

*Types of Dance Forms in Palghat  
District*

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## PALGHAT



## CHAPTER 4

### TYPES OF DANCE FORMS IN PALGHAT DISTRICT

This Chapter explains the profile of Palghat District and various dance forms, performed in Palghat district. Several dance forms of the District reflect their unity in diversity in terms of dance forms. All dance forms in Palghat District are mentioned in this Chapter. Palghat is the gateway to Kerala due to the presence of Palghat Gap, in the Western Ghats. It is nicknamed the Granary of Kerala. Some etymologists trace the word “Palghat”, to the word, Palainilam, which means “dry lands”.<sup>1</sup>

Palghat District is situated in the South West Coast of India, bounded on the North by Malappuram, in the East by Coimbatore of Tamil Nadu, in the South by Thrissur and in the West by Thrissur and Malappuram Districts. Palghat lies between 10°21′ and 11°14′ North latitude and 76°02′ and 76°54′ East longitude. The entire geographical area of the District is 4480 sq.k.m, representing 11.53 per cent of the State’s geographical area. Palghat is part of the erstwhile Malabar.<sup>2</sup>

It is a predominantly rural district. There are different explanations about the origin of the name, Palghat. It is said that the name derived from the traditional Tamil classification of land on the foundation of soil formation and physical features. A more sensible argument is that the whole of Palghat and its suburbs were once covered by thick forests of Pala trees and hence the words pala+ kadu came to be known as Palakkad or Palghat. In the East India Company’s records, the place is called by the name, Palghatcherry.<sup>3</sup>

Palghat is the ground of palmyrahs and paddy fields. It is called the Gateway of Kerala. Palghat District came into existence as an administrative unit, on the 1<sup>st</sup> January, 1957. Currently, Palghat is the biggest District in Kerala. Situated at the foot of the Western Ghats, this is the gateway to Kerala from North. Palghat gained significance as

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<sup>1</sup> Innes, C.A., *Malabar Gazetteer* Vol. I, Government of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, 1997, p.467.

<sup>2</sup> *District Handbooks of Kerala Palakkad*, Department of Information & Public Relations, Government of Kerala, 2003, pp.8-9.

<sup>3</sup> Kareem, C.K., *Kerala District Gazetteers: Palghat*, Government of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, 1976, p.1.

far back as the Sangam Period (1<sup>st</sup> century BC to 4<sup>th</sup> century AD) because the Chera kings made use of the breach, to expand their power to Kongunad, present day Coimbatore, Salem and Erode.<sup>4</sup>

The ancient history of Palghat is not clear. According to William Logan, the author of “Malabar Manual”, the Pallava Dynasty of Kochi might have invaded Malabar in the Second or Third Century. One of their headquarters was a place called ‘Palakkada’, which could be the current day Palghat.<sup>5</sup> For a number of centuries, the Malabar region was ruled by Perumals. Malabar had been invaded by many ancient South Indian Rulers. The famous among them was the “Valluvakonathiri” (Ruler of Valluvanad) of Palakkattussery. The Palghat Region was under the control of Kollengode Raja and Sekhari Varma Raja of Palghat. When the Kozhikode Samoothiri invaded Palghat in 1757, the Palghat Raja wanted the help of Hyder Ali of Mysore. His help forced the Samoothiri to retreat. Later Hyder Ali conquered Palghat, which was under the possession of Kozhikode Samoothiri. Thus the whole of Palghat passed into the control of Mysore Sulthan Hyder Ali Khan and his son Tippu Sulthan. The war between East India Company and Tippu Sulthan was concluded with the treaty of 1792 and all the possession of Tippu in Malabar area were ceded to the East India Company. Later it formed the Malabar District of the Madras Presidency.<sup>6</sup> The history of the Palghat District as a District, administrative unit, dates back to January, 1, 1957.<sup>7</sup>

### **Dance Forms of Palghat District**

#### **Aryammala Natakam**

The folktale of Aryammala is presented in this art form. It is performed by the Harijan community. It is performed in the regions of Palaghat and Chittoor Taluks. Musical instruments like Mridangam and Chenda (drum) are used as accompaniments.

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<sup>4</sup> Shanavas, P.N., *Kerala*, Stark World Publishing Pvt. Ltd., 2006, p.696.

