandalam Gopi, whose offering of his profile to the audience at moments of high drama in performance almost in a manner reminiscent of a popular cinematic idiom, thus unconsciously drawing upon the contemporary audience's knowledge of an interiorised mode of acting in contemporary cinema, functioning as a major illustration of the phenomenon.

At the same time, an interesting facet of this erasure of the identity of the performer is that it becomes even more marked in the case of male actors playing female roles, an established practice in *Kathakali*. That even the gender of the performer is effectively erased and a typological facade of the other gender is assumed in such cross-role situations, that the social embodiment of one gender is suppressed and replaced by a simulated, performative embodiment of the other gender, that in a fundamentally 'masculine' form this constitutes the ultimate erasure of personal identity, leads one to ask if the quintessential *Kathakali* actor is indeed the male actor who plays the female role. However, such a question cannot be rightly posed without reference to the inscriptions of power and powerlessness, of structures of social hierarchies, on the body of the *Kathakali* actor, as the form has evolved historically. Indeed, in the context, a related question would also be the dynamics of identity at play in the reverse scheme of cross-roles where the female performer takes on the role of the male character, especially in a contemporary setting where a number of female performers have made their presence felt on the *Kathakali* stage.

6. THE TRADITIONAL SOCIAL BODY

It is at this point that one needs to also look at the societal contexts in which the pedagogic and performance practices of *Kathakali* developed. Underlying its pedagogy is the presupposition of a certain hierarchical relationship between the teacher and the student, characterised by the exercise of power and violence from one side, and submissive compliance and deference from the other. The crucial aspect of this relationship is that it is at once both an extension and a recreation in an instructional setting of a set of social relations that characterised the time and social space in which the practice developed and came to be established.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, the formative period when most of the structures of performance and pedagogy evolved in *Kathakali*,⁶ training *kalaris* and performance groups were usually organised under the patronage of princely families, local chieftains, landlords, and so on. Clearly discernible in the structures of *Kathakali* training are distinct traces of the training culture of *Kalarippayattu*, the Kerala martial art form from the ranks of which *Kathakali* drew its first actor-dancers,⁷ in which strict discipline and total subservience to the interests of the patron were always observed, and the teacher – *āsān* as he is called in Malayalam – had complete authority over the trainee. Though the fundamental purposes of the training in *Kathakali* and of that in *Kalarippayattu* can be considered to be dissimilar in that one is aesthetic and the other functional, one directed towards performance, display and a certain formulation of rhythmic grace in stance, movement and enactment, and the other towards self-defence, combat and the effective use of the body's martial power, they thus share some underlying concepts of the body and a culture of training that aims at the creation of an embodied knowledge that can be elicited at will and with little recourse to the 'conscious' intervention of the mind. This being the case, *Kathakali* trainees were usually drawn from the poorest sections, from an economic and social underclass, for which the *kalari* was not only a place for learning a vocation but also a source of food and survival. The teacher was also usually of the same underclass, but being in the pay of the patron, he was the visible representative in the *kalari* of the patron, the visible agent and vehicle of that power,

and whose actions in the *kalari* were legitimised through the power vested in him by the patron. All that the student was expected to do was submit to this authority without question; obedience was at a premium in the system. There was little possibility of challenge within the *kalari* or recourse to appeal to some authority outside of it, because the student and his family were firmly implicated within the larger structures of that hierarchy.

The severe regimen of punishment, violence and pain, through which the training progressed, has to be necessarily seen in this context. It was almost as if the body of the trainee was being literally broken down and beaten into the required shape with little choice left for him to respond or opt out. Stories abound of the cruelty and brutality of the teachers that for want of a better word can only be described as verging on sadism, and of students who, with no other recourse open to them, often resorted to running away altogether or in some instances even attempting suicide. We get a glimpse of the dreadful predicament *Kathakali* trainees found themselves in, at the beginning of the 20th century, in a telling description in the biography of Pattikkamthodi Ravunni Menon, the great actor and modernizer of *Kathakali*:

The modes of punishment figuring in *Kathakali* training during that time were so terrible as to make them unbelievable to people today. Ittiraricha Menon (Ravunni Menon's teacher) was quite miserly in his life, but it used to be said that when it comes to the punishment of the trainees he was least miserly. The

⁶ It is generally accepted that *Kathakali* originated in the mid-seventeenth century as *Rāmanāṭṭom*, a dance in celebration of Lord Rama, with the plays of Kottarakkara Thampuran, the ruler of Kottarakkara, a principality in southern Kerala. (See K. P. S. Menon, 6-10).

