(a) The Pan-Indian Tradition of Kathakata

Kathakata literally means the performance of a Kathaka. 1 The Kathaka is a singer, or a group of singers who recite the episodes of original epics and the Puranas in accompaniment with music and dance before an audience. So he may be called a reciter. The term Granthika is a synonym of the term Kathaka that may be found in the Mahabhasya of Patanjali. 2 Rightly does M. Ghosh observe, "Kathakas or those who read before an audience episodes from original epics (Mahabharata or Ramayana) or the Puranas, and explain them with the art of a good story-teller interspersing their narration with songs, or musical recitation of original Sanskrit passages." 3

The Kathaka recites the epic poems such as the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the Bhagavata-Purana and other Puranas. Such type of epic recitation generally takes place on the occasion of religious festivals with some kind of abhinava associated with it. 4

"An exposition of a mythological story with music and dance is defined by Bhoja in his work on alankara under the

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1. The term Kathaka, narrator, relator etc. is found in the Mahabharata. Katha also signifies stories.
2. Kielhorn(ed) : Patanjali's Mahabhasya I.IV 29; III. 1.26
4. Ibid.
name of akhyāna; Bhūja’s remarks in another context show that this refers to the art of the Kathaka.\(^5\)

The Kathaka most probably performed both in prose and verse, as the oldest form of epic poetry in India consisted of prose and verse. And in the style of Kathakata we may trace dramatic elements.

The Sūta may rightly be equated with the Kathaka, since both the Sūta and the Kathaka are narrators and relators. The traditions of epic-recitation and Purāṇa recitation were current from the time of yore. The preface of all the Itiḥāsa (legends) and the Purāṇa (ancient tales) have justified that the Itiḥāsa and the Purāṇa were recited to vast congregations of people gathered at Sattras by a class of reciters called Sūta-Paurānic\(^6\). A good number of inscriptions can establish the fact of continuity of the tradition of exposition all through the course of Indian history. It shows that “this machinery of popular-religious education was active not only in every part of the mother country but in greater India too.”\(^7\)

The tradition of kathakata was not confined to India only, but extended up to greater India. Observes V. Raghavan: “As early as A.D. 600, one Somāśarmā is found

\(^{5}\) V. Raghavan: Methods of popular Religious Instruction in South India(6.A.I. Vol.IV) p.513
\(^{6}\) Ibid. p.504
\(^{7}\) Ibid.
to present to a temple in Combodia the Mahābhārata, the Rāmāyana, and the Purāṇas, and provide for their daily exposition; a regular temple to Vālmīki was raised in Campā by King Prakāśādharaman, and, in the tenth century, the kings of Combodia had a Kavi-Pandita attached to them to expound the Rāmāyana and the Mahābhārata. In North India, we have epigraphic evidence to show that endowments were made for the popular recital of the epics and the Purāṇas. From Bāna's Kādambarī we know that the Mahābhārata was recited in the Mahākāla temple, and from his Harsacarita, that Vāyu-Purāṇa was recited in his own village-house. 8

This practice is functioning as a living process even to-day in Northern India, for example, the Vaiṣṇavas congregate together to listen to recitals from the Gītā, the Bhāgavata and other Purāṇas by the Kathaka. Amongst the Sikhs this practice is prevalent even to-day, since in their religion reading and listening are very essential religious duties. 9

In the same way the tradition of Kathakata was current in South India from fairly ancient times. The Kūram and the Tandantettam plates testify that the reading and exposition of the Mahābhārata(Bhāratakhyāna) were in vogue in South India. 10

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8. V. Raghavan, op. cit., p.504
It is clear from the aforesaid discussion that the tradition of Kathakata may rightly be called a Pan-Indian tradition, since it was widely prevalent in greater India in ancient times and it has been handed down to the present day in an unbroken tradition. The practice of Kathakata was not only confined to the temples but was extended up to the villages too. "We have vivid accounts from recent times of such recitations not only in temples", says A.B. Keith, "but in villages, when the generosity of some rich man has secured the presence, if need be, for three months or longer of the reciters, Kathakas, to go over the huge poem, which claims to be an encyclopaedia of all useful knowledge as well as the best of poems." 11

The Kathakas may be divided into two classes, viz. (a) Pāthakas 12 and (b) Dharakas. 13 The Pāthaka repeats the poems and the Dharaka explains the same in the vernacular for the edification of the people. 14

(b) Kathakata as the basis of the Epics.

