TRACING LYRICISM IN GĀTHĀ SAPTAŚATĪ WITH RESPECT TO ABHINAYA IN INDIAN CLASSICAL DANCE

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Abstract

Gāthā Saptaśatī is an ancient poetic anthology written in Mahāraśtrī Prākṛt. It is a compilation of short brief poems done by King Hala, the seventeenth ruler of the Satavahana dynasty. The chief sentiment of these poems is love. It showcases the rural life of common people, their everyday chores, love affairs, etc. in very minute details making it a visual poetry. Indian classical dance is also called citra kāvya (visual poetry) as with the help of abhinaya, the dancer takes the rasikas in the world of imagination where he/she is able to visualize the story which is the content of the literature in front of his/her own eyes. Thus the literature should be chosen very wisely as it should have scope in characterization and interesting story line. Another important factor that should be considered in a good poetic literature which can be used for Indian Classical Dance is the concept of dhvani or suggestiveness. Dhvani gives the dancer the scope to interpret and reinterpret various levels of meaning of the same line. Along with this the metrical composition of the poems should give an innate rhythm for the portrayal of dance. All these factors are combined to trace the lyricism in a poetic literature. Gāthā Saptaśatī precisely fulfills all the above requirements which are necessary for being an excellent poetic literature thus making it apt for representing Indian Classical Dance.

Key words: *Gāthā Saptaśatī, Mahāraśtrī Prākṛt, citra kāvya, abhinaya, Indian Classical Dance, lyricism, sāhitya, gāthās, literature.*

INTRODUCTION

Gāthā Saptaśatī is an interesting ancient literary work belonging to the early centuries of the Common Era. It is a poetic anthology written in *Mahāraśtrī Prākṛt*. It was compiled by King Hala, the seventeenth Satvahana ruler and is considered as one of the most ancient works in the field of poetry. In one of his compositions, King Hala himself states that he has collected only seven hundred *gāthās* adorned with *alaṃkāras* (figures of speech) out of ten millions of such verses. Out of these seven hundred *gāthās* only forty-four *gāthās* are referred to as being composed by King Hala himself.

As mentioned earlier, this poetic anthology is written in *mahāraśtrī prākṛt*, yet it is famous by the Sanskrit name *'Gāthā Saptaśatī'*. However this anthology is also known by other *prākṛt* names like *Sattasai* (the seven hundred) and *Ghākoṣo* (A treasury or *gāthās*). Most of the noteworthy ancient Indian literature is found in Sanskrit. This is because Sanskrit was considered as the language of Gods and upper class. Thus majority of the ancient Sanskrit work is either religious or narrative. Very rarely it talks about the emotions of the common man. But *prākṛt* was the spoken language of the common man. Hence *Gāthā Saptaśatī* being in *prākṛt* makes a major difference in delivering the inner most emotions and desires of the common people which turns out to be more relevant and appealing to the readers.

'Gāthā-Saptaśatī' the word itself explains the composition of the anthology. *'Sapta'* means seven and *'śatī'* means hundred; that means it is a compilation of seven hundred *gāthās*. All the verses in this poetic anthology are not closely connected to one another. However there is one common thread running along all the verses that is the sentiment of love (*śṛngāra rasa*). Thus, though they are not connected to each other in form or matter, they can be arranged into groups or sections according to particular topics. This makes it convenient for the portrayal of *abhinaya* in Indian Classical dance.

Indian classical dance is deeply rooted with Indian literature. This is because the literature provides the major content of *sāhitya* to be expressed through dance. Thus the literature chosen should be competent enough to fulfill the needs for a fine presentation of the Indian classical dance. For instance, the literature should have wide scope for the portrayal of different emotions, the story line should be interesting, it should consist of many characters, etc. Such content in literature will enable the dancer to showcase an impressive array of *abhinaya* which will ultimately lead to a fine performance. This is exactly what the present paper intents to highlight, the lyricism in poetic literature such as *Gāthā Saptaśatī*, along with its content which makes it an apt literature for the portrayal of *abhinaya* in Indian classical dance.

LYRICISM IN GĀTHĀ SAPTAŚATĪ

The word 'lyricism' has many layers of meaning to it. To put out a few definitions it says:

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 "An artist's expression of emotion in an imaginative and beautiful way; the quality of being lyrical" (Oxford Dictionary)

"The quality or state of being lyric: songfulness" (Merriam and Webster dictionary)

"The beautiful expression of personal thoughts and feelings in writing or music" (Cambridge dictionary)

To sum up from the above definitions one may define that lyricism is a beautiful deep emotional content in writing which makes it lyrical. Lyricism is something that can only be applied to poetic literature and it is only fair to say that not all poetic literature contains lyricism.