<sup>5</sup> *District Census Handbook Palakkad*, Series-33, Part- XII-B, Directorate of Census Operations, Kerala, 2011, p.9.

<sup>6</sup> *District Handbooks of Kerala Palakkad*, Department of Information & Public Relations Government of Kerala Feb 2003. pp. 8-9

<sup>7</sup> Kareem, C.K., *Kerala District Gazetteers: Palghat*, Government of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, 1976, p.3.

It is performed in the public places. A mixed language, consisting Malayalam and Tamil, is used and male artists present the female characters. Aryammala drama is not so popular today.<sup>8</sup>

### **Ayyappan Thiyyattu**

Ayyappan Thiyyattu, also known as Ayyappan Koothu, is performed in certain temples, dedicated to the god Ayyappa in Northern Kerala, mostly Palghat District and Ponnani Taluk.<sup>9</sup> The art expression, conducted by the Theeyati Nambiars in the Ayyappan Kavus and Bharamalayas, is known as the Ayyappan Theeyattu. According to some it is called Ayyappan Pattu. The figure of Ayyappan Chakiyar (Koothukaran) is shaped after Nandikeswara, the chief of Siva's attendants. The cloth with pleates, is draped around his loins. He would also wear a kind of reddish shirt and a small crown on his head, called 'Pathiyam'. He is also decorated with necklaces (Koralaram), bracelet (vala), kadakam, ear ornaments (thoda), ear flower (chevipooove) and a broad waist band, called Pathiyaranjhanam.



The performer, after having worn the dress and ornaments, begins to sing the Ayyappa hymns, in front of inner shrine. When the story play is started, he used to act effectively with his limb gestures and he does not speak on this occasion. The act would be completed only after twelve days. Kalathilattam is a chief rite of the Ayyappan

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<sup>8</sup> Philomina, K.V., *Folk Arts of Kerala*, Financial Assistance from the Southzone cultural centre, Tanjavore, Tamilnadu, 2009, pp.45- 46.

<sup>9</sup> Menon, C.A., *Kerala Festival Message-2007* A Directory of festivals in Kerala with glossary of Kerala festivals, Chembakassery Publications, Thrissur,2006, p.15.

Theeyattu. Putting on a big garland on his neck, holding a sword, the Theeyati Nambiar performs his dance. The floor stage (kalam), decorated with multi- coloured powders is wiped out with his legs and swords. The Kalathilattam is thus concluded with the oracle. In association with the Theeyattu, smashing of coconut is also conducted. It is the oracle, who throws the coconut while dancing on the stage (kalam).<sup>10</sup>

It is performed as an offering and also as a part of the annual ritual of the temple. Koorayidal, Ucchappattu, Arangu Vithanikkal are some of the preliminary rituals. Then Kalamezhuthu starts. The figure of Ayyappa is drawn of five colours of powders. Deeparadhana, Kalam pooja, Kuthu, Thiri Uzhichal, and Pooja are done by Nambiar and then Brahman oracle or Velichapadu, wiping of the kalam are the important rituals. In Ayyappan Kuthu ,the performer enacts the details of the birth of Ayyappa in terms of mudras. The costume is the mixture of the costume in Vidooshaka in Chakyar Koothu and the dancer of Thullal. The last ritual is the playing of the Sanku and pulling down the Kooru from the pandal. Chenda, Para and Elathalam are the musical instruments.<sup>11</sup> In Ayyappan Thiyyattu, the picture on the floor represents Lord Ayyappa and the songs and dance are in praise of him.<sup>12</sup>

### **Ayyappan Vilakku**

This is a dance performed by two dancers, dressed up as the legendary Ayyappan and Vavar, striking with swords and executing vigorous movements, imitating the fight between them. It is danced in front of numerous miniature temples, constructed out of tender coconut fronds and plantain leaf stalks. In the last stage, a huge fire, called Aazhi, is lit and the dancers jump into the burning embers while still dancing.<sup>13</sup>When the Ayyappan Pattu is presented with excessively described stories and celebrated in a luxurious manner, it is called Ayyappan Vilakku. On these occasions, dance forms and story plays are conducted.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Philomina, K.V., *Op. cit.*, pp.47-48.