⁷ Kottarakkara Thampuran and following him the Rajah of Vettathu and Kottayam Thampuran, who played significant roles in the development of *Rāmanāṭṭom* into *Kathakali*, drew their actors from the *Kalarippayattu* warriors who were under their command. The Kalari warriors, with their physical culture and training, obviously possessed precisely the kind of bodily flexibility and grace that could be redeployed into the structures of a dance-based performance form as *Rāmanāṭṭom* was in the initial instance.

trainees had to suffer the persecution not only of the teacher (Ittiraricha Menon) but also those of *bhāgavathar* (vocalist) Pisharodi, the senior trainee Raman Nair, Changaliyode Krishna Kurup (the percussionist). It was almost as if they were all vying with each other in punishing the children. Pisharodi would beat the trainees with his rhythm stick only on the most painful, bony parts of body. Pulling trainees up by their hair and tossing them across the *kalari*, kicking them when they have fallen on floor, poking them with the rhythm stick, hitting them continuously on the knees during training because the knees are not spread sufficiently in the typical stance expected of them – such were the kinds of punishment. People used to be reluctant to even pass through the surroundings of the *kalari* because they could not endure the loud screams and wailings of trainee children writhing in pain (*translation mine*).

Nair and Balan, 2004, p. 26.⁸

In a sense then, the body of the trainee/performer was becoming a ground for the enactment or inscription of certain paradigms of social power, class domination and patronage, expressed in the sublimated language of a physical aesthetic achieved through the painful restructuring of the trainee's body under the constant shadow of corporal punishment. The physical agony of the trainee thus becomes an integer of his social inferiority and powerlessness. Thus the erasure of the identity of the actor assumes a different significance here: he is effectively reduced to an instrument, a tool, an object, with agency outside of him – a social agency that is ultimately resident in the patron, but is exercised through the teacher in the *kalari*. This exercise of social agency and power finally culminates in the performance situation where the patron and those of his class 'look at' the performer and the performer 'is looked at,' a situation that

institutionalizes through the physical gaze a distinct subject-object dichotomy, but which gathers into it all the might of the 'gaze of social power' and its concomitant subject-object dichotomies. Censure and appreciation – in fact, all forms of 'aesthetic' criticism and judgment – assume in such a context the strength and impact of a repressive social hierarchy in action. Not only that, the very spaces in which the performer functions – the spaces of training, performance and social interaction – become extensions of one another and their normative modalities take on significance as expressions in different discursive sites of an all pervading social hierarchy.

In the light of the above, the question posed earlier whether the pedagogic practice of embodiment in *Kathakali* is predicated primarily upon the fact of childhood will have to be seen in a different light altogether. In terms of the disempowerment of the performer and his reduction to the status of an object, childhood appears as a discursive trope with which the experience of powerlessness of the performer and his inability to assume subjecthood and agency over the self are retrospectively rationalized and the societal modalities through which such a negation is made possible is legitimated. The childhood/maturity binary then makes sense as a displaced metaphor for the binaries of powerlessness/power and object/subject, but one in which the performer shall never attain maturity, is forever condemned to remain a child, a powerless object, in training, in performance and in life, subject to the mature, adult gaze of societal power and all its oppressive effects. In a further extension of the same process, within a fundamentally patriarchal cultural milieu, the female character becomes a site for the ultimate disempowerment of the actor, the enactment of the 'female type' as a bodily representation of the conventional patriarchal notions of femininity

⁸ The biography devotes an entire chapter to describe in detail the travails Pattikkamthodi Ravunni Menon and his fellow trainees underwent in the *kalari* of Ittiraricha Menon (See Padmanabhan Nair & Njayath Balan, 26-33).

stripping him of the last vestiges of an already largely nullified identity.

7. THE CONTEMPORARY BODY

While the traditional contexts described above have characterised *Kathakali* training and performance for most of its history, the societal transformations of the twentieth century, especially its second half, have had tremendous bearing on them. The impact of modernity, the steady attrition of feudal hierarchies, the gradual democratization of socio-political structures, and the persuasions of nationalism, in general, and the weakening of patronage as a major factor in the support of art forms, the formation of public institutions for their training and promotion, public and governmental involvement in their modalities, the concomitant pressures of greater social accountability, and the urbanization of the performance setting, in particular, have all contributed in various measures to a reformulation of the culture of *Kathakali* in all its facets. In performance, this has led to attempts at individuation that sidestep the rigid external form and work on the level of the latent form, greater attention to the depiction of character through emotive, quasi-realistic modes of acting that sometimes verge on melodrama, efforts to bring in individual contributions and stylistic variations, considerable focus on the subtle details of costume, acting, music and percussion aimed at increasing the aesthetic appeal of performance, discursive expressions of individual creativity and artistry, and so on, all of which show distinct traces of a burgeoning sense of subjectivity on the part of the performer. At the same time, with the change in the social contexts, the organizational contexts of *Kathakali* also underwent significant transformations. As in the case of a number of other performance forms in other parts of India, the weakening of the traditional patronage system and its institutions, and the perceived decline of traditional art forms, led to the call for their protection as part of a nationalist agenda to

