



The *Rāsa-Līlā* tradition with Relevance to Kathak

Varada Pandit

Department of Kathak, Nalanda Nritya Kala Mahavidyalaya, The University of Mumbai, Juhu, Mumbai, Maharashtra, India

Abstract

India is the land of legends. The stories from *Purāna-s*, *Itihāsa*, *Gāthā-s*, etc were transferred down the generations through oral tradition. The art of storytelling gave rise to many performing art forms including dance and drama. The *Bhakti* movement gave rise to many sects, amongst which Vaishnavism became the religion of masses. The *Kṛṣṇa* legends became the popular means to propagate *Vaiṣṇava* philosophy through dance and drama. *Rāsa-Līlā* –the theatrical presentations of Vrindavan-Mathura, and Kathak the classical dance form of North India, celebrated the *Kṛṣṇa* theme through dance and music. Both these ancient art forms had their origins in the art of storytelling and share the same period of their revival. On these grounds they have similarities in content, and essence. The *Rāsa-Līlā* and Kathak are the living traditions of the ancient Indian Heritage.

Keywords: storytelling, *uparūpaka-s rāsa*, Vaishnavism, *Bhakti*, *Kṛṣṇa*-legend, *līlā-s*

Introduction

Storytelling is an art prevalent in India since prehistoric times. It was a leisure time which was enjoyed by children and adult in every household. The stories could be real stories or imaginative, but there used to be some moral hidden in it. The listeners were entertained as well as educated through these storytelling sessions.

In the flow of time this informal art was adapted by some communities as a profession. There were many communities of professional storytellers prevalent in ancient India. The sessions used to take place at various venues, like village squares, private courtyards, temples etc. There were some travelling mendicants who used to educate people across the country, by reciting the stories from *Purāna-s*, *Itihāsa*, epics and other literature.

Gradually the art of storytelling developed as an entertaining form. The storytellers were accompanied by musicians and singers. The performers used some element of dance and drama by adding gesticulation and enactment of the stories. The well-developed art of storytelling sowed the seeds of Indian folk theatre.

“The folk theatre can be broadly divided into two categories – theatre of entertainment and theatre of religion. In the first category the stress is on entertainment and the second depicts religio-mythological themes being a part of the *Bhakti* cult [1].

Both the categories of folk theatre developed into various entertaining forms. The theatrical presentations like ‘*Svāṅg*’, ‘*Nauṭankī*’, ‘*Tamāsā*’, etc are the forms which belong to the theatre of entertainment. On the other hand the theatrical presentations like ‘*Rāma-Līlā*’, ‘*Rāsa-Līlā*’, etc. belong to the theatre of religion.

During the medieval period, the *Bhakti* movement swept the country and many religious sects arose during that period. Out of the various sects (Shaivism, Vaishnavism, Shaktism), Vaishnavism was embraced by the nation. One of the most significant theories that Vaishnavism offered to the country

was the ‘*avatāra*’ theory – The theory of incarnations of the Supreme power. The epic heroes, *Rāma* and *Kṛṣṇa* were celebrated as the *avatāra-s* of *Viṣṇu*. *Kṛṣṇa* was recognized as the *Pūrṇa-Avatāra* by the *Vaiṣṇava* saints. The *Kṛṣṇa* themes influenced all arts and literature.

The ‘*Karmayogī*’ of *Mahabharata* and the playful ‘*Gopāla*’ of Vrindavan were two distinct characters of the same *avatāra*. *Rāsa-Līlā* the religious theatrical presentation presented the *līlā-s* and pranks of the *Gopāla* of Vrindavan. The *Rāsa-Līlā* is the most celebrated ritual in the temples of Vrindavan and Mathura. The *Rāsa-Līlā* drama is presented in two parts. The first part consists of the enactments of *Kṛṣṇa*’s *līlā-s*, and the second half presents the *Rāsa* dance of *Kṛṣṇa* with *gopī-s*.

Though the *Rāsa-Līlā* dramas became popular in the medieval period, its roots are found in many ancient dance-drama presentations commonly known as *uparūpaka-s*. These are mentioned in the Sanskrit treatises as *rāsaka*, *rāsa*, *cālikya*, *hallīsaka*, *nāṭyarāsaka*, etc. The different treatises and *Purāna-s* describe the *rāsa* dance as the dance of *gopī-s* with *Kṛṣṇa* in a circular formation.

“The concept of *līla* or more specifically *Rāsa-Līlā* is contained in *Harivamśa*. The *Viṣṇu Purāna* vividly describes the dance of the *gopī-s* with *Kṛṣṇa*...*Harivamśa*, however gives a more detailed description of this dance form, adding new elements and ornamentations to the basic motif [2].”