<sup>11</sup> *Essays on the Cultural Formation of Kerala, Kerala State Gazetteer*, Vol. IV, Part- II, Government of Kerala, 1999, p.47.

<sup>12</sup> Mallika Sarabhai, *Performing Arts of Kerala*, Mapin Publishing Pvt. Ltd., Ahmedabad, 1994, p.77.

<sup>13</sup> Shovana Narayan, *Folk Dances of India Unity and Diversity*, Shubhi Publications, Gurgaon, 2017, p.211.

<sup>14</sup> Philomina, K.V., *Op. cit.*, p.47.

Many miniature temples are constructed out of coconut frond and plantain leaf stalks. Then songs are sung on the famous fight between Ayyappan and Vavar. In tune with the different rhythms and rhythms of this devotional song, two dancers in the costume and make up of Ayyappan and Vavar, perform by striking with swords and defending with coconut fronds. The dancers execute vigorous foot-movement. In the last stage, an enormous fire, called aazhi, is lit and the dancers jump into the burning embers still dancing.<sup>15</sup>

### **Chavittukali**

A tribal dance form in the southern Malabar region, Chavittukali is performed by tribes like Kanakkar, Cherumar, Pulayar and Koodar. Though not essentially ritualistic in nature, the art form is performed mostly during temple festivals, especially in Bhadrakali temples. Rarely the art form is taken outside the precincts of temples and it is sometimes played at houses and paddy fields. There are two divisions in Chavittukali-the one played by men are called Aankali and one by women, is called Penkali. There are variations in the steps and rhythms of these two types. Usually, ten-twelve people are necessary for a performance. The dance is choreographed in such a way that anyone can partake in it.<sup>16</sup>

In the festival season, one can see hundred more persons. The speciality of this art form is that anyone can participate in the art form. It is the pleasant rhythm of Chavittukali, practised by the agricultural community of the region.<sup>17</sup> The rhythmic steps and songs have enthralled the audience. It is performed by the artistes of the Mangalam and Paradur desams, who assemble on both the sides of the field.<sup>18</sup>

### **Elelakkaradi**

This is a heroic group dance, in which almost the whole community of men, women and children take part. The dance is very common with the tribals, called Irular of Attappadi in Palghat District. The dance brings out the fight of the people against the

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<sup>15</sup> *Dances of Kerala*, Department of Information & Public Relations, Government of Kerala, 2004, p.29.

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.malappuramtourism.org>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.keralatourism.org>

<sup>18</sup> *The New India Express*, 26/3/2009.

wild bears, which often attack their hamlets.<sup>19</sup> Here the dancers move out in rhythmic steps, with vociferous shouts and war cries and keep time to the beatings of the primitive drums.<sup>20</sup> The different stages, in the fight against the wild beasts, are very well presented.<sup>21</sup>



### **Kanyarkali**



Kanyarkali is a ritual art. It is performed in Kerala, especially in Palghat District. As it is meant for the propitiation of Bhagavathi, Kanyarkali has got different names like Desathukali and Ponnakali. According to some, it indicates the inception of agrarian festival in Palghat District. It is staged in a peculiar pandal in a Bhagavathi temple yard. Kanyarkali is presented, either by Nairs or other equally ranked members. Six types of musical instruments are used in Kanyarkali. They are tambourine, drums, musical drum,

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<sup>19</sup> Vilanilam, J.V., Antony Palackal and Sunny Luke, *Introduction to Kerala Studies*, Vol. II, International Institute for Scientific and Academic Collaboration, New Jersey, USA, 2012, p.496.

<sup>20</sup> *Kerala an Authentic Handbook*, Information Public Relations Department, Government of Kerala, 2010. p.351.

