S P O T L I G H T

MaaRgamkaLi: Genre and group identity through the ages

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The Kerala Christian performance tradition presupposes the settlement of Christianity itself as a religious system followed by a distinct group of people who took it up as their faith. During the early period of the advent of Christianity, the new believers, in order to propagate and ensure the community’s sustenance in the faith were prompted to ‘Christianise’ certain ritual performances connected with the rites of passage. Of all the rites of passages, the early Christian communities considered marriage celebrations as the most important component in their performance tradition.

Marriage being an important event not only to the family in which it is celebrated but also to the community itself, much of the community’s progress and growth depended on matrimonial relations. Therefore the Christian community made it a point to make marriage celebration an important custom to reveal their identity as a group by performing certain songs which narrated their faith, dictums, and idioms in a didactic fashion. The native customs of the celebration of marriage is strategically manipulated to incorporate the Christian ideology in their performing traditions. The early Kerala Christian performed rituals by paaTTu tradition and in the course of enactments of paaTTu tradition, they also resorted to dancing during the celebrations. The earliest form of the dancing tradition involves circular movements while singing in gathering. Circular dance form reflects the organisational capability of the community on the one hand and the size of the community itself on the other. Usually when the community is small, it develops a mode of communication which is closed and akin to the community itself. The community members are capable of coding and decoding the messages sent through songs or verbal expressions. PaLLippaaTTu, maaRgamkaLi, vaTT akaLi were some of those performing traditions of the early Christian community. The maaRgamkaLi being very much semi-theatrical is the best example for the band level organisation of the early Christian community.

maaRgamkaLi is one of the ancient semi-theatrical round dance (group dance) forms of Kerala practised by Syrian Christians in general and Knaanaaya Christians in particular. This round dance form, beautifully moulds religion, history, culture, customs, faith and art together into one form. Traditionally maaRgamkaLi includes vaTT akaLi (group in circle or round dance) performed for a particular ballad called maaRgamkaLippaaTTu (maaRgamkaLi song) by men-folk. This text comprises fourteen padams (stanzas) which narrate the life and work of St. Thomas in Kerala. The etymological meaning of the term maaRgamkaLi itself suggests its historical antiquity and the Christian leanings. The literal translation of the word maaRgam is ‘way’ or ‘path’, kaLi means ‘dance’. In the olden days conversion to Islam and Christianity was called maaRgamkooTuka or joining the way. Those who embraced a new faith were called maaRgakkar or maaRgwasikaLi (converts) or in other words those who joined the new way’. This term was popular till recent times. But among Christians in Kerala, the word maaRgam got more in depth religious sense. The paaTTu tradition of St. Thomas Christians equates the word maaRgam with the religion of Christ, the way of Christ or those who practised Christian faith. In a way the early Kerala Christians who were in the way of Jesus Christ was known as St. Thomas Christians and the dance performed by them was called maaRgamkaLi. The song based on which this dance was performed was maaRgamkaLippaaTTu. It is difficult to fix the period of the origin of this dance form. There are a number of controversies regarding the authorship of the paaTTukaL and the legendary sources. Based on the linguistic analysis scholars always argue over the exact time period of its origin.

However, the present paper ascertains the fact the maaRgamkaLi is certain to have been in practice long before the advent of Portuguese in Kerala. Even though the difficulty of studying the early history of Christianity in Kerala is increased by the fact that such sources for the history of Christianity in the region down to the modern times were burned into ashes after the synod of Diamper in 1599. Therefore the Malabar Church has been left without authoritative documentation for the history of its ancient past. Our information concerning the early history of this Church must be derived from Syria and Green sources with authors who had no particular interest in India, and therefore, who provide us with only scattered and disconnected fragment of evidence. So in order to reconstruct the history of the past, one has to rely upon the references and early accounts of the Western writers. Perter Maffe’s (1558) account on the popularity of songs and dances narrates the adventures of St. Thomas during the early days of Portuguese arrival. The reference made by a Jesuit priest Coria Amandar (1564) about the early Christian pilgrimage and procession to Malyankara on every November twenty-first, to commemorate the day of Marthomas arrival on the Kerala soil, with singing songs about Marthoma. The documented evidence of the Gouvea’s description about the dance form performed by a group of young men at Angamali in order to entertain Arch bishop Menezes and Gouvea’s explanations regarding the salient features of the performance, like its beginning, with the performers drawing a cross sign on their forehead by
singing a prayer and the following song which narrates the episodes of the life of St. Thomas directly relate this with an early form of maaRgamkaLi. Moreover the decrees of Diamper (1599) which explicitly abandoning some of the heathen practices of the then Christians and the participation in the non-Christian festivities, implicitly suggests the existence of an active performance tradition. Apart from that the famous granite cross of the Kaduthuruthy Valiapalli (which was completed in 1594 AD) with a basement decorated with carved sculptures (at the left side, facing the church) resembling round dance forms such as maaRgamkaLi and ParicamuttukaLi indicates the existence of these forms in the pre-Diamper era.