The *rāsa* dance has a very special significance in the daily worship of the *Vaiṣṇava-s*. The *Vaiṣṇava acārya-s* define *Kṛṣṇa* principle as ‘joyous essence’. To attain *Kṛṣṇa* means to taste this essence of joy and reach the state of eternal bliss. This essence or *Rasa* is fully manifest in *rāsa* dance of *Kṛṣṇa* with *gopī-s*. Hence experiencing the *rāsa* dance is experiencing in totality the essence of the *Kṛṣṇa* principle.

Initially the *rāsa* dance used to be performed in temples or on a circular structure called *Rāsa-Manḍala*, which was specially built for the purpose of *rāsa* dance. These were built in conjunction with the shrine. The circular stage symbolizes the

Rāsa-Manḍala of the *Śrīmad Bhāgavata*.

The presentation of *Rāsa-Līlā* begins with a *jhānkī* – a tableaux like presentation in which *Rādhā* and *Kṛṣṇa* are seated on a *simhāsana* (royal seat). This section is called ‘*maṅgalācaraṇa*’ in which an invocatory verse is sung. This is followed by the *āratī* and is done by the *gopī-s*. *Maṅgalācaraṇa* and *āratī* comprise the *stutī* part of the *rāsa* and it creates an atmosphere of devotion. The verses are drawn from several literary sources but the prime source is the compositions of the *aṣṭachāp* poets and the *gosāin-s*. The style of singing is mostly *dhrupada* style.

After the preliminary rituals, the *rāsa* dance begins. This is rigorously structured into different phases comprising many complex patterns in choreography. The initial part of *rāsa* dance has an element of *abhinaya* through gesticulation, and the latter part of *rāsa* is *ṛtta*. This is done on the accompaniment of mnemonics or ‘*bol-s*’. The technique of the dance is built on an elaborate system of *tāla* where the tempo rises from slow to fast.

“*Rāsa* is the type par excellence with which *Kṛṣṇa* and *gopī-s* are connected...This style is delicate or forceful; it is in different *tāla-s*; in fact *rāsa* itself is a *tāla*-name...They do only pure dance or *ṛtta* but what is noteworthy is that they execute many patterns and designs...called *piṇḍibandha*, *ṣṛṅkhalā*, *bhedākya*, and *latā* [3].

The end of the *rāsa* is the beginning of the *līlā-s*. The compositions of *līlā-s* are those composed by the *aṣṭachāp* poets. Different *līlā-s* are chosen for different occasions. Popular among these are the ‘*mākhan corī*’ (stealing of butter), and the ‘*Uddahva līlā*’ (the realization of *bhakti* by *Uddhava* in *Gokula*). The compositions of the *aṣṭachāp* poets are based on Hindustani *raga-s* as well as folk tunes. The *Rāsa-Līlā* presentations end with the enactment of *Kṣa*’s *līlā-s*.

As mentioned earlier, the *Rāsa-Līlā* drama has its origins in the *uparūpaka-s*. The *rāsa* dance is described in the *Purāṇa-s* beginning with *Harivaṁśa Puarāṇa*, *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* and *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. The approximate period of these *Purāṇa-s* is from 1st century C.E. to 6th century C.E. This makes clear that the tradition of *rāsa* dance was prevalent since ancient times. It got disrupted in the later centuries during the Sultanate rule. The 16th century C.E. brought in the tolerant rule of Emperor Akbar. The steady political conditions changed the socio-religious scene. This resulted in the revival of many art forms including *Rāsa-Līlā*.

Kathak the classical dance style of North India also bears its origins in the art of storytelling. Among the many art forms, Kathak was also revived in the tolerant rule of King Akbar. Both *Rāsa-Līlā* and Kathak bear similar origins and were revived in the same period. Owing to this, they have similarities on many grounds. The Hindustani music which developed in North India during the medieval period was the mode of music used in both *Rāsa-Līlā* and Kathak. Vaishnavism with its *Kṛṣṇa* themes is the integral part of both the forms. Based on the similar theme the literary content is also similar in Kathak and *Rāsa-Līlā*.

