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PAPER 5 DANCE POETS AND POETRY, RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHY AND INDIAN CLASSICAL DANCE



ज्ञान - विज्ञानं विमुक्तये

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MODULE 14

POETRY AND THEMES OF MOHINIATTAM

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DANCE, POETS AND POETRY, RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHY AND INDIAN CLASSICAL DANCE

MODULE 14 POETRY AND THEMES OF MOHINIATTAM

Mohiniyattam / मोहिनीअट्टम was popularized in the nineteenth century, because of the patronage extended to it by Swathi Thirunal (1813-1847), the Maharaja of Travancore. At his court, one of the most favoured personalities was Vadivelu of the Tanjore Quartet, who was paid a very high honorarium, in recognition of his genius. Vadivelu is believed to have influenced most of the dance compositions of Swathi Thirunal, especially Pada Varnas. His influence played out in the transformation of Mohiniyattam, as a popular dance form. It was under his influence that Mohini Attam also began following the margam of Bharatanatyam - Allaarippu, Jatiswaram, Sabdam, Varnam, Padams, Javali, Thillana and Slokam, that the Tanjore Quartet had created. In addition to his own composition he is known to have been the reviewer and critic of Swathi's dance compositions.

Swathi Thirunal not just patronized Mohiniyattam during his reign, but is also credited with the composition of many music arrangements and vocal accompaniments that provide musical background for modern Mohiniyattam dancers. Swathi Thirunal himself wrote as 20 varnams, 50 padams and 5 thillanas for Mohiniattam. He roped in the iconic poet Irriyaman Thampi into his court and made him contribute to this form. His lullaby "Omana Thingal Kidavo" is one of the most popular pieces in the Mohini Attam repertoire.

After Swathi's demise, Kathakali came to be promoted at the expense of Mohiniattam, and the style's popularity began waning. The

prohibitionary regulations imposed on dancing by the colonial government worsened their already precarious position. Author Ahosk desai writes in his book “Dance of the golden hall” published by ICCR, that in 1915 a Mohiniattam dancer in Thrissur was stoned and eventually the resultant wounds turned out to be fatal. The dancers were not able to negotiate the unsupportive environment, and extraneous dance pieces were introduced in its repertoire, like Polikali, Esalen, Mukuthi and Candanam, along with lyrics that were attractive to the lowest level of audiences.

The noted Malayalam poet Vallathol Narayan Menon, who established the Kerela Kalamandalam dance school in 1930, played an important role in stalling the spiralling descent of the dance form and popularizing Mohiniattam once again, in the 20th century. The syllabus of Mohini Attam that he instilled included only the classical features and dance pieces and he rejected the pieces of minor value. Along with Mohiniattam, Kerela Kalamandalam became the laboratory for the revival of Kathakali, Othan Thulala and Koodiyattam.

There are two views that prevail about the origin of Mohiniattam. Dancer scholar Nirmala Pannikkar claims that the art if Mohiniattam arose from the dance of the Kerela Devadasi. But in contrast, scholar and theatre personality Kavalam Narayan pannikka is of the opinion that Mohiniattam arose from the regional dance forms of Kerela, namely Kaikottikali / कैकोत्तिकाली, Nangiar Koothu / नंगिअर कूथु and Thiruvathira / थिरुवाथिरा. Several references can be found in manipravalam literature to the dancer, with no reference to the dancer being a Devadasi. This would suggest that Kavalam Narayan Pannikar’s view holds good.

However, Vallathol's search for an appropriate Mohiniattam teacher as well as student proved harder than what he had imagined and eventually Kalamandalam's first Mohiniattam teacher lived out her days at Shantiniketan in West Bengal, as Tagore had requested for a teacher. But Kalyani Amma did not teach Mohiniattam in Shanti Niketan but folk forms. Beryl de Zoete's book "In The Other Mind" contains a description of her dance. Gurus for Mohini Attam were hard to come by and most left citing some reason or the other, often to do with objections to the changes in the tradition that were recommended.