On the other hand according to some of the veteran performers of this tradition, maaRgamkaLi was performed by those people who came to India with Thomas of Cana. This hypothesis could hold because the song maaRgamkaLi itself speaks for the existence of this art form among the people (in maaRgam). Especially the first stanza of the text itself indicates the immigration of the Kwaanaaya Christians; their colonisation under the aegis of Thomas of cana and Bishop Joseph of Ouraha (Edassa) and their joyful wish is to hold together for ever. Another reason was the prominent existence of dance in various spheres of the life of the people in India. Moreover, the linguistic features, the structural affinities and the performance contexts of this art form clearly show the harmonious co-existence of the Hindu and Christian religions in the pre-Portuguese period as in the case of Kerala church architecture of the pre-Diamper era. This mellifluous blend of native performance which affirms an antiquity and preserves all the varied elements of a rich cultural heritage proclaims the identity of the early Kerala Christians as ‘Christians in religion, that too, apostolic in origin, oriental (Syrian) in liturgy, yet thoroughly Indian (Malayalee) in culture’.

The theme and the song text of maaRgamkaLi play an important role in understanding the significance of this semi-theatrical form. The source of the theme is based on the first, second and thirteenth acts of an apocryphal work called Acta Thomae written by Burdusan of Edessa Ouraha in the third century. Apart from this, Jacob Velliyan puts forward ‘Homilies of Mr. Jacob’, which include the writings of the Syrian scholar Mr. Jacob of Sergu in the sixth century as another work which might have influenced the contents, especially the seventh stanza of the present maaRgamkaLippaadTiu’. The text is based on St. Thomas, the great Apostle of Jesus Christ who is said to have come to India in 52 AD. In the text of maaRgamkaLi there is an elaborate description of his arrival, work, relation with the local people, difficulties and problems and finally his persecution and end have been incorporated in the fourteen stanza (padams) of the song. The song which begins with a cuvaTu (probably the Chola king of Mylapore) and the sending of his minister Avan, to bring in a master architect, later the bringing in of St. Thomas, the delight of the king on seeing a fine drawing by the apostle, the collection of innumerable materials for building, St. Thomas going away on Gospel work to Kerala and then to Malacca and China, imprisoning of the holy man on his return by the irate king, the ailment and apparent death of the heir (kings brother), his soul being taken by Angels to heaven where it beholds the fair mansion prepared for ccoZan, the soul’s miraculous return to the flesh before cremation and the re-born brother telling the king of the good tidings, the conversion of the royal family and the rapid progress of Christianity with the multitude of followers, the-lancing of the saint by the Ebrins who are the priests of the temple and in the concluding stanza the angels are hastened into the scene, and they carry his holy spirit to the white throne of God and the body of Chinna Mala, (now called as Little Mount). The song throws light into the historical, geographical and socio-political life of the people of Kerala in those times.

The stanzas of maaRgamkaLi is in separate pieces of dance choreography. These fourteen stanzas are sung during the performance by mixing different kinds of kaalasam. The kaalasams suggest the end of a particular stanza. Like the other round dance traditions of Hindus, the maaRgamkaLi also have basic steps (cuvaTu). Moreover, the basic choreography is developed around the circle formation. The lamp in the centre is kept as the connecting point for all the dancers. They never show their back to the lamp, even at the leaping positions they do it facing the lamp. In the early days this round dance performance usually took place during the
celebrations of marriage and Church festivals. Mostly the venue of this performance was in the courtyard of the Church or in the panTalil of wedding party. In the centre of the performing place the traditional lamp (nilaviLakku) with twelve wicks were placed on a stool or a raised level. The aasan comes forward to light the lamp the stands by the side of the burning lamp. After this, each dancer comes forward, touches the flame and touches his own chest and forehead with the same hand. Then he goes down and touches the feet of the aasan. The aasan recites the lines and the disciples repeat the same in chorus. Then they start clapping the hands together and the different patterns of circular movements continue. Each piece of dance ends with kaalasam and at the end of the performance mankaLam comes, which is usually sung by standing in folded hands around the lit lamp. The whole performance involves devotional spirit.

