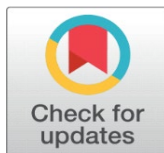


KATHA KEERTHAN, AS AN ART AND BEYOND...

Dr. Bharathi Devi. P¹

¹Associate Professor of Kannada, GFGC, Holehonnuru-577227



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ABSTRACT

Katha Keerthan is a popular performing art that is widely recognized among people. This art form, known as Katha Keerthan, is actively promoting religious thoughts and striving to unite people throughout India. This is especially true in the southern part of India. Medieval India used this art, initially a medium for the praise of God and later for the propagation of religious ideas, to revive religion. It is used in modern India to promote government schemes and raise public awareness about various issues. The use of art as a vehicle for various ideas other than religious premises has faced strong opposition. There has been a significant amount of serious thought towards the revival of art. The present article tries to examine all these aspects through a historical lens.

In India, a country known for its diverse cultures, art is similarly characterized by its multidimensional nature. Regionally and socially, the various art forms appear before us in a wide variety of backgrounds and genres. It is important to note that many of the art forms we see around us are situated inside a religious framework. Ancient forms of art such as Yakshagana, Kathakeertana, Bhajan, and Classical Music have long served as mediums for conveying philosophical and religious teachings. We cannot claim any art form to be pure. Even when it proclaims its purity, nonetheless it adheres to a certain ideology. Furthermore, it is common within our community for art to be utilized as a means of conveying ideas that extend beyond the mere enjoyment and consciousness-raising that art typically offers. Prior to making a judgment on the appropriateness of employing art as a means of communication, it is necessary to thoroughly examine the underlying reasons behind the way it is used. Furthermore, it is important to assess the potential of Katha Keerthan as an artistic expression beyond its role as a mere medium for specific messages. In the present article an attempt has been made to examine the popular storytelling form in the south of India, Katha Keerthan and how it became the voice of society's aspirations and ideas at different times.

Katha Keerthan is an art form that originated and evolved within the community. Katha Keerthan has spread among communities as a part of the Bhagavata sect, a stream of Bhakti tradition, a messenger of religious ideas, and the pulse of the people. The integration of narrative, music, and philosophy in this work is highly appealing to a diverse audience and effectively communicates the intended message.

It is for this reason that it is often referred to as 'solo theatre'. Such a fascinating genre with regional features can be found all over India, especially in the southern part. It is known by many names such as Kathakirtana, Sankirtana, Abhangasankirtana, Katha Kalakshepa, Harikatha and Shivakatha. Additionally, it is evident how religious institutions like temples and religious communities have supported this art form over time. It's remarkable to observe how, despite its religious roots, this art evolved over time to carry a variety of themes beyond of the purview of religion.

With a few exceptions, like Yakshagana, most forms of art no longer have the large followings they once did. It is interesting to note that both the social and economic factors have played an important role. Dances and orchestras have taken the role of the artistic performances at fairs, festivals, and other special occasions. Television has become a ubiquitous part of our day to day life. In addition to the obvious change, it's crucial to recognize the growth underwent by various forms of arts and the method by which they are appropriated to suit the demands of various communities. Not only the forms of arts are being utilized to express the demands of the modern world, but we also need to be aware of the risk that they are used to propagate sectarian agendas. Here, I have made an attempt to trace the transition underwent by Katha Keerthan over the years.

RELIGIOUS GOAL

According to the research made in Katha Keerthan so far, it began as an effort to disseminate religious themes and unite people. People regard Narada as the pioneer of Katha Keerthan.ⁱ Though it evolved over time to reflect various eras, the Bhagavata tradition remains its foundation. It underwent yet another remodeling during the Bhakti movement in medieval India. Maharashtra's saints, such as Namdev Tukaram and Dnyaneshwar, attempted to bring community together via Katha Keerthan. Purandaradasa is known as the 'Keerthanacharya of Karnataka',ⁱⁱ while Kanakadasa is also known to have traveled through villages and preached philosophy. V. Lakshmandas Velankar, a renowned kirtanist, acknowledges that storytelling's primary goals are dharma-prasar and lok-shikshan. Lokmanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak stated in the Kirtan Sammelan, "The aim of the Keertan is to show the path of God's attainment to the mind immersed in the samsara."ⁱⁱⁱ

SECTARIAN GOAL

In medieval India Katha Keerthan was aimed to raise religious consciousness and bring people together in addition to addressing religious subjects. It is well known that saints like Samarth Ramdas used Katha Keerthan to spread the Hindu faith during the period of Islamic conquest. The task of bringing everyone together, irrespective of race or class, started in response to this invading danger. In light of this, rigid religious regulations were relaxed.

