

Festivals and Fine Arts

Mrs. Anuradha Ramesh & Dr. Ambika Kameshwar

Vels Institute of Science, Technology and Advanced Studies (VISTAS)

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Abstract:

Festivals are an integral feature of any culture. It could be called as the celebration of the richness and the multifariousness of a country's heritage. The temple festivals or *Utsavas* nourished and cultivated the fine arts. The *āgamas*, considered the handbook or the rule book for all temple related activities, provide comprehensive directions on every component of a temple, starting with the selection of the land and construction through locating the governing deities and the *Utsavas* to be celebrated. They further give in greatest of details the – song (*gīta*), dance (*nṛtta*) and playing of musical instruments (*vādyā*) that have to be performed during the *Utsavas*. These could be hailed as the roots of the current classical and folk-art forms of today.

Introduction:

The word 'festival' to an Indian mind, immediately ushers in vibrant colours, fragrant smells, elegant drapes, grandeur, splendor, magnificence, opulence, religiosity, abundant happiness, thrill and immense joy. It is an occasion when the entire community, village or town comes together transcending differences of caste, creed or religion, to partake the feeling of oneness and merriment. And no festive celebrations are ever complete without music and dance- the *dandiarās* of Gujarat, the *bhangra* dance of Punjab, *Bihu* in Assam, *kai kotti kali* of Kerala, *kollattam*, *poi kālkuthirai* and *kummi* in Tamil Nādu are just a few of the well-known examples. Most of the classical art forms and the folk-art forms can be said to have their roots in these occasions of jubilation and absolute revelry. In fact, the *Nāṭyasastra* begins with *Dhvajotsavā* performance by Bharata and his sons.

Utsava:

In the context of a South Indian temple, a festival or '*utsava*' in Sanskrit are "these immense cultural performances. Gods resplendent in bright silk garments, brilliant gold ornaments and colorful garlands of flowers parade forth from their stone temple sanctums like the splendid lords of the cosmos that their devotees believe them to be" in the words of Richard H Davis.

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The *Hayasirśasamhitā* states that, during the consecration of a temple or installation of an idol, an *Utsava* has to be performed, failing which the entire effort would be futile and would not lead to any results.

उत्सवेनविनास्थापनंनिष्फलम्भवेत्।(36.5)

utsavenavināsthāpanamniṣfalambhavet

The *Ajitāgama* explains that *Utsava* have to be celebrated to bring about prosperity and well-being for the benefit of not just humanity but of all life forms.

सवःकल्याणमित्युक्तंसर्वजन्तुसुखवहम्।

उद्भूतस्तुसवोयस्मात्तस्मात्उत्सवउच्यते॥ (27.1)

savaḥkalyāṇamityuktaṃsarvajantusukhavahaṃ .
udbhūtaस्तुसवोयस्मात्तस्मात्उत्सवउच्यते ..

Āgamas like the *Viṣvaksenasamhita*, *Kāranāgama*, *Īśvarasamhita* and many more speak about *Utsavas*, the performance of which benefits mankind, brings in peace, fulfillment of desires, destroys sins and ensures the attainment of the four values – *dharma*, *artha*, *kāma* and *mokṣa*.

Utsavas and Performing arts:

The *Utsavas* are usually classified as *nitya*, *naimittika* and *kāmya*. The *nityautsava* or *nityotsava* are indispensable and have to be performed - namely daily festival (*nityotsava*), weekly festivals (*varotsava*), fortnight (*pakṣotsava*), month (*māsotsava*) and year or annual (*Mahotsava* or *Brahmotsava*). In addition to these the *vasantotsavā* (spring festival), *dolotsava* (swing festival) and such like festivals are recommended as well. The *āgamas* prescribe that song (*gīta*), dance (*nṛtta*) and playing of musical instruments (*vādya*) should be performed as part of offerings (*upacāra*) during the *nityotsava*.

The *Ajitāgama*, for instance, states the following:

“With a tumult of conches and kettle-drums, accompanied by incense and lamps, with parasols and yak-tail fans, accompanied by peacock feather fans and banners, with song and dance accompanied by auspicious rhythms and all the rest, the Lord should leave the temple and make a circumambulation outside.” (27.25-26)¹

Further, the *talas* that have to be played at each direction or *sandhi* is mentioned as well.

“There should be *samatāla* for *Indra* (in the east): there should be *baddhāvaṇa* for *Agni* (south-east), *bhṛṅgiṇītāla* for *Yama* (in the South), *mallitāla* in *Nirrti* (south west) *nava-*

¹ Richard H Davis, A Priest's Guide for the Great Festival- Aghorasiva's Mahotsavavidhi.



tāla in *Varuṇa* (west), *bali-tāla* for *Vāyu* (north west), *koṭīśikhara* in *Soma* (north) *ṭaṅkarīnīśāna* (north east). Thus, he should cause these eight rhythms to be played in all the directions.” (25.28b-31)²

The *Kāranāgama* states specific *rāgam*, *tālam*, *nṛttam* and *vādyam* to be played during full moon (*Pūrṇamā*) of each month.

Mahotsava:

The *Mahotsava* is elaborated in most of the *āgamas* as the great festival that is to be celebrated with jubilation and joyousness. This celebration may be for 1 – 17 days depending on the size and the patronage that the temple receives, the ideal being 9 days. During each of these days, the musicians and the dancers play a significant role. For instance, during the raising of the flag (*dwajārohanā*), a percussion instrument called *Bheri* is first worshipped and with the rhythmic beating of the *Bheri*, offering (*bali*) is made to the Guardians of the directions to the accompaniment of music, rhythm and dance. Most of the *āgamas* specify distinct *tālam*, *rāgam*, *nṛttam* to be performed at the *navasandhi* ceremony. These are not always the same as is performed in the *nityotsava*. For instance, in the South west corner, for *Nirrti*, the *tālam* to be played during *nityotsava* is *malli*, while during *Mahotsava* it is *matta*. The flag is raised with the musical instruments being played in the background along with the chanting of vedas and mantras.

When the Lord is taken on a procession outside the temple, He should have musical instruments playing with the dancer in front of his palanquin, the vedic scholars reciting the mantras behind the palanquin. The entire ensemble consists of numerous lamps and plates of incense giving it an ethereal feel. The various musical instruments played are *śaṅkha*, *bheri*, *mṛdaṅga*, *nadaswaram*, *mellam*, *dundhubhi*, *cymbals*, *vīṇā*, *veṇu* etc. The dancing girls were called *rudraṅnikās* or *gaṅikās*. It is during the *Mahotsava* that the *Kuravanji* dances were said to have been performed as well.

Utsavas and other art forms:

The *Utsavas* did encourage other art forms too. The art of making beautiful, colourful flower garlands, the art of decorating the deity, the art of dancing of palanquin bearers, the art of the decorations of the upper part of the chariot and so many innumerable art forms. Some of them unfortunately are dying due to lack of patronage.

Conclusion

The history of the art forms of India has an indubitable link to the ritualistic practices that used to be performed in the temples of India. It is in the temples *Utsavas* that many of the arts thrived

²(N R Bhatt) *Ajitamahatantram*, Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, New Delhi and Motilal Banarasi Dass Publishers Pvt Ltd.



and matured. Thus, these art forms that were an integral part of the festivals in the temples of South India have reached every part of the world, bridging nations and uniting us with the invisible thread of sublime experience.

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