This maaRgamkaLi performance structure has a religious interpretation. That is, in the performance there are only twelve performers denoting the twelve Apostles of Christ. The flame having twelve wicks also spells out the same idea. The aasan is to be considered as the representative of Christ. The lamp lit in the centre is like a pivot holding the twelve together and the twelve performers dance in the circle drawing strength from Jesus, the lamp.

It is said that the lyrics originally might have been composed in Syriac and later translated into Malayalam. St. Thomas Christian’s use of Syriac as their early liturgical language and the present existence of a number of Syriac liturgical words and the musical affinity of maaRgamkaLippaaTTu with the Syrian liturgical chanting strengthen the above point of view. But the early Christian’s affinity and adaptability of the local culture and customs argue for the early composition of the text in the native language. Moreover the songs were written in Dravidian metrical scheme. As Jacob Velliyian opines, the music of maaRgamkaLi is basically in Dravidian tunes with a touch of syrian chants. The initial and concluding invocations for divine help also suggest its close resemblance to vedic chants. The dress used for the maaRgamkaLi is very simple. In olden days the men had only two white pieces of clothes on their body. (1) muNTu is a long piece of white cloth tied around the waist. They tie it in such away that inspite of vigorous and fast movements it remains as if it is a stitched costume, (2) tooRttu is a long white towel tied to their head.

The disparity between the present condition of this form and the early days leads one to assume three important phases in the history of maaRgamkaLi. The first phase was the pre-Diamper one in which this semi-theatrical form was performed by the St. Thomas Christians during special occasions. That time the sword and shield dance was a part of it. Later synod of Diamper curbed and suppressed this native form. During the last seventeenth century, due to the efforts of a Knaanaaya priest Itti Thomman Kathanar, the textual part of this form got certain upliftment and care.

The maaRgamkaLippaaTTu might have been edited and refashioned into the present fourteen stanza structure during this time. However, till the fag end of the nineteenth century the art form was not very much in practice even though it did exist here and there. But at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of twentieth century as the veteran aasans assert, the form got popularity. Some of the structural changes took place then. Masters such as Kalarikkal Unni aasan, Indumoottil Kocheppu aasan, Indumoottil Kutto aasan were some of them who were responsible for this change and upheaval. By this time puttan Purikkal Uthuppu Lukose compiled and published maaRgamkaLippaaTTu in 1910. In this second phase the Knaanaaya Christian community acquired this form as their own tradition and heritage. Then again it had a set-back and during the 1950’s to 1970’s it was on the verge of becoming extinct. But in the late 70’s once again the Knaanaaya Christians of Kottayam diocese took the initiative to revive and popularise this form. This third phase resulted in the form acquiring a place in the competitive section of the youth festival and in the cultural festivals as a mark of Thoma Christian identity.

During these phases the form has gone through certain major transformations. Some of them are: The shift of performance context from the marriage rituals to the competitive venues of the youth festivals, where the dance is performed on the stage by twelve women clad in traditional Christian costume, around a lit (nilaviLakku) for a stipulated time. The additions like the red waist belt and the use of sleeveless baniyans were added to the costume of male performers. The inclusion of vanccippaTTu music into the format of maaRgamkaLippaaTTu and the removal of aasan from the centre are some of the major changes that occurred due to socio-political reasons. Thus, the present status shows a transformation and continuity.

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8. Velliyian, Madhugeethi, 79.
In every folk society their beliefs and superstitions, behavioral approaches, social and religious ceremonies, creations like art – literature – performing arts etc., even kinship relations are to a great extent directed by religious doctrines. Moreover, many folkloric religious sects have emerged to follow only specific religious ideas and to observe certain worshipping processes. In Indo-Bengali context, existence of many such religious sects are found. Most of these minor religious sects arose in post-Chaitanya period along with the anti-Brahmin religious movement. Of them Kartabhaja deserves special mention. It is not only a religious sect, it also represents mass awakening of dialectical reality of that particular social context (Chattopadhyay, 1984).