In dance, one chooses poetic literature or *kāvya* to portray the emotions. This is because poetry itself has a certain metrical composition of words, an innate rhythmic character which makes it suitable to be set to rhythm and melody in dance. *Gāthā Saptaśatī* is composed in *ārya* metre (as called in Sanskrit) and is called *gāthā* in *prākṛt*. A *prākṛt gāthā* gives its own definition as:

"*paṭhamaṁ vāraha mattā vīe aṭṭhāraehi samjuttā |*

jaha paṭhamaṁ taha tīaṁ dahapañca-vihūsiyā gāhā ||"

 [Taken from *The Prakrit Gatha Saptasati compiled by Satavahana King Hala* edited and translated by Radhagovind Basak].

 Meaning – That is called a *gāhā* or *gāthā* which contains twelve *mātrās* in the first foot, eighteen in the second, again twelve in the third and fifteen decorating it in the fourth.

Another reason to choose poetic literature is that, the creative arrangement of words gives the artist the scope to interpret and reinterpret the meaning of the lines. Many a times there is a straight forward meaning and also an underlying meaning which is to be understood by reading between the lines. This gives the dancer a wide scope to interpret the poetry and its suggested meanings in numerous possible ways. *Gāthā Saptaśatī* is a compilation of short brief poems. A lot of layers of meaning are compressed in short number of lines. This feature of poetry is called as *dhvani,* where one line of poem can be interpreted in various ways. The theory of *dhvani* (or suggestiveness) can be best illustrated by many charming verses from this poetic anthology. Many noteworthy authors and commentators like *Ānandavardhana*, author of *Dhvanyāloka* and its commentator *Abhinavagupta, Kuntala*, the author of the *Vakroktijīvita, Mahimabhaṭṭa*, the author of the *Vyaktiviveka* and many others have quoted verses from this poetic anthology to illustrate some principles of poetical science. *Gāthā Saptaśatī*, thus satisfies all these basic requirements of an ideal poetry portraying lyricism at its best making it suitable to perform through Indian Classical Dance.

THEMATIC CONTENT OF GĀTHĀ SAPTAŚATĪ

Gāthā Saptaśatī showcases the rural life of the people. One gets to see a clear picture of the society through these poems. The poems are so beautifully composed with such minute details that one can actually visualize the rural backdrop, nature setting, geographical conditions, lives of the people, their occupations, their way of dressing up, social relationships, nature of the society, etc. just by reading them. In this *Prākṛt* anthology, the poets have painted a picturesque portrayal of the Deccan region with appealing amalgamation of words just as a painter would do with his brush.

The chief theme of *Gāthā Saptaśatī* is love i.e. *śṛngāra rasa*. Both the types of *śṛngāra rasa*, *sambhoga śṛngāra* (love in union) and *vipralamba śṛngāra* (love in separation) are seen in these poems. The village women, young and adults are seen as heroines (*nāyikās*) and the young and adult men as heroes (*nāyakas*). The main occupation of the people is farming. It is seen very vividly in the *gāthās* that the men are working hard in the fields with the ploughs and the women work hard in the kitchen and provide food to their husbands by carrying it to the place of their work. Fields of cotton, rice, pulses, sesamum, are often depicted as places of love making for the couples. By this depiction we understand that rice, barley, sesame were the staple crops of the region as there is repeated mention of these crops and also that the society was bold enough to engage in love making in the open fields. There is a mention in one of the verses of *Pulinda* woman (forest tribe) being jealous of another woman with whom her husband is involved in the act of love making. This depiction highlights two important points – one that there were forest tribes also living in the society making hunting one of the popular occupations, and two that extra marital affairs were a common phenomena in the society. There are also references of other occupations in the *gāthās* like goldsmith, blacksmith, carpenter, potters, weavers, garland makers etc. However there are no direct references to trade or commercial activities taking place. Yet there is a repeated mention of 'absent traveller' in the *gāthās* where the wife is pining for her husband to come back soon or sends messages for his early arrival.

The *gāthās* showcasing situations of love, acts of love making, extra marital affairs, are all from the women's perspective. It describes women's deepest desires, her demands in relationships, her emotions, her secrets etc. very explicitly. Thus it is fair to say that *Gāthā saptaśatī* very dominantly showcases the feminine phenomena. The reason behind this freedom of speech could be, during that period patriarchy must not have been consolidated or the society must not have been fully stratified. Also in many of the verses there is mention of co-wives stating the rivalry between them to attract their husband's love and affection. By this it can be inferred that the society at that time was more liberal, rules and regulations were not much followed and polygamy was openly practiced. With the careful study of the *gāthās*, one can understand the variety of crops that were grown,

the variety of the trees, geographical conditions like the mountains and the rivers, the occupations of the people, the living standards of the people, etc. that were prevalent. Along with these materialistic things, we also understand the emotions of the people, the values that they believed in, the rules they followed, the mindset of the people, their religious beliefs, their philosophical views and all those things that contribute to a harmonious living of a community.

