

The Role Of Sopana Sangeetham And Ashtapadi In The Development Of Kathakali Music

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Abstract

Though Kerala has long, rich and various traditions for folk music, but there is only one classical music tradition for Kerala. As a result of Bhakti movement *GitaGovinda* came to Kerala around 12th century AD. *Gita govindam* was well accepted and appreciated by Kerala people. Still today also it is a tradition and custom to sing *GitaGovindam* in the Krishna temples of Kerala. *GitaGovindam* is known as Ashtapadi at Kerala. The term Ashtapadi consists the meaning of eight lines. The Musician of *Gita Govindam* stands near the stone steps leads towards the Deity. The stone steps are known as Sopana, in both Sanskrit and Malayalam. Therefore the singing style of *Gita Govindam* became popular as Sopana Sangitam.

Key words: Folk Music, Classical music tradition, Git Govinda, Ashtapadi, Sopana Sangeetham

1.Introduction

Kerala is widely recognized for its cultural diversity and for the coexistence of numerous folk-art forms that are closely linked to the everyday life, rituals, and seasonal festivals of its people. These folk music traditions, though varied in form and function, reflect the social, spiritual, and occupational realities of the region. However, in contrast to this plurality of folk expressions, Kerala developed a single, distinct classical music tradition rooted in temple worship and devotional practices. This classical tradition is fundamentally different from the mainstream Carnatic system, though it shares certain musical principles with it.

The emergence of this classical tradition can be directly associated with the Bhakti movement, which emphasized personal devotion to God through music, poetry, and ritual performance. It was during this period, around the 12th century AD, that Jayadeva's *Gīta Govinda* entered Kerala. The poetic and musical beauty of this work, combined with its intense devotional appeal, ensured its wide acceptance among the people of Kerala. Over time, the singing of *Gīta Govinda* became institutionalized within temple rituals, especially in Krishna temples, where it continues to be performed as part of daily worship.

In Kerala, *Gīta Govinda* came to be known as Ashtapadi, a term that signifies its poetic structure of eight-line verses. The method and location of its performance are equally significant. The musician traditionally stands near the stone steps that lead to the deity, known as Sopana. This spatial arrangement, combined with the contemplative and restrained musical style, gave rise to what is now called Sopana Sangeetham. This temple-based musical tradition later provided the foundational aesthetic and musical principles for Kathakali music.

2.Statement of the Problem

Kathakali music owes its origin and classical identity largely to Sopana Sangeetham and the Ashtapadi tradition. However, in the course of its historical development, Kathakali music has been influenced by various external musical systems, particularly Carnatic and, more recently, Hindustani music. These influences have led to noticeable changes in raga usage, vocal technique, and overall musical presentation. While such changes have enhanced the melodic appeal of Kathakali music for contemporary audiences, they have also raised concerns among scholars and practitioners regarding the dilution of its original aesthetic purpose.

The central issue addressed in this study is the gradual shift away from the traditional concept of Abhinaya Sangeeth, where music functions primarily as a support system for dramatic expression rather than as an independent musical entity. Understanding the role played by Sopana Sangeetham and Ashtapadi in shaping the original structure of Kathakali music is therefore essential for evaluating both continuity and change within the tradition. This research seeks to address this problem by examining the historical, musical, and performative links between Sopana Sangeetham, Ashtapadi, and Kathakali music.

3.Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this study is to examine the historical and cultural origins of Sopana Sangeetham and to understand its role as Kerala's classical music tradition. The study also aims to analyze the significance of Ashtapadi, particularly Jayadeva's Gīta Govinda, in shaping the devotional and musical landscape of Kerala. Another important objective is to trace the influence of Sopana Sangeetham on the development of Kathakali music and to explore how this influence manifests in vocal style, raga selection, rhythmic structure, and performance practice. In addition, the study seeks to document the role of musicians, instruments, and musical conventions in Kathakali and to highlight their contribution to the expressive and dramatic dimensions of the art form.

4.Research Methodology

The present research adopts a descriptive and analytical methodology, which is particularly suited to studies in the field of performing arts. The research is grounded in the study of primary literary sources such as Jayadeva's Gīta Govinda and classical Kathakali Attakathas, along with secondary scholarly writings on Sopana Sangeetham and Kathakali music. Analytical observation of live Kathakali performances and temple-based Sopana singing traditions forms a crucial part of the methodology.

In addition to textual and performance analysis, the study draws upon experiential knowledge gained through engagement with practitioners and performance contexts. Musical elements such as raga structure, tala patterns, vocal techniques, and instrumental accompaniment are examined in relation to their dramatic function. This integrated methodological approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of Kathakali music as a living tradition rooted in historical practice yet responsive to changing cultural contexts.