The spiritual thoughts and social expressions of Kartabhajas are manifested in their religious fairs and festivals which take place in various places throughout Bengal. The biggest annual festival of this community takes place at Ghoshpara, the place which is associated with the holy memory of Aaul Chand, the founder of this religious sect. This place is situated at the southern end of Nadia district of West Bengal, adjacent to the river Ganga. This fair bears a rich heritage of more than two hundred years. Besides its religious significance to the people of a particular sect, it also has some attraction for the so-called higher society. Even it is said that once Rabindranath Tagore was curious about this fair and he gathered information from Nabin Chandra Sen, the famous poet of Bengal and the then sub-divisional magistrate of Ranaghat. Other than this fair many more fairs and festivals of Kartabhaja are held in various places in memory of Aaul Chand and his prominent disciples. All these festivals and rituals follow the auspicious occasions of the Bengali calendar year. The main objective of these occasions is to observe the religious significance and conduct of the Kartabhaja sect. Except the main stream of Kartabhaja, though there are some other minor modified forms like Gupta Kartabhaja, Satyasrot etc. are found, mostly all of them are the followers of Aaul Chand (Nandi, 1984). It is believed by the Kartabhajas that Aaul Chand was actually another form of SriChaitanya after his re-birth. The followers of this sahajiya cult, a stream of the Kartabhajas take SriChaitanya as their supreme guru and they also believe that there is a close relation between Kartabhaja and sahajiya cult. At folk level it is possible to get assimilation of the philosophical thoughts and ritualistic performances of folk religion and shastric religion. Perhaps it happens due to the circulation and diffusion of different cultural traits. In Bengal also we find many such examples of contacts, conflicts and assimilation of folk and higher religions.

Thousands of Kartabhaja devotees meet together at Ghoshpara, on the fullmoon day of Holi. They think of it as if to come to their real home and their own house seems to them as basa, the temporary residence. Many devotees from different parts of Bengal and even from the neighbouring country Bangladesh come here every year to meet their gurus and to pay homage to the Satimata. Satimata is the wife of Ramsharan Paul, who was one of the twenty two major disciples (Baish Fakir) of Aaul Chand. Ghoshpara is famous for Satimata devi, as it is believed that by her supernatural divine power desires of the devotees can be fulfilled. Even they have the trust that her divine powers can cure the blind, the deaf and the dumb. To reveal the real situation we will have to search into the socio-economic background of these credulous devotees, mostly those who are living below poverty level. Their social and family situation compel them to believe in this supernatural power, as they have no much scope and sufficient money to avail of the costly modern medical facilities. So, it is often found that they try to make their beloveds cured by dipping in the black mud of holy lake Himsagar. This job is done by the religious gurus. Sometimes it is found that these spiritual men cover the eye of a blind or smear the tongue of a dumb with this mud of Himsagar in a very inhuman process. Indeed devotees have full confidence on them. Here, a pomegranate tree is another important holy spot. The belief about divine grace of this tree has come down from the long past. At the foot of the pomegranate tree a handful of dust suffices to cure any disease and cleanse from any sin (Hunter, 1875).

Devotees come here to take vow for fulfillment of their desires and they fasten a piece of stone or derivative objects like small terracotta horse or elephant to the tree with a red thread. After fulfillment of their particular desire again they come here to keep their promise and offer their worship to Satimata. Because this fair is thought to have the divine power of Satimata, it is popularly known as Satimata’s fair. In the ritualistic part of this fair many forms of human sacrifices are found. Devotees make prostrations from Himsagar to Dalimtala, the process is termed as dandi kata. After taking holy dip at Himsagar they lay horizontally on the ground. At that time they ignore their physical sufferings caused by gluey muddy ground and heavy crowd. Sometimes even small children 3-4 years old make prostrations to keep their parents rows. In this fair each guru establishes his shrine centred around a tree. These are called aasan, while larger ones are called aukhada. In these religious camps gurus remain always
surrounded by their disciples and at the time of Holi they assemble here to discuss about their theological pantheon, religious rituals, esoteric words etc. besides its sacred parts some profane parts also found in this fair, which provide various entertaining elements.

Like Ghoshpara fair Kartabhajas also perform annual festivals at Kanchrapara, Chakdah and some other adjacent places. Like Baul, another mystic cult of Bengal, Kartabhaja also follow obscure religious practices. They believe in body worship. For nirvana or attainment of salvation they indicate a certain state of realisation, which one can reach by the union of male and female power. According to them, this certain state of supreme bliss is called as ‘Maha Sukha’ (Dasgupta, 1946). In this stage through the sexual activities they get over the sexual feelings and ultimately realise the supreme spirit into their own. Again in this stage of platonic body worship the man and woman both should transform themselves into the opposite sex and their realisation should also become like this. In one of their popular religious song Bhaber Geet it is described that when woman becomes hermaphrodite and man becomes eunuch, they are considered as the real Kartabhaja. This certain stage of body worship is called death in life (jyante Mada) (Nandi, 1984). In their spiritualism and religious practices body is the most holy and an important element. In some other obscure religious cults also we find similar ideas. Shashi Bhusan Dasgupta, clearly illustrates one shloka (verse) of Dohakosa in which the body is described as the greatest pilgrimage:– ‘Here (within this body) is the Ganges and the Jamuna, here the ‘Ganga Sagar’ (the mouth of the Ganges), here are Prayaga and Benaras, – here the sun and the moon. Here are the sacred places, here the Pithas the Upa-Pithas – I have not seen a place of pilgrimage and an abode of bliss like my body’. Dasgupta, 1946). All these rivers, sun, moon, pithas and upa-pithas are used symbolically. A real votary of kartabhaja has good control over his own body. He can control his respiratory wind, glandular secretion and even nervous. Thus Kartabhaja worshipper realises supreme god by controlling his sense organs.