This was particularly true for Krishna Panikkar who had taught some Mohini Attam in the early 20th century and who taught again at Kerala Kalamandalam at the age of 75. Panikkar taught both Shanta Rau and Kalyani Kutty Amma. The complete difference in styles and content is so surprising. While Shanta Rau danced a powerfully masculine style of Mohiniattam, Kalyanai Kutty Amma danced in a feminine mode. This difference between the two main dancers of Mohiniattam at that time - Kalyanai Kutty Amma and Shanta Rau is reflective of the fact that the dance form has been subject to many interpretations.

Widely recognized as the "Mother of Mohiniattam," for her constructive contributions in bringing back Mohiniattam to the mainstream of Indian classical dance, Kalyani Kutty Amma's main contribution was towards lending structural integrity to Mohiniattam as we see it today. Her efforts promoted Mohiniattam from a dismal, near-extinct state into a mainstream Indian classical dance, rendering it in a formal structure, with the appropriate ornamentation.

Poet Vallathol invited her to enrol for dance lessons in Kerala Kalamandalam. The adventurous and independent young Kalyanikutty Amma took up the challenge. She was turned out of her home and was denied everything she was entitled to, as a result of this decision. Under late Krishna Panicker Asan who was then 78, she took rigorous training in Mohiniyattam. She learnt a very Bharatanatyam inspired repertoire from him including a Jathiswaram in Kamboji, a Varnam in Yadukulakamboji and a Thillana in Arabhi. She had her Arangetram in 1939. She also took training in Kathakali from Pattikamthodi Ravunni Menon and from Kalamandalam Krishnan Nair who was then a teacher in Kerala Kalamandalam. Vallathol, it is believed, entrusted Kalyanikutty Amma the responsibility of compiling and uplifting Mohiniyattam to a full-fledged dance form and giving it a dignified status. This inspired Kalyanikutty Amma, and with the support of her husband Kalamandalam Krishnan Nair she started the great journey with Mohiniyattam. She did extensive research into the origin and history of the dance, travelling all over Kerala to trace its growth. She visited numerous temples where the dance form had been performed. She even interviewed some descendents of the devadasis. She developed many adavus (basic steps) and classified them into different groups namely, Thaganam, Jaganam, Dhaganam and Sammishram. Her strict and clear instructions of a systematic method for the movements of the body and limbs created a formal structure for Mohiniyattam. She composed cholkettu, jathiswarams, varnams, padams, thillanas, slokams, and saphams in Malayalam and Sanskrit, setting them to suitable ragas to bring out the lasya and bhakti of Mohiniyattam. She liberated the theme of Mohiniyattam from Shringara to embrace various emotions and made use of the Navarasas. This widened the scope of Abhinaya in Mohiniyattam. Later, Kalyani Kutty Amma wrote her own Varnams, of which “Varika varika sakhi varagunan avane kando” in Anandabhairavi raga is a popular example.

Meanwhile, at the Kerala Kalamandalam, the jinx around a Mohiniattam teacher was finally broken with Thothassery Chinnammu Amma joining in 1955 and staying on till 1964. Admittedly when Chinnammu amma arrived at Kalamandalam it was after a long hiatus in dancing. This break could have been responsible for many slips in memory. Nevertheless she taught jathiswaram in Senjurutti, the varnams “Sami nine” and “Manasi Medusaham Aiyo” by Swati Tirunal, the padams “Indal Iha / इंदल इह” and Illataler Shyane / इल्लातालेर श्याने” by Swati Tirunal, and Irriyaman Thampi’s two padams, “Prananayakam” in Navaras raga and “Yentaho” in Mukhari raga. Thus in the initial years the repertoire of Mohini Attam clearly resembled that of Bharatanatyam, with Varnan and padam being the space for the inclusion of poetry.

But after some years, Kalamandalam itself became a centre for creating new ‘sahitya’ traditions for Mohiniattam. Valathol a renowned poet himself provided some of the new poetry. “Pandadi / पंदादी” or the play of the ball which was a metaphor of life that went up one moment and came down the other was the subject of a poem by Vallthol. Another popular piece was on Mary Magdalene culled from a long eighty verse poem in chaste Malyalam written again by Vallathol.

