Harikatha: New Message through an Old Form

N.Usha Rani (Usharani Narayana)

Abstract:

The presence of sophisticated media has not deterred the people from patronising Harikatha. Most of the religious festivals and special occasions are marked by Harikatha programmes. As a result, unlike other traditional arts, which are fast waning, Harikatha has successfully withstood the onslaught of the competitive modern arts. A solo-recitation, Harikatha exudes spiritual expression. It is a combination of literature and lilting lyrics which convey rich musical and literary sentiments. Harikatha is a theatre craft which does not require a stage, costumes and other paraphernalia. The total flexibility of Harikatha offers fertile ground for the communicator to exploit. Harikatha helped strengthen the moral fabric of the society and secondly, it educated the masses in the vital aspects of life. One of its important characteristics is that it enables the artiste to alter the message according to the mood of the audience and in the process of face to face communication, gauge the impact of the message on them. Harikatha is unique in that it primarily appeals to one’s intellect rather than emotions, unlike other traditional arts.

Introduction:

Among the variety of traditional art forms of Karnataka, Harikatha, a religious discourse enjoys the patronage of both rural and urban people and of the government. Though Karnataka is not the home of its origin, it has an estimated 500 Harikatha artists. Harikatha is known in one form or the other with different names like Katha, Katha Keerthan, Shiva Katha, Katha Kalakshspam, Katha Prasangam, Kertan and Sankeertan etc., in the country.
The present form of *Harikatha* is believed to be 150 years old. It seems to have prevailed in different forms even during the early sixteenth century. In Karnataka the art is believed to have been borrowed from Maharashtra and popularised by *Haridasas* and *Shivasharanas*. Under royal patronage, *Harikatha*, was mostly performed at private audiences at the courts of kings and aristocrats, though it was also performed in temples and public places on the occasions. With the end of royal patronage, *Harikatha* was nourished by the common people and gradually temples and *Ramamandirs* became the venue for devotional outpourings of *Keertanakars*.

The art attained international stature with the active involvement of highly reputed scholars like *Bhadragiri Keshavadas* and his brothers. They established *Keertana* College and the *Dasarama* International Centre at Bangalore. Aimed at propagating the ‘*Bhakti*’ movement, the institution is the nerve-centre of all activities of the *Haridasa* cult and has ardent followers all over the world.

In 1964, an attempt was made for the first time to bring together all the *Keertanakaras* of the State, at Bangalore. The Karnataka *Keertanakars’ Parishat* was founded at this conference, to preserve the art and safeguard the interests of the artistes.

Even the presence of sophisticated media has not deterred the people from patronising *Harikatha*. Most of the religious festivals and special occasions are marked by *Harikatha* programmes. As a result, unlike other traditional arts, which are fast waning, *Harikatha* has successfully withstood the onslaught of the competitive modern arts.

An ancient practice of propagating the ‘*Bhakti*’ cult, Harikatha is associated with the Hindu pantheon. It is essentially a religious discourse encompassing spiritual advice and moral ethics. *Harikatha* may be defined as a versatile and a composite art in which a single person indulges in the act of dramatization, with all the vital components of the theatre craft such as music, dance and dramatic presentation of themes.

According to Milton Singer, “*Harikatha* is a kind of concentrated drama, a mono-drama, in which one gifted actor enters swiftly a whole series of
characters, moods and manners.” A Solo-recitation, *Harikatha* exudes spiritual expression. It is a combination of literature and lilting lyrics which convey rich musical and literary sentiments. *Harikatha* is a theatre craft which does not require a stage, costumes and other paraphernalia. It can be staged in any place with minimum preparation. Conventionally, the main *Harikatha* artists are accompanied by two or more supporting artistes. With the entrance of women into the field, the artistes are free to wear any kind of dress convenient to them.

The principal performer is the chief-singer-narrator of the story and is called ‘Dasa’ or ‘Keertankar’. He is accompanied by few artists in the background to give him vocal support. Musical instruments like the Mridanga, the tabla, the violin, the harmonium and the cymbals are played by them while the Keertankar plays castanets. In the absence of any rigid rules, even a single artiste can successfully manage to keep an audience fully engrossed. In *Harikatha*, the performer through his religious discourse addresses a large gathering of people who instantly become a captive audience. With the theme centered on spiritual, ethical and philosophical values, *Keertankar* narrates stories from epics and *Puranas* in semi-literary style.

According to H K Ranganath, “it (*Harikatha*) was indeed the right school of the illiterate masses in the villages and educated them on dramatic episodes contained in human classic like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*.”

It implies that firstly, *Harikatha* helped strengthen the moral fabric of the society and secondly, it educated the masses in the vital aspects of life.

The total flexibility of *Harikatha* offers fertile ground for the communicator to exploit. One of its important characteristics is that it enables the artiste to alter the message according to the mood of the audience and in the process of face to face communication, gauge the impact of the message on them. If the impact is adverse, he is free to change or disband the tenor of the discourse by a smooth switch-over to the old folk tales.

*Harikatha* is unique in that it primarily appeals to one’s intellect rather than emotions, unlike other traditional arts. Hence even themes of the great literary works can be easily understood by the illiterate because of the
simplicity of the narrative technique making the discourse vivid and comprehensive. The other characteristic is its secular nature. It should be clearly said that Harikatha is non-ritualistic and may be staged on any occasion-religious or social.

Lack of any rigidity in the theme facilitates effortless transformation of its content- social, philosophical, mythological, historical or religious. In Kerala there are instances of Hindu performers reciting Biblical stories and vice versa. Any person, irrespective of caste, creed and sex, with an exceptionally good narrative ability, can stage a Harikatha performance. In the absence of rigid customs, the performer can choose any content appropriate for the occasion and this explains the entry of women into this field of Katha Keertan. Besides, Harikatha is the cheapest and the simplest mode of communication. A single artiste, often managing the whole performance can cut down all costs.

There are no strict specifications regarding the duration of the performance. An average performance may last between two to five hours. Depending on the occasion and purpose, the artiste is free to reduce or increase the duration of discourse, according to his convenience.

**As a Tool of Propaganda**

Today, Harikatha has survived partly due to the discovery of its immense ability to communicate and consequently, serious efforts are being made to promote it as a tool of propaganda. This aspect will be better understood if one analyses the qualities and the major constituents of Haikathatha in its proper perspective.

Infusion of new themes into the format of Harikatha is, of course, not a recent development. Over the years, its thematic presentation has shown amenable vicissitudes. Modern themes like child care vie with the conventional ones. During the alien socio-political rule of India, Harikatha was used to awaken the masses to the need to protect their religion and culture from foreign rulers. As a result the propagation of political ideologies, criticism of government policies and popularisation of developmental programmes has become part of its content.
**New Message and old form**

In rural parts of Karnataka *Harikatha* artistes engaged by the state government are delivering contemporary messages by weaving messages concerning child care, health, adult education, small savings, evils of drinking, loan *melas* and animal husbandry into the main discourse with the added elements of satire and humour.

A little over 100 such artistes have been enlisted to propagate the government programmes showing that *Harikatha* has been accepted as a major input in the development communication strategy which strives to present new messages through old forms.

**Bibliography**

3. Ibid.