5.Scope of the Study

The scope of this study is limited to the musical aspects of Sopana Sangeetham, Ashtapadi, and Kathakali music traditions of Kerala. The discussion focuses on vocal music, raga systems, rhythmic organization, musical instruments, and performance conventions. While Kathakali is a composite art form involving dance, drama, costume, and make-up, these aspects are addressed only insofar as they relate directly to musical expression and abhinaya. A detailed choreographic or visual analysis is beyond the scope of the present study.

6.Origin of Sopana Sangeetham and Ashtapadi

Sopana Sangeetham represents the earliest classical music tradition of Kerala and is closely associated with temple worship. It evolved primarily through the singing of Jayadeva's Gīta Govinda in Krishna temples. The term Sopana refers to the stone steps leading to the sanctum sanctorum, and the physical positioning of the singer at these steps is symbolically significant, emphasizing humility, devotion, and proximity to the divine. The Sopana singer typically accompanies the vocal rendition with the Edakka, an instrument capable of producing subtle melodic variations.

Music serves as the fundamental life force of Kathakali, nourishing both its dance and dramatic components. The Attakathas, or Kathakali librettos, are composed with continuous musical structure, reflecting the deep integration of music and narrative. Although Kathakali music exhibits certain distinctive features in its application, it remains firmly rooted in classical musical principles and shares common ground with Carnatic music. Its primary objective, however, is not musical elaboration but the enhancement of expressive and sattvika acting.

7.Development of Kathakali Music

The formal development of Kathakali music can be traced to the 16th century, when Kerala Varma Raja of Kottarakkara composed a series of dance-dramas based on the Ramayana. This art form, initially known as Ramanattam, later evolved into Kathakali. In composing the music for these works, Kottarakkara Thampuran drew heavily upon the stylistic and aesthetic principles of Ashtapadi and Sopana Sangeetham. As a result, Kathakali music emerged as the second classical music tradition of Kerala.

In more recent times, Kathakali music has shown openness to external influences. Younger singers have introduced certain Hindustani ragas, such as Desh, into the Kathakali repertoire. While these innovations have been appreciated by audiences, they also raise important questions regarding the preservation of traditional aesthetics and performance values.

8.Structure and Function of Kathakali Music

Kathakali vocal music is characterized by a distinctive style that prioritizes dramatic expression over melodic ornamentation. Music forms the backbone of Kathakali, sustaining both dance and drama. The singer functions as the voice of the character, articulating emotions such as anger, sorrow, heroism, and compassion through controlled modulation of pitch, tone, and voice quality. Often, multiple emotions must be conveyed within the framework of a single raga, requiring exceptional expressive skill.

In performance, two singers participate simultaneously. The main singer, known as the Ponnani, maintains rhythm using the Chengila and exercises overall control over the tempo and progression of the performance. The assistant singer, or Shankidi, supports the Ponnani and plays the Elathalam. Though secondary in designation, the Shankidi plays an essential role in maintaining rhythmic stability and vocal continuity.

9.Musical Instruments in Kathakali

Musical instruments play a crucial role in animating the movements and emotional expressions of Kathakali performers. The principal instruments used include Chenda, Maddalam, Chengila, Elathalam, and Edakka. Chenda is the most prominent percussion instrument and is capable of producing both thunderous and delicate sounds, making it suitable for a wide range of dramatic situations. Maddalam provides deep resonance and rhythmic strength, while Chengila and Elathalam establish and maintain

tempo. Edakka, with its soft and melodious tonal quality, is particularly associated with the portrayal of female characters.

10.Raga, Tala, and Musical Features

Kathakali music employs more than fifty ragas, many of which correspond to those used in Carnatic music, though often under different names. In Kathakali, ragas are not vehicles for musical improvisation but are carefully selected to evoke specific emotions, times, and dramatic contexts. Rhythm is maintained through syllabic calculation rather than hand gestures, ensuring close coordination with percussion instruments. The tempos known as chaukkam, madhyam, and murukiya kaalam are employed according to narrative and emotional requirements.

11.Attakatha Literature and Dandakam

Kathakali Attakatha literature consists of Sanskrit verses, Manipravalam, and mixed-language compositions. The verses describe characters and situations, while the padas are sung during performance. A distinctive literary feature of Kathakali is the Dandakam, which narrates a sequence of events either behind the curtain or on stage. Dandakams are recited in specific ragas and rhythmic patterns that enhance narrative continuity and dramatic intensity.

12.Conclusion

Kathakali music is deeply rooted in the traditions of Sopana Sangeetham and Ashtapadi, which together form the classical musical foundation of Kerala. Music continues to function as the life force of Kathakali, sustaining its dramatic, emotional, and aesthetic dimensions. Despite the influence of modern musical trends, the traditional framework remains essential for preserving the classical identity and expressive power of Kathakali music. Mastery of this tradition demands extensive knowledge and rigorous training, as evidenced by legendary singers who memorized dozens of Attakathas. The continued study and practice of Sopana Sangeetham and Ashtapadi are therefore vital for the preservation and enrichment of Kathakali music.

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