Amongst Kalamandalam students, the contributions of Kalyanikutty Amma, at an individual level and Kalamandalam Sathyabhama’s at an institutional level are praiseworthy. Sathyabhama got the platform of the Kerala Kalamandalam, where since 1957, until her retirement as its Principal in 1993, she was faculty. Through the Kalamandalam, Sathyabhama reformed the art more aesthetically by giving an

indigenous touch to the hairstyle, adapting more adavus and mudras. She added to the repertoire, but could never break out of the Bharatnatyam margam. Many new varnams were developed under her guidance. Among them were the Todi varnam / तोडी वर्णम “Dhanisamajendra / धनिसमार्जेंद्र”, the varnam in Raga Shankarabharanam / शंकराभारानाम “Manasime Parijatam / मनासिमे परिजातम”, “Sumasayak / सुमसयक” in Kapi and the Dhanyasi Varnam / धन्यासी वर्णम “Ahanta Vanchitaham / अहंता वन्चिताहम”. She also reinforced the Bharatnatyam like margam at the Kerela Kalamandalam, starting with the cholkettu, jattiswaram, varnam, padam, thillana and shloka.

The contra inspiration in Mohiniattam came from a greatly talented some of Kerela, the litterateur and dramatist Kavalam Narayan Panikkar. His work has always been rooted in both the classical and folk traditions of Kerala. His approach was totally different and today as he turns 87, it is spearheaded under the aegis of his institute, the Sopana Institute of Performing Arts, founded in 1965. Sopanam explores the classical theatre of India and the unique regional style of Kerela’s own indigenous music tradition, ‘Sopana sangeetham’. Thus Kavalam’s efforts have been to simultaneously regionalise and classicize the art of Mohiniattam to free it off the stamp of Bharatnatyam and give it its own character. For instance, contrary to the usual practice of using the Carnatic rhythms, he has spearheaded the introduction of Kerela’s own rhythms, as defined and enumerated by Kunjan Nambiar, renowned 18th century poet of Kerela and creator of Othamthullal. Kunjan Nambiar has the distinction of not just creating a new aesthetic but for defying prevailing frameworks of elitism in the arts of Kerela and drawing inspiration from the numerous folk forms of the common people.

The wide range of rhythms that he introduced like Chempata, Ayadi, Marma etc are based on hridaya tala or the rhythms of the heart, which imbue it with a unique regional flavour.

Kavalam Narayan Pannikar's specific journey into Mohiniattam began with Bharati Shivaji. Bharati had been handpicked by Kamla Devi Chattopadhyaya for the project on languishing arts that covered Dhrupad in addition to Mohiniattam. Bharati's long years of having learnt Bharatanatyam, her years of singing for Odissi and learning Odissi with Kelucharan Mahapatra as he was reconstructing the form and creating new items, put her at an advantage for such a process in Mohiniattam. In 1978, Kamladeviji introduced Bharati Shivaji to Kavalam Narayan Panikkar. Panikkar was a master of the literature, music, melodies, talas and the 'deshi' arts of Kerela. Panikkar began working on a new, and what Bharati calls, "an interdisciplinary repertoire for Mohiniattam with her.

Panicker based his repertoire for Mohiniattam on his research into Malayalam literature and Sopana music. According to Bharati Shivaji, "Sopana sangeetham greatly compliments Mohiniyattam, even though Sopana sangeetham isn't very different from Carnatic music. The difference is in the rendering which gives it a very distinct regional flavour. It brings in more Bhava and hence called Bhava geetham". Panikkar's Sopana repertoire consists of Ganpathy. The journey of the opening piece Ganpathy started from the Thyaani. The Thyaani is a homage to a deity, in this piece it is Ganesh, which is part of the Kottipadi seva that is rendered on the steps of the temple. It is accompanied by the edakka, the 'vaitaris' of which intersperse with the short 'sahitya'. Thus, the Sopanam repertoire marks a journey from the outside into the sanctum sanctorum of the temple.