<sup>21</sup> Vilanilam, J.V., Antony Palackal and Sunny Luke, Vol. II, p.496.



gong, cymbal and a small drum. Songs are in praise of gods and goddesses. Kanyarkali is presented thrice by singing songs. Vattakkalippattu, Andikkuthppattu, Malamakkalippattu are the integral part of Kanyarkali. In the former Kanyarkali songs, the Tamil influence was obvious. Kanyarkali is conducted as a part of land worship. It is also conducted at the time of sowing seeds and festivals like Vela and Pooram.<sup>22</sup>

In the Thalasseri region, Kanniyarkali resembles the theyyam performance in which headgear is worn.<sup>23</sup> The programme for each day is known by a different name—the first day's Kanniyarkali being called Eravakkali and the next three days items being known as Andikoothu, Vallon and Malama respectively.<sup>24</sup> While in Eravakkali Cherumi and Cherumman act as prominent characters, in Andikkoth, the characters are mendicants called Aandis. In Vallonkali Valluvass act and in the Malamakkali, the Malayas perform. After having completed the four day performance, all actors leave the ground only after performing the Vattakkali. This practice is also known as Poovaran Chadangu.<sup>25</sup> The costumes are very colourful.<sup>26</sup>

Kanyarkali has mainly two parts. The first part is Vattakkali and the second is called the Purattukali. As far as Vattakkali is concerned, it is a ritual art form in which the participants need not have remarkable dress items. Here the actors are divided into two groups, who perform the Vattakkali by singing and beating rhythms. It starts only after pandal entry and circumambulating the floor. Purattu, the second part of the play is meant for entertaining the audience. The wide usage of fun in Purattu, encourages the audience to think and laugh. The pandal, which is decorated by tender coconut leaves, is known as Onpathukal Panthal (nine pillared panthal). By the side of the middle pillar, there would be a pedestal, sword and a floor lamp. Besides these performers, there would be an oracle or Velichappatu.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Philomina, K.V., *Op. cit.*, pp.59-60.

<sup>23</sup> Shanavas, P. N., *Kerala 2006*, Stark World Publishing Pvt. Ltd., 2006, p.329.

<sup>24</sup> Shovana Narayan, *Op. cit.*, p.244.

<sup>25</sup> Philomina, K.V., *Op. cit.*, pp.59-60.

<sup>26</sup> Shovana Narayan, *Op. cit.*, p.244.

<sup>27</sup> Philomina, K.V., *Op. cit.*, pp.59-60.

Kanyarkali is celebrated in the month of March or April, in Kurumba Bhagavathy temples, in Palghat. It is a quick and swift dance, attuned to the rhythmic the devotional folk songs and asuravadyas. They are said to begin from the pursuit of martial arts when the region was under threat of attack from nearby Kongunadu. Kanyarkali depicts the life of the Malayalam, who were one-time slaves and dependents of the feudal chieftains of the Malabar area in Kerala. The accompanying folk songs also shed some light on the ancient feudal relationships. In Kannyarkali, practised in the Palghat area, a person in the role of an untouchable, holds forth on the equality of man, insignificance of caste and impermanence of manmade institutions.<sup>28</sup>

Kanyarkali is heavily influenced by the social, cultural, economic and political environment of the time. Kanyarkali is commonly performed by male, members of the Nair community. The group of performers is all male with no female presence. The feminine characters are portrayed by men, dressed as women. However, there have been recent attempts by cultural activists, to bring girls into the band of performers. These girls were made part of the singing group, to a performance in 2010, in Kakkayur Desam. They were permitted to stand outside the pandal and watch the performances. But age-old traditions are always hard to break and their attempts have not received much support from the community of artists. The rules of the art form have been approved, down from one generation to the next without the support of any formal text or scripture.

Kanyarkali is a combination of dance, drama, music, song and martial arts and it is usually performed for four consecutive nights, as a part of Vishu celebrations.<sup>29</sup> Kanyarkali is a word derived from Kannakiyammankali. Kannakiyammankali mostly has songs to pacify Kannaki. Kanyarkali demands the ardour and power of youth because its rapid movements resemble martial art form. It is encouraging to see the girls from the other communities, performing the art form and thereby ending the male dominance of centuries. But the dance form fails to attract able youngsters of the region, who prefer lucrative jobs. Mr. Sreevatsan said.<sup>30</sup> Traditionally, this performance lasts for four days.

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<sup>28</sup> Shanavas, P. N., *Op. cit.*, p.329.

<sup>29</sup> *Times of India*, 13/8/2018.

<sup>30</sup> *The Hindu*, 22/7/2016.

