SOCIAL ANALYSIS OF THE ORIGIN OF FOLK ARTS IN KERALA

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Abstract

In ancient times art was never linked to the concept of beauty but associated with work implements as magical instruments. It is thus intimately connected with human life and folk arts especially is a manifestation of this phenomenon. Folk art was considered as the crystallization of the wisdom acquired by a primitive race that simultaneously reflects their social environment and emotional ties. Folk art aims at instant communication and as it speaks of social themes, the common man finds it easy to identify himself with it. Besides folk art is imbibed almost unconsciously, it does not demand a disciplined, systematic approach or constant practice.

Key words: Folklore, Folk art, theatre, rituals, theyyam

Primitive man’s knowledge of nature was limited. He had to find a way to defend himself against ferocious animals, thunder bolt, rain and other undefined calamities of nature. In course of time, he found that he could interfere with natural phenomena with the help of sympathetic magic. He began to depend on rituals for success in hunting, cultivation of crops and acquiring the basic needs of day to day life. These rituals, involving certain dances and utterance of vague sounds, became diffused during the Neolithic period, when agriculture began to make progress. Spring festivals as well as harvest festivals were celebrated. All this was closely associated with his social life.

Prof. Radcliffe-Brown argues that “rites are symbolic representations of certain sentiments and every life has its own inner meaning. However, it is difficult to believe than rituals had any relation with religion in olden times. Nor did they originate as art”. Art and labour are inextricably linked to each other. Art is as old as human society because art objects are in reality, natural products that get transmuted through human labour. Infact in ancient times art was never linked to the concept of beauty but associated with work implements as magical instruments. It is thus intimately connected with human life and folk arts especially is a manifestation of this phenomenon.
As is evident there can be no consensus regarding the exact interpretation of word ‘folklore’. And because folklore differ according to the geographical and cultural peculiarities of the lands where they are born. Western theories used to analyze or categorize them will hardly do justice, to their variety. The folklore of Kerala, for instance is rich, varied and greatly different from its western counter parts in form as well as presentation. Folk art can be described as the simple art form of the common man. He is its creator and at one time was its sole consumer.

Folk arts have always had an organic link with the community life of the prevalent age. Most of them originate from rituals that are part of magical and religious rites undertaken by man to overcome crises, gather courage and confidence and ward off despair. The ‘potato dance’ of the Moaris, is an excellent instance of this. At one time, the inhabitants of the Polynesian island were under threat of losing their potato crops due to stormy winds. In order to stall it, a group of women wearing loose garments danced in the fields. The artificial wind generated by their quick steps, they believed was, the storm wind and this ritual of imitative magic would prevent natural catastrophes. Similarly, villagers in kerala danced with the taikkolams of Bhagavathi and vasoormala in a bid to dispel small pox and reach succor to the patients and give courage to their relatives as well. In Kerala, folk arts flourished under the shadow of feudalism. It attempted to raise voice against the social and economic inequalities of the time.

As an art form, rituals have three components as myth, rituals and theatre, Whereas the basic structure of each of these does not change alternations and improvisations have always been accommodated. For instance, the singers of the myth have the freedom to delete certain sections, sometimes create new myths or connect the existing ones with contemporary social life. Similarly it is possible to reduce the duration of the ritual. For instance, theyyattom in Kerala requires toddy as one of its ritual objects. At one time when prohibition came into force, toddy was replaced with tender coconut water. Over the years. the theatre components has also undergone many change. The rituals arts like theyyam, mudiyettie and padayani now accommodate elaborate make-up, colourful costumes detailed angikabhinaya, acrobatic displays etc. The evolution of rituals arts into performing arts was gradual.

The folk arts of kerala can be broadly classified under two heads ritualistic and non ritualistic. Ritualistic folk art can be further divided into two as devotional and magical. Devotional folk arts are performed to propitiate a particular God or Goddess. Theyyam, thira, pooramthira, kanyarkali, kummati, etc are some of them. Forms like panappattu and thottampattu are composed in the form of songs. In folk ki,
margamkali dappumuttukkali etc, the ritualistic element is not very strong. Magical folk arts seek to win general prosperity for a community or exercise evil spirits or to beget children. Gandharvas and nagas are worshipped inorder to win these favours. The magical folk arts include pambinthullal, poopadathullal, Kollamthullal, malayankettu, etc. Non -ritualistic folk arts can be divided into theatre arts, painting, architecture, sculpture, handicraft, folk music etc. Earlier, the ritual art was never performed before an audience. The performers were not treated as artists either, rather they were looked upon as deities.

References:


11. Theyyam - is the most colourful and spectacular ritual theatre form of kerala. The meaning of the word theyyam is Deivam ie)God.

12. Theyyattom means the dance of God.