Kathakata may rightly be considered as an integral part of the 'ancient ballads.' In the style of Kathakata we may trace dramatic elements. Max Müller and Levi discovered the germs of dramatic literature in the Śāivāda (dialogue)

12.  Pāthaka is a public reader of the Purānas or other sacred books. He is a spiritual teacher. Pāthaka may be called gathaka mentioned in the inscription of Lakṣmī Simha. Kindly see Chapt No.XII.
13. Dharaka is a supporter of Pāthaka.
hymns, Hertal and L. von Schroeder worked out a theory that the Samvada hymns constituted speeches pertaining to some dramatic performance connected with religious rituals.  

M. Winternitz styles the Samvada hymns as 'ancient ballads'.  

It may be assumed that the style of Kathakata plays an important role in the growth and development of the Samvada hymns. Winternitz asserts that the traces of epic-poetry in India may be found in the Vedic literature in the dialogue hymns of the Rgveda and in the ṛkhyānas (narratives), itiḥāsas (legends) as well as Purāṇas (ancient tales) of the Brāhmaṇas.

In the Vedic age the recitation of such narratives was very essential in the religious ceremonies at the sacrificial and domestic festivals. Hence, we may say that the practice of Kathakata plays an important role in the Vedic age also. The Kathaka recites gāthās and ballads to avert misfortune that may come in near future. These ballads may be equated with the ṛkhyānas (narratives) and the itiḥāsas (legends). According to M. Winternitz there are several collections of itiḥāsas (legends) and Purāṇas (ancient tales) which are made up of myths and legends. It is correct that there is no evidence, however that such itiḥāsas or Purāṇas did not really exist in the form of books in Vedic time. These were

Hertal : Indische Märchen, pp.344, 367 ff.  
L. Von Schroeder: Mysterium Und Mimus in Rgveda Leipzig-1908

17. Ibid. p.311.  
18. Ibid., p.313
handed down orally and this oral tradition was carried over by the singer i.e. Kathaka in the style of Kathakata. M. Winternitz mentions that beside the itihasa and the Puranas the gathanaraśāma (i.e. 'songs in praise of men') could please the gods. The 'songs in praise of men' are the direct precursors of the real Heroic Epic itself. These 'songs in praise of men' perhaps soon take the form of the epic-poems i.e. heroic songs, and into entire cycles of epic songs centring around one hero or one great event; for the only two national epics which have come down to us, the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyana, represent but the last remnants of a long past period of epic-poetry.  

So it would not be irrelevant if we say that the epic-tradition was carried down by the Kathaka orally. Ultimately Vālmīki and the great sage Vyāsa put into shapes those that epic-lore transmitted orally through the system of Kathakata and made it into unified poems (i.e. the Rāmāyana and the Mahābhārata proper).

(c) The Tradition of the Sutas

The literal meaning of sūta is a bard, a singer, a reciter. We have already mentioned that the sūta may be equated with the Kathaka. The sūta recites the ākhyānas and the itihāsas. In the same manner the Kathaka also recites the ākhyānas.

19. Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa XI. 5, 6, 8.
and the itihasas. According to Bhoja exposition of a mythological story with music and dance is known as Kathakata. Both the Kathaka and the suta are reciters of mythological stories. They try to expound the contents of the epic or the Puranas by means of music, dramatic monologue, and prose narrations. So, both the Kathaka and the suta have many affinities. In a sense, the sutas are the direct bearers of the tradition of Kathakata. Of course, the tradition of the suta may not be traced in the Vedic literature, but on the other hand the art of Kathakata may be seen in the Vedic literature, since the style of Kathakata plays an important role there particularly in the Samvada (dialogue) hymns of the Rgveda. This hypothesis is supported by the findings of Max Müller and Levi. Furthermore, Patanjali in his Mahabhashya refers to the akhyana of Kamsavadha (the Killing of Kamsa) and that of Balibandhana (the binding of Bali) which appear to have been recited. It may be noted here that even the ancient akhyanas were recited in the Rejasuya sacrifice. The hotri (Priest) recited to the king the story of Sunahsepa in Prose and Verse after the King’s ceremonial bathing. " ..... the adhvaryu (Priest) also seated on a golden cushion, responded by uttering 'Om' at the end of each Rg-veda Verse and tatha at the end of each patha.