ABHINAYA IN INDIAN CLASSICAL DANCE

Etymologically the word *'abhinaya'* is split into two words, *abhi* means towards and *ni* means to carry. So it simply means communicating with the audience. In dance communicating through dialogues is not possible as it is in drama. Few classical dance styles allow it but still it is on a very smaller extent. Thus all the communication is done with the language of the body and the facial expressions.

Nāṭyaśāstra is a treatise on *nāṭya* (drama) but many of its contents are applicable to Indian classical dance as well. In fact, for a dance to be recognized as classical dance, it is mandatory that it fits in the framework of *Nāṭyaśāstric* elements. *Nāṭyaśāstra* gives a four-fold classification of *abhinaya: āṅgīkābhinaya, vācikābhinaya, āhāryābhinaya* and *sātvikābhinaya. Āṅgīkābhinaya* deals with usage of entire body, hand gestures and facial expressions; *Vācikābhinaya* deals with music, lyrics and literature (*sāhitya); Āhāryābhinaya* deals with make-up and stage properties and *sātvikābhinaya* deals with the concentration of mind. Out of all these *abhinayas, āṅgīkābhinaya* plays a very important role as the essential conveying part of the *sāhitya* is done by the hand gestures (*hastābhinaya*), movement of the major limbs *(aṅgas),* movement of the minor limbs (*upāṅgas* and *pratyāṅgas*) and by facial expressions. When it comes to *vācikābhinaya,* the literature chosen is significant. As much the literature offers the scope for the vivid portrayal of characters equally it becomes interesting for the dancer to interpret and convey the meaning through dance. Music and musical instruments are also part of *vācikābhinaya. Āhāryābhinaya* is different and unique to each classical dance style. Lastly *sātvikābhinaya* is common to all classical dance styles as it deals with the psychological state of mind. When the mind is focused and concentrated only then the *'sattva'* is attained and only then *sātvikābhinaya* is created.

India is blessed with a rich cultural heritage. We have eight classical dance styles as of now, *Sattriya* being the latest addition to the list. All these dance styles belong to different parts of India and have their own individuality. But there are a few things common to all dance styles together. For instance, all the classical dance styles will have the same four *abhinayas*, eight *rasas, nāyaka bhedas* (types of heroes), *nāyikā bhedas* (types of heroines), concept of *sakhī* (friend or mediator between *nāyaka* and *nāyikā*), but the way of representation will be unique to the style.

To conclude with, *abhinaya* is the most vital part of classical dance as it is the only key for communication. The beauty of the literature can only be translated through *abhinaya.* The chief aim of classical dance is to create *rasa* (aesthetic enjoyment) and that can be achieved through the form of *abhinaya.* Thus one can fairly say that *abhinaya* is the soul of Indian classical dance.

CONCLUSION

Gāthā saptaśatī is an ancient and classic form of poetry. The style in which the *gāthās* are written is simple yet so beautiful that it showcases the honest portrayal of human emotions. Along with that the beauty of the nature, the romantic setting of the backdrop, the change of seasons, the variety of flowers, the mention of rivers and river banks, the description of sunrise and the sunsets, everything is described with such minute details that one can visualize the poetry by reading it. The entire scenario just appears in front of your eyes as if you are a part of it. Classical dance does the exact same thing. With the help of the *abhinaya* the dancer takes the *rasika* in the world of imagination, narrating the story or the episode in such a way that the *rasika* visualizes the entire situation in front of his/her eyes. After all that is the reason why dance is called visual poetry (*citra kāvya*).

The vivid portrayal of characters in *Gāthā saptaśatī* offers a wide scope of characterization in classical dance. For instance, the verses depict so many human relationships like that of a mother and daughter, husband and wife, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, co-wives, woman and her friend (*sakhi*), woman and her secret love partner, etc. which allows the dancer to play a wide range of characters making the dance piece very colourful. Also the content of *Gāthā saptaśatī* is a true *citra kāvya,* based on the everyday life of the rural people, the situations of love like the extra marital affairs, fights between co-wives, separated lovers, clandestine love, and so on which is so dramatic that it becomes very interesting for the dancer to create such *sancārīs* (small episodes) and even the *rasikas* enjoy watching it.

Indian classical dance always requires literature which has scope for choreography. A good choreography is only possible when the dancer has the liberty to interpret and reinterpret the literature in various possible ways. The literature should be capable of creating colourful *sancārīs*, memorable characters and very relatable experiences. This is exactly what *Gāthā saptaśatī* has to offer. Though this poetic anthology is in ancient regional language of *prākṛt* but still there is a lot of classicism in it. Indian classical dancers have always been dancing to the regional languages of the particular state origins but with time there is a lot more to explore. In contemporary times one

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may definitely widen their boundaries and experiment the dances danced to different classic literature. Thus one can certainly implement 'classic literature (like *Gāthā saptaśatī*) to classical dance.'

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