safeguard and promote the country's traditional heritage, institutions, and forms. The establishment of institutions such as the Kerala Kalamandalam and others in its wake were landmarks on this road to the creation and definition of what constituted a national culture and its various regional representations.

Needless to say, all the above had tremendous impact upon the training and pedagogical structures of *Kathakali*. The *kalaris* under the patronage system gave way to *kalaris* in institutional settings, initially retaining most of the features and practices of the earlier *kalari* system, but progressively getting fashioned upon the lines of the public school system. The gradual accommodation of *Kathakali* training into the structures of the secular system of general school education, and the inclusion of other disciplines and subjects common to general education into the curriculum have had two major outcomes: on the one hand, a much greater intellectual and conceptual development of the *Kathakali* trainees, in terms of their general knowledge base, but on the other, less focus on the art and practice of *Kathakali* than in the earlier system where *Kathakali* was the sole subject taught. At the same time, tensions have also developed in the traditional pedagogic practices of *Kathakali* today in these institutional settings, due to the vastly different modalities of teacher/student subjectivities and relationships, and the impossibility of recreating in modern institutions the same or even similar structures of training as in the traditional context. The earlier culture of implicit obedience and total acceptance of the authority of the *āsān* has become a veritable thing of the past in the context of present-day student expectations and responses, just as the violent, punitive procedures that were part of training have become socially unacceptable and morally reprehensible in terms of contemporary expectations and parameters that govern institutions with public accountability. Along with this, new concepts and parameters of educational

transactions, discourses on the rights and privileges of students/children, and a general reformist attitude towards traditional discourses and practices aimed at transforming them in tune with the times and the changing perceptions of society, all have put manifold pressures upon the continuance of the traditional pedagogic practices of *Kathakali* in institutional settings. The problem is also further exacerbated by the fact that, primarily as a consequence of urbanization, present-day trainees follow a life style, food habits, physical culture, conceptual mapping and a cultural blueprint of gestures drastically different from those of trainees half a century ago and thus require greater levels of training to inculcate in them the physical and mental culture required for *Kathakali*. Coupled with this, the difficulty of making the sustained investment of time and effort, for what is at best a very unpredictable future as a *Kathakali* artist, while many other art forms offer the possibility of greater pecuniary success and popular acclaim with much less effort, has also worked as an inhibiting force on rigorous training. In this light, even while betraying certain conservative ideological and aesthetic preferences, the regular complaints from aficionados that younger artists lack the rigour and structured coordination of performance customary to older artists, that their powers of sustained intensity are sorely deficient in comparison, acquire greater significance. What they indicate is a gradual but pronounced erosion of the traditional physical culture associated with *Kathakali* and the aesthetic structures produced by it.

The major quandary posed by this situation, one for which an adequate solution has still not been found despite several individual and concerted efforts in the direction, is how to create the same body aesthetic and the same rigour without the replicating the same oppressive hierarchy and violence as of the traditional *kalari*, while at the same time introduce a greater level of student involvement and conscious participation

in the learning process. As has been mentioned earlier, the root problem is one of non-correspondence between physical and mental potential, that the training programme has to be done before a certain age for it to be effective and produce the desired results as far as the adult practitioner's body is concerned, that if left till the mind is fully developed, the thorough grooming of the body required for the form may become well nigh impossible. Obviously, the need of the hour is to develop a system that fully recognizes, on the one hand, the value of the traditional aesthetic structures of *Kathakali*, but on the other, the total unsustainability of the earlier system of training that produced it. The solution would lie in the formulation of a comprehensive pedagogy that, even when directed at the child, is not erosive of his subjectivity, or hierarchically dominant and violent, but which evokes the interest, involvement and creativity of the child. However, such an attempt cannot but be cognizant of the sad but necessary knowledge that all beauty is historical and time bound, and may indeed have to pass on.

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