23. Kielhorn (ed): op.cit. III.I. 26

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or Brāhmaṇa verse recited by the other. We are told that not only in the Ājasūva, but also after a victory in war, the king should have this story recited (ākhyāpayeta).”

All these can testify the prevalence of the tradition of Kathakata in the Vedic age.

The tradition of sūta seems to begin with the epic-poetry (heroic-poetry). The earlier Vedic literature was mainly sacerdotal both in origin and in character. So it was confined to a group of people so far as transmission was concerned. It was not intended for the general public, but the heroic poetry were taken up by the sūtas, i.e., Professional bards, for popularization among the masses.

M. Winternitz states that the sūtas were the author, reciters and preservers of the heroic-poetry. Further M. Winternitz asserts that the sūtas were the creators of the oldest Purāṇa-poetry as well as of the epic-poetry. "Epic-poetry", says M. Winternitz, "originated in the circle of such bards, who certainly were very closely related to the warrior-class". In another place M. Winternitz emphatically comments: "The sūtas or bards were undoubtedly the creators and bearers of the oldest Purāṇa poetry as well as of the epic.”

28. Ibid., p.315.
29. Ibid., p.528
It would not be apocryphal if we say that the tradition of sūta emerges out of the tradition of Kathakatā and the ojāpāli art form of Assam have emanated from both the Kathakatā tradition and the sūta-tradition. It may be assumed that the Kathakas appeared in the form of the sūtas in the epic age and in course of time the sūtas re-appeared in various forms like ojāpāli or bhāgavatār or Kathā-vācaka and so on.

The tradition of Rāma-Kathā, Hari-kathā or Bhāgavatā-kathā

The tradition of Kathakatā is the basis of the tradition of Rāma-Kathā and Hari-kathā or Bhāgavatā-Kathā (Bhāgavata-kathā includes Kṛṣṇa-Kathā). In the Kathakatā system, the Kathaka sits on a platform, specially made for this purpose with a canopy in the middle of the audience, assembled for listening to Rāma-Kathā or Bhāgavata-Kathā. The Kathaka must be a man of dignified personality and should have knowledge in various arts and eloquence. He who sings the songs of the Mahābhārata, or the Rāmāyana or Bhāgavata is called Vyāsa or Bhāgavātār or Kathā-vācaka.

After preliminaries, the Kathaka or the Vyāsa, or the Bhāgavātār recites from the Rāmāyana or the Mahābhārata
or the Bhāgavata-Purāṇa (other Purāṇa may be taken into account) in different rāgas and tālas or rhythmic sequence with appropriate gestures and mudrās or facial expressions. In the same way, the audience also occasionally takes up the refrain of the songs sung by the Kathaka."

There is a tradition that the Ādikavi Vālmīki retold the story of the Rāmāyana to his disciples. And the great Sage Vyāsa also retold the ākhyānas of the Mahābhārata to his disciples. It would not be irrelevant if we say that both Vālmīki and Vyāsa are two great Kathakas. Hence, the tradition of Rāma-Kathā, Hari-Kathā or Bhāgavata-Kathā begins with the Ādikavi Vālmīki and the great sage Vyāsa. So, both Rāma-Kathā and Bhāgavata-Kathā, Hari Kathā are based on the all-India tradition of Kathakatā.