But now, it is reduced to a few hours. During the longer form of the performance, there were sheds attached to temples for Kanyarkali performance.<sup>31</sup>

## **Kathakali**

Kerala is the home of Kathakali, the classical drama of India. There is a very ancient story regarding the creation of Kerala.<sup>32</sup> It is considered to be one of the most glorious theatres of imagination and creativity.<sup>33</sup> Vellinezhi has a rich legacy, evolving the most popular and refined style of performing Kathakali.<sup>34</sup> Kalluvazhi Chitta, the most popular school of Kathakali, had its origin in Palghat and its exponent was late Sri Vazhenkada Kunju Nair.



The Vellinezhi village has over four dozen training centers for Kathakali in the Kalluvazhi Chitta. It had also a large number of training centers for other performing arts like Koodiyattam and Thullal. The majority of the living Kathakali artists are from this village.<sup>35</sup>

Palghat District also gave her own men to Kathakali. Guru Kunju Kurup, who was awarded Padma Bhooshan for his outstanding contribution to Kathakali, was the

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<sup>31</sup> *The News Minute*, 17/8/2017.

<sup>32</sup> Krishna Rao, U.S and Chandrabhaga Devi, U.K., *A Panorama of Indian Dances*, Sri Satguru Publications, New Delhi, 1993, p.45.

<sup>33</sup> Valluru Prabhakaraiah, *Indian Heritage and Culture*, Neelkamal Publications Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 2013, p. 214.

<sup>34</sup> *The Hindu*, 21/12/2017.

<sup>35</sup> *The Hindu*, 12/7/2014.

greatest exponent of this art. Kavusseri Swamy Bhagavathar and Gopala Krishna Bhagavathar were famous Kathakali players, who were known throughout Kerala.<sup>36</sup>

### **Koothu and Koodiyattam**

Koothu and Koodiyattam are very ancient acting styles of Kerala. Chakiyarkoothu is a more light-hearted performance mode, akin to contemporary stand-up comedy and this ancient art was at first confined to temple sanctuaries. It was afterward popularized by Mani Madhava Chakyar.<sup>37</sup> Mani Madhava Chakyar was born on 15 February 1899, at Killikurissi Mangalam village of Palghat District. Only a handful of artistes, with rare talents like Mani Madhava Chakyar, know about this very ancient art form.



Chakyar Koothu is normally performed by a small clan of artistes in Kerala, called “Chakyars”, who specialise in this form of performing art. It is a unique art form of Kerala, where spontaneous humour, ready wit, immaculate storytelling, mimicking capabilities and biting sarcasm are the essence. The beauty of Koothu lies in the fact that it is easily intelligible and enjoyable for a wide spectrum of people. Kids or grown ups, men or women all enjoy this art form, which transcends barriers of caste, language, religion and creed.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Kareem, C.K., *Kerala District Gazetteers Palghat*, Government of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, 1976, p. 141.

<sup>37</sup> Vilanilam, J.V. Antony Palackal and Sunny Luke, *Introduction to Kerala Studies*, Vol. I, *Op. cit.*, p.492.

<sup>38</sup> Geeta Radhakrishna, *Prakruti Nrityam The Dance of Nature*, G.R Menon, Mumbai, 2003 p. 14



Kudiattam, the Sanskrit theatre tradition of Kerala, is one of the surviving traditions of River Nila. Padmasri Mani Madhava Chakyar Smaraka Gurukulam still keeps its tradition and plays a major role in Kudiattam training, revival and performance, under the aegis of Guru Padmasri P K Narayanan Nambiar. In the history of Kudiattam, the role of Mani family of Chakyar is distinct and Guru Mani Madhava Chakyar was instrumental in many revolutionary changes in Kudiattam. He started a formal Gurukulam in 1982, for training Kudiattam, Chakyarkoothu, Nangiarkoothu and related artforms at Killikurissi Mangalam near Ottappalam in Palghat District, irrespective of caste and religion. Continuing the legacy of Guru Mani Madhava Chakyar, his son, Padmasri P K Narayanan Nambiar named the Gurukulam as Padmasri Mani Madhava Chakyar Smaraka Gurukulam, which is now commonly known as Mani Gurukulam.<sup>39</sup> Mani Gurukulam is now a recognized center under Central Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi, for providing training in Kudiattam and its allied art forms, in various disciplines of acting, percussion, Chutti etc.<sup>40</sup>