The *gat-s* of *Kṛṣṇa* and *gopī-s*, and the *gat-bhāva* – ‘*mākhan corī*’, ‘*panghat par cheḍ chād*’, ‘*Govardhan līlā*’, ‘*Kālīyā daman*’, etc. are presented in both the forms. The *Rāsa-Līlā* drama has a deep esoteric meaning and symbolism. It reveals

the unconditional love of *gopī-s* towards *Kṛṣṇa* and thus ensures *bhakti* as the highest path of salvation. A part of *rāsa* dance depicts the *vipralambha śṛṅgāra* in a suggestive way. Each *gopī* is filled with a sense of pride thinking that she alone is the favorite of *Kṛṣṇa*. Sensing this *Kṛṣṇa* disappears from the *Rāsa-Manḍala* and the *gopī-s* experience the pangs of separation. To overcome the separation, the *gopī-s* try to feel *Kṛṣṇa*’s presence by enacting his *līlā-s*. As soon as their ego has surrendered, *Kṛṣṇa* reappears and continues to dance with the *gopī-s*. The disappearance of *Kṛṣṇa* from the *rāsa* dance indicates that God is away from those, whose love is mixed with pride. The *vipralambha śṛṅgāra* is the most celebrated sentiment in *Vaiṣṇava* themes.

In Kathak, the *vipralambha śṛṅgāra* is depicted in a *ṭhumarī* where the *nāyikā* is suffering the pangs of separation from the *nāyaka*. Various shades of *vipralambha śṛṅgāra* and various states of the *nāyikā* in separation are presented in a *ṭhumarī* effectively. The *jhūlan* ceremony in *Rāsa-Līlā* is also a part of Kathak dance. In this, the divine couple ‘*Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa*’ are seated on a swing and the *gopī-s* play music and sing while swinging the couple.

The amorous play of *Kṛṣṇa* with *gopī-s* is the means to reveal the message offered by *Bhāgavata*. The *Śrīmad Bhāgavata* says that *kāma*, which is the worldly desire, if directed towards the divine, serves as a means of liberation. On this ground, various ‘*cheḍ chād*’ (amorous pranks) themes of *Kṛṣṇa* and *gopī-s* are depicted in Kathak and *Rāsa-Līlā*. There is a deeper philosophy in the *gats* like ‘*panghat kī gat*’, and ‘*mākhan corī*’. In ‘*panghat kī gat*’ *Kṛṣṇa* breaks the pot filled with water on the *gopī-s* head and the water spills out. The water filled pot on her head symbolizes her ego, which is broken by *Kṛṣṇa*. In the *gat* ‘*mākhan corī*’, *Kṛṣṇa* snatches the pot filled with butter from the *gopī*. The butter is the symbol of purest heart filled with purest love, which *Kṛṣṇa* steals from the *gopī*. The philosophy of the *Vaiṣṇava-s* is effectively depicted through various themes in both *Rāsa-Līlā* and Kathak. These themes are an integral part of contemporary Kathak.

The technique of *ṛtta* in Kathak and *Rāsa-Līlā* bear similarity to some extent. The *rāsadhārī-s* hold *hamsāsya hasta* which is also used in the basic stance of Kathak. *Cakkar-s* or pirouettes are also common to both the forms. The mnemonic *bol-s* which are used in both Kathak and *Rāsa-Līlā* are similar. *Mṛdaṅga* or *pakhāvaj* was the percussion instrument prevalent in the 16th century C.E. It was the prime accompanying instrument in Kathak and *Rāsa-Līlā*. Thus the compositions of *pakhāvaj* known as *paraṇ* are common in both the forms. The use of *paramelū-s* (compositions incorporating various sounds from nature and those of instruments), is also a common feature. The basic *bol-s* of Kathak ‘*tā theī theī tat*, *ā theī theī tat*’ are also used in *Rāsa-Līlā*.

As described by Dr. Vasanta Yamadagni,

“The entire *Rāsa-Manḍala* used to resound with the *bol-s* of ‘*tā theī theī tat*’ ‘*ā theī theī tat*’ [4].

The celebration of various festivals like *horī*, various seasons like *vasanta ṛtu*, *varṣā ṛtu*, etc. are presented in Kathak and *Rāsa-Līlā*. On account of these similarities it is evident that both, *Rāsa-Līlā* and Kathak have influenced each other and

had artistic exchange owing to their phase of revival. The *Kṛṣṇa* lore which was celebrated in all art forms is the central theme of Kathak and *Rāsa-Līlā*. Among the many art forms developed from the simple storytelling sessions, *Rāsa-Līlā* and Kathak are the two major forms which continue to thrive today.

References

1. Varadpande ML. History of Indian Theatre, Lokaranga Panorama of Indian Folk Theatre, Abhinava Publications, New Delhi, India, 1992, 33.
2. Kapila Vatsyayan. Traditional Indian Theatre, National Book Trust, New Delhi, India, 1980, 123.
3. Raghavan V. Sanskrit Drama in Aesthetics and Productions, Mrs. Sharada Raghavan, Madras, India, 1992, 187.
4. Dr. Vasanta Yamadagni, '*Rāsalīlā Tathā Rāsānukaraṇa Vikāś*' Sangit Natak Akademi, New Delhi India, 1980, 216.