The next item in the Sopanam repertoire is the “Mukhachalam / मुखाचालम” a pure dance piece that is often structured around a garland of traditional Kerala talas. In this journey to the sanctum Sanctorum, the Mukhachalam is like the steps taken towards the main temple premise. With Bharati he worked on the Ashtapadis, as like Odisha, Kerala too has a tradition of singing and dancing Ashtapadis, at the Guruvayoor temple. The style of singing is different. The first ashtapadi they worked on was the Ashtapadi “Chandancharchit Neelakalevar / चंदनचर्चित नीलकलेवर ”. With Bharati, Panikkar also worked on the Jeeva. Jeeva represents the voyage of the devotee towards the sanctum of his ‘Ishtadev / इष्टदेव’, through the steps known as Sopanam. It marks the point of union of the self with the ultimate. The pace grows from the ‘ativilambit / अतिविलम्बित’ to the ‘atidrut / अतिद्रुत’ which in Kerala’s percussion terms is called “progressing towards the needle end of the rhythmic experience. With Bharati Kavalam created “Mohini Purappadu / मोहिनी पुराप्पदु”. The text for this was an extract of the 12th century Dandakam written by Damodar Chakyar. It had Mohini come to the asuras and lure them with the pot of nectar. It included the ‘Kumbha Tala / कुंभा ताल’ and would end with Mohini disappearing.

Inspired by the many ideas that Panikkar had kindled in her mind, Bharati created some independent pieces too. For one she worked with the experts at Guruvayoor / गुरुवायूर to choreograph the entire “Geet Govind” into dance, so that all ashtapadis would have a regional identity. She strung them together in a choreography she called “Devageeta / देवगीता”. She also created “Chandrotsavam /

चंद्रोत्सवं”- the Moon festival, based on the Chambru kavyam “Chandrotsavam”, a 16th century poem of unknown authorship, in Manipravalam. The theme of Medini Vennilavu, the heroine being cursed by her husband the moon, to live an earthly life of devadasi, gave itself very well to treatment in Mohiniattam. Bharati’s independent signature piece of choreography was “Tauriyatrikam” an amalgam of geetam, vadyam and nrutyam.

At that time Panikkar had not created Niram. This was the item that matched the Varnam. It was also the item by which in his design of the devotee it is believed has entered the sanctum sanctorum. Niram too means colour as does the varnam. Here, Niram is an item based on the figure of Kali as drawn on the floor with five kinds of natural and organic powders that reflect the qualities of the Devi. These qualities are encapsulated in the accompanying songs called “Niram Pada”. There after come the Padams that allowed one to experience the divine. Apart from the Padams of Swati Tirunal, the Sopanam repertoire has incorporated many kritis from the abundant Manipravalam literature, and also appropriate and suitable lyrics from Sangham literature like the “Ardhanareeshwara” dance from “Silapadikaram”. Apart from this, the ballads from North Malabar describing the valorous deeds of the heroine Unniarcha, the lullabies and other poems of Iraiyanman Thampi, and his daughter Kutty Kunju Thangachi, as well as the works of Changapuzha Krishna Pillai, famed for his romantic elegy “Ramanan”, written in 1936, are all part of the literary base of Mohiniattam.

Panikkar next worked with Dr. Kanak Rele. Dr. Rele had trained initially in Kathakali and her initiation into Mohiniattam came much later under Kalamandalam Rajalakshmi. A grant from the Sangeet

Natak Akademi and later the Ford Foundation helped her delve deeper into her interest in Mohiniattam and during 1970–71 she travelled extensively in Kerala filming exponents of the dance form such as Kunjukutty Amma, Chinnammu Amma and Kalyanikutty Amma. The project helped acquaint her with the nuances of Mohiniattam and record its traditional and technical styles while also enabling her to evolve a teaching methodology for it. Her study of these artistes and their technique against the backdrop of classical texts like the “Natyashastra”, or Kathakali’s “Hastalakshanadeepika” and Travancore Maharaja Kartika Tirunal “Balarambharatam”, the last mentioned being the text used as the reference point of Mohiniattam, was a significant step in the development of Mohiniattam. At that stage Kanak Rele created some items based on Swati Tirunal’s work including “Bhvayaami” and even a hindi bhajan. She also worked on creating items based on the verses from the Natyashastra like “Ashtanayika” and “Ashtarasa”.

