

‘Don Quixote’ in India – Democratising Classical Arts and Changing Artistes

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During the India-EU Summit held during July 15,2020, an important message that went unnoticed was PM Modi's call for strengthening India's cultural linkages with Europe. The ongoing Ukraine crisis has once again pushed India- EU cultural ties to the back seat. This is unfortunate since artistes from India and EU member countries have taken up many interesting collaborative projects in recent times, a case in point being the production of the Kathakali version of 'Don Quixote'.

In 2016, Spain commemorated the 400th death Anniversary of Miguel Cervantes. The event had its reverberations in distant India, where an interesting project was launched to produce a Kathakali version of 'Don Quixote'. The ambition was to stage the production in Spain as part of the Cervantes Anniversary. 'Margi', Kerala's leading performing arts theatre, based in Trivandrum took up the challenge. The initiative was triggered by Guillermo Rodriguez Martin, philologist, scholar and Director, Casa de la India. The Ministry of Culture, Government of India provided financial support for the project.

The libretto for the initial Kathakali version of Don Quixote (hereafter also DQ) was P. Venugopalan, Kathakali and Kutiyattom scholar, who fleshed out portions of the 'Don Quixote' novel to create the 'dance story line'. Apart from leading artistes from Margi, like Margi Vijay Kumar, the project involved other leading artistes of Kathakali. Nellyode Vasudevan Namboodiri who was famous for his presentation of evil roles in Kathakali took up the role of Quijano and Don Quixote. Margi sought to 'test' the initial, 'Indian' version of DQ in Trivandrum. This version underwent change in Spain with Spanish playwrights and artistes (notably Iganacio Garcia and Monica Feuntes) bringing in their creativity to the libretto. Unlike the Kathakali versions of King Lear and other Shakespearean plays, which was performed for local and international audiences in India, the co-produced Kathakali version of DQ was crafted mainly for the international stage.

The initial version of DQ stretched for more than three hours. It was performed in Trivandrum twice, on consecutive days, during the first week of July 2016. I happened to witness the performance on the second day. This version carried the elements of romance, chivalry and the comi-tragedy from Cervantes' novel, which suited the dance -drama style of Kathakali. The themes covered in this version included reflections by Quijano, his transformation into DQ, his drafting of Sancho Panzo as his squire, his endless obsession for Dulcinea, his 'quixotic' adventures, notably, his crazy confrontation with the 'windmills',

his battle with a 'ferocious' lion, and his skirmishes with Sanson Carrasco (aka 'The Knight of the White Moon') which leads him to his end.

The performance became a media sensation.

Compared to the Ballet versions of DQ that I have witnessed, the initial Kathakali version of DQ had a few interesting features. The ballet version of DQ mainly focuses on Don, Kirti (Quiteria) and Basilio. Kitri's zestful dance at the Grand Pas de Deux in Act III severely tests the skills of a female soloist, as it moves from elegance pointes to feisty jumps and hops, thereby conveying breezy exuberance. Basilio's humorous ploy of pretending to be dying while jumping back to life to dupe Kitri's father, is always a spectator's delight in Ballet.

By comparison, in terms of subtleties of character, Sancho Panza gets special focus in the Kathakali version of Don Quixote. Sancho emotes well as a follower, who is hit by conflicting feelings for his 'knight'. While at one level he realises the hopelessness of following a hallucinating master, his keen desire for social mobility (the desire to liberate himself from his status as a lowly peasant to that of a Minister or Governor in Don Quixote's 'to be realised' kingdom), persuades him to follow the 'self-styled knight' in his adventures. As Margi Vijay Kumar, who donned the role of squire both at Trivandrum and Spain tells me, the character, Sancho Panza, severely tested his ability as a Kathakali artiste since it went beyond the traditional canons of acting (abhinaya) in Kathakali.

Apart from the distinctiveness of the text, there are a few other symbolic characteristics that make the Kathakali version of DQ special. While both the Ballet and the Kathakali versions of DQ carry the windmill episode, the striking backdrops of 'giant wind mills' on the Ballet stage symbolises abject realism. By contrast, the windmills in the Kathakali version of DQ are represented by red beard characters that symbolise evil. Also the 'lion' in the Kathakali version of DQ is represented by a Kathakali character rather than the figure of the actual animal. It is this dimension of art forms like Kathakali that holds fascination for Western artistes.

Traditionally, storylines in Kathakali have focussed on the themes of comedy vs tragedy, right vs wrong, chivalry vs cowardice, hope and hopelessness, sadness vs happiness, romance and retribution. Emotions associated with social inequality and social mobility

rarely figure in storylines. The Kathakali version of Don Quixote had strong social undertones. It brought out the keen desire of the socially marginalised sections to experience social mobility. Sashi Kumar from Margi who co-ordinated the show in Spain on behalf of Margi, tells me how in the co-produced version performed in the different places in Spain, singers and percussionists (who traditionally assume backstage positions in traditional Kathakali performances) were brought in front of the curtain to perform the overture. This, unusual change, in many ways, had the effect of signalling the idea of conveying 'democratised production'.

From Spain, the co-produced Kathakali version of Don Quixote travelled to other countries in Europe in 2018. With COVID 19 gradually receding, the Casa de la India plans to have more international and national level shows planned out in Europe and India.

The DQ project is a stellar symbol of cultural linkage between India and a EU country that the Prime Minister talked about at the Indo-EU summit. The fact that it was actively catalysed by the Governments of India and Spain and yet failed to get its due is deeply disappointing.

True, Kathakali version of Don Quixote will struggle to gain acceptance amongst those who would like to see Kathakali in its unalloyed form. Whatever be the case, it is a fact that the co-produced version of DQ has brought in a new trend of internationalisation of art forms in India. For the first time classical art forms of India like Kathakali are boldly importing elements from Western drama into its pantheon. This was unthinkable in the past. What is more, with its deep social undertones, cross country initiatives like the 'Kathakali Don Quixote' are likely to have far reaching inter-textual influence in classical art forms. It is likely that new storylines in our art forms would emerge that seek to pitch for the ideals of social inclusion and diversity more prominently than before. In return, the valuable aesthetic depth of our classical and folk arts offers vital lessons for the art forms of the West.