The tradition of Kathakāla-kṣepa or Harikathā, a very popular audio-visual art form of South India in general and of Tamilnad in particular emerges out of the pan-Indian tradition of Kathakatā. 31

The reciter of Harikathā is known as the Bhāgavatār. He stands infront of his assistant. The assistant takes place behind the Bhāgavata with a mrdanga (a kind of drum). They sing episodes from the Rāmāyana and the Mahābhārata and from the Purāṇas. " After some preliminary invocatory singing on

Ganesa, Sarasvati, Hanumat and the guru, the Bhagavatør sings a song which is the text of his sermon. This song emphasizes that devotion to the Lord, or a particular mode of his worship, is the only means of Salvation or that the Lord is the only refuge of man. To illustrate this Bhagavata takes up a story which forms the main part of the performance. It is called the Harikatha. In the end the story is wound up by harking back to the burden of the first song, to illustrate which the story, the Bhagavata's wide learning in sacred literature is to be brought into display. He has to elevate the listeners with his knowledge, drive home with wit moral and ethical principles and move the hearts of his audience with his dramatic and devoted narration. V. Raghavan calls it a monodrama.

The form and structure as well as contents of the art form of Harikathá have many similarities with that of the tradition of Kathakata. So, it would not be wrong if we say that the art form of Harikathá is a bearer of the pan-Indian tradition of Kathakata.

In the ejamalí art form Kathás, i.e., akhyanas or stories are recited, as such this art form may be termed as Harikathá. There is a popular saying which is used by the

32. V. Raghavan, op. cit., p. 514.
33. Ibid.
ojāpāli art form frequently. The saying goes that first the matter of livelihood and only then the glory of Hari or God:

"age cāul kathā pāche hari-kathā".

(e) Burra Kathā:

Burra-Kathā of Andhra Pradesh is a traditional art form based on the pan-Indian tradition of Kathakata. The troupe consists of three minstrels. This art-form recites stories with the aid of percussion instruments and cymbals. That the art-form is one of the bearers of the age-old tradition of Kathakata is evident from the remarks passed by B. Rama Raju: "This narration in musical tones is traced back as far as pre-Rāmāyana days. Vālmīki, the epic poet, publicised his great story through two skilled rhapsodists, then known as Kusilava. They sang the Rāmāsaga to their countrymen and finally before the ruling emperor. Though the text of the epic gained the status of a classic (mārga style), its publicity was in the folk medium (desāi). Later on, with the passage of time these rhapsodic traditions continued taking regional forms and the main aim was to preach, entertain or provide diversion for rural folk."34

Sriram-Pāncahāli a well known traditional art-form of Bengal is also based on Kathakata. Themes of this art form

34. B. Rama Raju: Folklore of Andhra Pradesh, p.135.
are taken from the *Rāmāyana* and the *Mahābhārata* as well as
from the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa*. Besides, local and popular legends
and stories are also adopted. The performers are generally
unlettered and semi-literate.\textsuperscript{35} The *Kathaka* plays an impor-
tant role here. He is assisted by his assistants in all respects.
The *Pāncāli ojā* is current in Assam particularly in the Āumi-
ātisattra as well as in the Daksimpāt Sattrā of Mājuli, the
great river-island.

In the same way the *Rāmaīlā* of North India, the
*Bhāgavatamela* of Tamilnād and many other performing art forms
of India and abroad have emerged from the tradition of *Kathakatā*.
We have already mentioned that the art of recitation is one
of the essential characteristics of a *Kathaka*. Rightly does
observe S. Awasthi: "The performing tradition of the epic was
born the day recitation was born, and recitation was born the
day epic was born."\textsuperscript{36} Most of the epic theatre and dance-forms,
including the puppet theatre, have evolved out of recitation,
i.e. *Kathakatā* which acts as base line upon which the super-
structure of the form is raised."\textsuperscript{37} So, the tradition of
*Kathakatā* survives along with literary and performing tradi-
tions that handed down through the ages in India and other
countries as well.

\textsuperscript{35} A. Bhattacharya : *Oral Tradition of the Rāmāyana in Bengal*  
(*The Rāmāyana Tradition of Asia*, ed. V. Raghavan  
Pp. 610-11)\textsuperscript{36}

\textsuperscript{36} S. Awasthi : *The Rāmāyana Tradition and the performing Arts*  
(*The Rāmāyana Tradition in Asia*, ed. V. Raghavan)

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
Now we may come to the conclusion that the pan-Indian tradition of Kathakata has given rise to many audio-visual art forms throughout India in different times and ages. The ojapali art form is surely one of the such art forms.