Her meeting in 1982, with Kavalam Narayan Panicker, led to her introduction to Sopana Sangeetham and the creation of choreographic pieces set to Sopana Sangeetam's talas. Apart from a suite of ashtapadis and padams, Panikkar helped her create items like “Kottichedam” based on the verses of “Sillapadikaram”. With his encouragement, Rele worked on ancient poetry that gave birth to “Sharbari Moksham”, and in “Madhumasak” she used excerpts from the first century Satavahan ruler Hala’s “Gatha Saptashati”. She also created items based on the poetry of contemporary poets like Sitakanta Mahapatra on whose poetry is based her work “Kubja”. Other contemporary poets she was inspired by were Ayappa Pannikar and Meenakshi Iyer. Rene has credited Kavalam's compositions as being inspirational for several of her choreographies

that "highlight the trauma of women in society based on women characters in mythology".

Kavalam Narayan Panikkar was not alone in his efforts. Most artistes had felt the need to expand the repertoire of Mohiniattam and were doing it in different ways. Needless to say however that there was a clear divide between the direction of work inspired by Kavalam's perspective and that done by the Kalamandalam group, for the Kalamandalam group never really broke off from the control of Carnatic Music. Some of the other dancers of great seniority who were engaged in a similar effort, hailed from Kalamandalam. One amongst them was Kalamandalam Leelamma, who after concluding her studies in Mohiniattam, Bharatnatyam and Kuchipudi at Kalamandalam, training under Kalamandalam Chandrika, went on to join the institution at the age of eighteen as a teacher. Here she went on to do some innovative work. Under a Fellowship from the Ministry of Culture, Government of India, she worked on the new compositions that were entering Mohiniattam. She created as many as eighty adavus for Mohiniattam. She choreographed about a hundred new items including padams, varnams, poems and dance dramas. Her literary scope contains traditional, classical and modern poets. Some of her choreographies include 'Magdalana Mariyyam' of Vallathole, 'Kalyana Sougandikam' of Kunchan Nambiar, 'Ujjayani' of O. N. V. Kurup and 'Mambazam' of Vylapilli Sreedhara Menon and 'Veena poovu' of Kumaran Asan.

Similarly, Kalamandalam Kshemavathy, disciple of Chinnammu Amma and Kalamandalam Satyabhama, went on to add new adavus and new literary pieces. She composed new pieces in Mohiniattam using the Sanskrit lyrics of Adi Shankara's "Saundarya Lahiri" and Melpathur Narayana Bhattathri's "Narayaneeyam". "Narayaneeyam"

is a medieval Sanskrit text, comprising a summary, in poetic form of the Bhagwat Puran. It was composed in 1586, but appeared in print only after more than 250 years. Kshemavathy also used the poetry of “Kuchelavrittam” written by Chengannur Muringoor Matthom Sankaran Potty in the 20th Century, as well as Cherrussery’s “Krishnagatham”. Cherusseri Namboothiri (1375 to 1475 AD) is the author of Krishna Gatha, a poem which is used in India for daily recitation as an act of worship of Krishna during the Malayalam month of Chingam (August - September), by the devout in Kerela. Her work has been greatly appreciated for its spirituality and deeply internalised strengths.

Another significant figure on the stage of Mohiniattam is Prof. Leela Omcherry, scholar and musicologist par excellence. She challenged the idea that javalis were not part of Mohiniattam’s repertoire, and drew from Kutty Kunju Thangachi’s writings the song “Kaamakomalakara chettume tamsam vina” a ragamalika composition in Aditala which has been danced by her daughter Deepti Omcherry Bhalla as a Javali.

Thus, Mohiniattam, that in the years immediately after independence, in fact well into the 1970s had such a small repertoire that it could not sustain a full evening’s concert. Consequently, was reduced to just a closing item or as a filler in an evening of another dance form like Bharatanatyam, Kuchipudi or Odissi. Some of the dancers who included a Mohiniattam segment as a filler, were dancers like Indrani Rahman, grew its repertoire slowly but surely. One of the instigators for the growth in the repertoire of Mohiniattam, is something that is not mentioned in most books. This is the entire culture of Youth festivals in Kerela. A lot of items are being produced in Mohiniattam because of the Youth festivals. Most

of them are around themes from the epics. The main reason for this is that in the Youth Festivals no introduction is allowed and because the themes from the epics are familiar to all, there is no problem and people easily follow the subject of the dance. Sometimes winning items at a Youth Festival become trend setters and then spawn imitators and different versions. Among the most common pieces are the varnam “Bhavayamee Raghurama” and the padavarbham “Pannagendra shyayanam Shri Padmanabhan”

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