### **Kummatti**

Kummatti is an ancient folk art, performed in Wyanad and some parts of Palghat Districts to propitiate the goddess. In Thrissur, it is done during Onam, as a form of entertainment while in Ottappalam, it marks the commencement of the harvest season. Kummatti is performed by Hindu children, who go from door to door in groups of eight

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<sup>39</sup> *Welcome Kerala*, Vol 9, Issue 5, November- December, Kannur, 2017, p.4.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p.6.

to ten.<sup>41</sup> Kummattikali is a famous colourful mask-dance of south Malabar, performed during the festival of Onam.<sup>42</sup> This dance is a localised version of Padayani, and includes songs, dances and Kolam drawings, in an attempt to appease the goddess.<sup>43</sup>

Kummatti is an amusement art form, conducted in many districts of Kerala, as a part and parcel of agrarian festival. Kummattikali, performed in the Namboodiri manas, was later on appropriated by the communities like Mannans. It is during the Onam season that Kummatti is performed. Youths and children, with their colourful dress settings, participate in the Kummattikali. The travel of Maveli, who had ruled Kerala, to the hell, is the theme of presenting the Kummattikali. It is Lord Siva's attendants who perform the Kummattikali.<sup>44</sup> Kummattikali is a mask dance, widely prevalent in South Malabar. The dancers wear brightly painted wooden masks. For the period of onam season, groups of dancers, donning masks and adorning themselves with leaves and grass, go from house to house. The rhythm is provided by vibrating the cord of a bow-like instrument called Onavillu.<sup>45</sup>



In Ottappalam Taluk of Palghat District, Kummattikali signifies the beginning of the agricultural festival. The performers are washermen. Kummatti begins soon after the Makaram harvest, that takes place in January. They wear banana leaves as costume.

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<sup>41</sup> Menon, C.A., *Kerala Festival Message-2009-2013*, A Directory of festivals in Kerala with glossary of Kerala festivals, Chembakassery Publications, Thrissur, 2008, p.23.

<sup>42</sup> Vilanilam, J.V., Antony Palackal and Sunny Luke, Vol. II, *Op. cit.*, p.492.

<sup>43</sup> Teresa Cannon, Peter Davis, *Kerala*, Lonely Planet Publications, Australia, 2000, p.35.

<sup>44</sup> Philomina, K.V., *Op. cit.*, p.24.

<sup>45</sup> *Dances of Kerala*, Department of Information & Public Relations, Government of Kerala, 2004, p.50.

The performers are dressed in arecanut spathe or masks on their faces. Charcoal powder is applied on the body. They do not sing. This has been performed in ancient days as an offering. Kummattikali can today be seen in its pristine form in the Bhadrakali Temple at Pudusseri, in Palghat District, where it is an important part of the annual festival. Kummattikali is also a key feature of the Konganpata festival, held in the month of Makaram, every year in Chittur, Palghat. This festival has a historical association. It is said that on one occasion, the ruler of Palghat had to face a fierce attack from the Kongu King. The ruler of Chittur, in a gesture of help, sent his men to ward off the attack. It is in commemoration of this event that the Konganpata is celebrated yearly. However, the participants in this are only kids.<sup>46</sup>

Kummattikali provides ample opportunity to perform freely, forgetting their selves and effectively feigning to be others as well as providing popular entertainment. Without any particular training, anyone can take part in this. All, who dance, have their faces covered with wooden masks and they have to cover the whole body with Parapatkaputu. When this grass is not easily available, certain other leaves can be used as substitutes. The aesthetic element in Kummattikali comes from the beautiful artistically carved masks. The chief characters, which appear in a kummatti performance, are from the Puranic characters. Some others are taken from real life. In the olden times, this art was used to be performed by the Nair community but now everyone can participate. It is a festival dance where gods and demons are presented comically, by putting on masks depicting various characters. It is also one of those theatrical forms, where masks are used abundantly and it is presented in a particular setting. It gives a rare opportunity for the spectators to get a feel of fantastic power and charm of masks.<sup>47</sup>

In order to lead the effigies of Kummatti, there would be the teachers (Asans) as Thalla Kummattis. There would be ten important characters and five or six other figures. They used to wear Kummatti stick on hand (bows), wearing mask and a crown on head. Sometimes, they use the palmyra leaf umbrella. Decorative articles, for the Kummatti

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<sup>46</sup> Nirupama Chaturvedi, *Encyclopedia of Indian Dances*, Anmol Publications Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 2007, pp.199-200.