Common people failed to realise divine spirit because of the complex religious systems. As a result people became attracted to the simple worship system of these anti-vedic religious sects. To them ‘man of heart’ is more acceptable than imaginary vedic gods or Upanishadic Brahma. A Kartabhaja worshipper practices and learns this obscure worshipping process from his/her guru to meet this divine spirit. It is true indeed that the spiritual thoughts and exalted religious processes of Kartabhaja contribute a rich cultural tradition in the cultural heritage of India.

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Most traditional societies, which include folk/tribal societies, live within a framework, which may be described, as embodying a grammar or a vision of life. Their religion is a central part of this grammar. It is religion that, in however oblique and complicately symbolic way, presents the picture of a world which organically relates man, society, nature and what may be called the sacred.

There are countless legends in NorthEast India describing the natural forces embodying a divinity which they share with human beings, plants and animals. There are sacred gods, sacred forests, rivers, mountains and animals. A community having a religion of its own, with its deities and its rituals is not only marked off from the neighbouring tribes, it also derives a sense of dignity and self-respect.

The Deori, tribe in Assam, continues to worship Gira Girachi in their namghar in spite of the impact of organised religion and modernisation. They worship other deities called Balia Baba and Pisasi Dema. Their pujas are performed on the basis of the tradition and they celebrate the festivals of bohagiyo bisu and Magia Bisu regularly. So also the Nishis who worship Ane Duini, the sun-mother, the Tagins who have their own Diani-Pol or the Sun-Moon God.

The two most powerful deities for the Apatanis are, Kiru and Kilo, whom they worship and with whom their annual festival, the Mloko, is associated. For the Hill Miris Si-Donyi the sun and the earth are the highest deities. Si lives on this earth and Donyi lives in the sky. Their religion, was their source of strength and, more importantly, it helped to preserve the ecological balance of the region. In this connection, it may be noted, that for the Adis the natural forces are the manifestation of the supreme power of Sedi. Even others like the trees, stones etc. come on their own, grow by themselves and become what they are also by themselves.

Historians such as Mackenzie, Harakanta Barua and S. K. Bhayun, describe the Adis as a dignified and self-contained people who lived with the truths of their own religion, songs and dances and had their own village council of elders namely Kebangs, to guide them advise in political, economic and agricultural matters. What is unique about the Adi conception of the creator is their belief that He becomes perceptible through the Sun (Donyi) and the Moon (Polo). Actually all natural phenomena, whether in the cooling effect of the Moon, or in the revealing nature of the Sun reflect the Supreme reality. The religion of Donyi-Polo stands for the pursuit of truth which, they persist in claiming, pervades all things. For example a reference to an oath taken at the beginning of the Kebang, meeting of the elders is: Sun-Mother, Moon-Father / if I have committed any crime / theft or any other crime / if I have drunk anything forbidden / this day’s rising Sun / you, this eve’s setting moon, you / in a manner / that all can see and know / clearly testify.

This simple prayer of the Adis reminds them that the beneficial force is always there. What is significant here is the implied emphasis on the intimation of beauty and splendour that the worshipper gets through his contact with nature.

Like in other tribes of NorthEast India, the sacred here is identified with their own geographical setting and their traditional way of coming to terms with it. This inevitably enters into their sense of identity. This world-view is still closely wrapped around their ecology. The Adi since ancient times has given a sense and meaning to all that surrounds him and his day to day life has come to be intimately connected with that meaning. Hence it is not easy to divorce the supernatural from the natural elements in this religion. It may be noted that there was hardly any practice of paying for the upkeep of a religious ‘clergy’ who served the religious needs of the people by performing rites directed purely towards other worldly ends.

Along with its function of uniting and consolidating the group Adi religion has, like most other tribal religions, a necessary reference to the environment as sacred. As long as their environment remains cohesive and their very own, their religion and consequently their identity remains intact.

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Religion and folklife

Krishna and Radha Drawing by a sutradhar of Burdwan, late 19th century or early 20th century, West Bengal