STRENGTHENING THE CURRENT SOCIAL SYSTEM:

The foundation of our social system is its hierarchical and unequal structure. People from diverse social, economic, and religious backgrounds do not have equal opportunity in these domains. In this case, Bhaktimarg has provided a chance for people of various castes, classes, and genders to come together in the name of Sankirtan. It stated that spiritually all are equal. Thus, it attempted to unite people based on religion on a larger scale, but in other domains, it served to uphold ingrained hierarchies. The notion of karma is asserted in numerous Kathakirtan songs and stories. Women are also subjugated in the guise of tradition, which is concealed in a variety of discourses.

NATIONALISTIC AGENDA

With time, we have been considering art as a voice for social and political issues. During the height of the freedom movement, a large number of Haridasas were active in raising public awareness of the British rule through Katha Keerthan. It is especially the case in Karnataka. There have been incidents of people burning foreign clothes and goods in the Holi fire motivated by the words of Sri Jayaramacharya Koppal's the renowned Keerthanakara.^{iv} In response to Haridasas's preaching, both men and women have been known to contribute money and jewelry to the independence campaign. Belur Kesavadas, an eminent artist, was also banished from Madikeri because of his controversial remarks in the light of India's freedom fight against the British. Katha Keerthan's overarching goal of unification has evolved to serve nationalist objectives.

RAISING AWARENESS

Following independence, governments which saw the potential of this artistic medium used it extensively to inform the public about their new policies. Instead of telling the story of God, this structure of songs and stories featured detail of government programs and information aimed at creating awareness. This was the method used for numerous initiatives, including literacy campaigns, national savings plans, development projects, and five-year plans. Scholars have observed these kinds of phenomena throughout India, particularly in Maharashtra. When Katha Keerthan was used to spread modern viewpoints through this medium, it had to face strong criticism for departing from its original religious intent. A Round Table Conference to revive Katha Keerthan's art was convened in Bangalore in 1983.^v It is acknowledged that there has been discussion to elevate this medium as an art instead merely spreading messages.

MODERN EXPANSIONS

Katha Keerthan's artistic design, which includes song narratives, is no longer limited to telling religious stories. In Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra, it has seen its expansion incorporating social commentaries. In Maharashtra, 'Ambedkar Jalsa', which narrates the life story of Ambedkar, appears captivating together with the song, story, and philosophy. In some places, the stories of Swami Vivekananda and Ramakrishna Paramhansa have been incorporated into this design. On the one hand, we see such expansions, and on the other, we also witness the corporatization of the arts. Art has expanded and changed significantly as a result of being presented in accordance with market regulations and tailored to today's needs. The narrative was trimmed or shortened to meet the requirements of the cassette or CD. The most alarming development, above and beyond all of this, is thrusting communal objectives into the public sphere via artistic expression. People are using concepts like nation, religion, and devotion to propagate divisive ideas. This also holds true for other artistic mediums.

Being able to engage a broad group audience is one of Katha Keerthan's greatest strength. Those that perform Harikatha and the related arts show the representation of all communities, although not in a significant amount. They speak to the people using music that is similar to folk melodies and their own language. It is necessary to consider the potential of keeping these arts alive and using them to propagate public opinion.

The present difficulty lies in bringing this art form to life among the masses, despite the disagreement on numerous concepts within it. While thinking rationally, we need to think about how we can connect people to the arts without losing sight of their manifold possibilities. There are many examples of this already. Numerous organizations have made significant efforts in this regard. The way Maharashtra's Kabir Kala Manch has touched the people in a wide and effective way through songs, plays, and narrations is commendable. There are many examples of theater using forms like Harikatha, Yakshagana, Baul, Pandavani, etc. in their performances. We can initiate new experiments by adhering to the storytelling design. It will be a great achievement in the way of building pro-people thinking and movement.

The formation of Katha Kirtan Parishad and Sangeet Nritya Academy aims to revive arts such as Katha Keerthan. Other organizations must also embrace this initiative, surpassing the institutional restraints. We need to approach this initiative with a democratic mindset, without forgetting the social reality, rather than solely focusing on fostering such arts within the religious sphere. This is important from the viewpoint of the viability of the arts, its progress, and the propagation of pro-people ideas.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None

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None

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