<sup>47</sup> *Folk India- A Comprehensive study of Indian Folk Music and Culture*, Vol. 11, Sundeep Prakashan, New Delhi, 2004, pp.217-218.

figures, are made out of natural objects. In order to make artificial faces, thin timbers like pala, coral tree and the root of jack tree are used. Dress settings are made in accordance with the nature of the body structures. The body is tied or fastened by the vine of nux vomica or parpitakappullu (a medicinal plant, also known as Kummattipullu) or nhanganam pullu (grass). For each day's performance, these are made separately. The main instrument is the bow. The bows are made out of either the root of tree or bamboo. Each year, after the performance of Kummatti, there is the custom of keeping the bow. In the coming years, when the Kummatti is performed, the children used to sing and dance by using this bow.<sup>48</sup>

They wear costumes, which are traditionally made of grass and dry banana leaves and they use masks that identify them as various characters in the Ramayana and Mahabharatha. On arrival at a house, they start dancing, accompanied by songs, a small drum and a particular string instrument known as the Villu.<sup>49</sup> An important feature of Kummatti is the humorous and rhythmic songs. It is for the humorous characters, that appear in the midst of the play and there is singing of Thallappattu and Mannan Nair Pattu. All Kummatti songs explain the legends and rites of Kummattikali.<sup>50</sup>

In the splendid theatre tradition of Kerala, masks are used in religious rituals, classical dances, popular entertainments and dramatic arts. A participant in the performance of a customary ritual uses various devices, including a mask, in order to attain the necessary state of mind and the appropriate ambience for transformation into the super human being that he represents. The mental condition of one who puts on the costumes and make up prescribed by sacerdotal tradition in Keralite rituals like theyyam and Padayani, is fundamentally different from that of an actor.<sup>51</sup>

Kummattikali is the name given to a variety of mask dances, popular in the Palghat District and Trissur District. In Palghat, Kummattikali is associated with Devi

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<sup>48</sup> Philomina, K.V., *Op. cit.*, p.24.

<sup>49</sup> Menon, C.A., *Op. cit.*, p.23.

<sup>50</sup> Philomina, K.V., *Op. cit.*, p.24.

<sup>51</sup> *Folk India- A Comprehensive study of Indian Folk Music and Culture*, Vol-11, *Op. cit.*, pp.216-217.



temples, where they are performed as part of rituals.<sup>52</sup> Kummattikali is region-specific and objective-specific in Palghat District. In Ottappalam Taluk Kummatti signifies the commencement of the agricultural festival. Kummatti in Chittoor is intended to revive an item in the historical Konganpada, the invasion of Kerala by the Tamils.<sup>53</sup> In Pudukkottai region it is a ritualistic offering to Bhadrakali, as part of annual festivals. In Palghat, the dance is performed with great reverence and devotion to propitiate the goddess.<sup>54</sup>

Kummattikali is a folk dance in which the performers wear very attractive and artistically made masks.<sup>55</sup> The mask, for the Kummatti performance, can be made only by a skilled craftsman, who has years of experience in wood carving. Today such skilled artisans are very few in number. In 1986, there was an attempt to document the work connected with all the masks used in Kummattikali. It was revealed, that there are about forty different kinds of masks in use. Accepting these old masks as models, are planned. The Natana Kairali has also plans of conducting detailed studies and arranging workshops in order to revive the art of making theatre masks.<sup>56</sup> Masks are an integral element in many Keralite rituals and theatrical arts. Kummattikali is one of those theatrical forms, where masks are used abundantly and it is presented in a particular setting. It gives a rare opportunity for the spectators to get a feel of fantastic power and charm of masks.<sup>57</sup> Kummattikali can today be seen in its pristine form, in the Bhadrakali Temple at Pudukkottai in Palghat District, where it forms an important part of the annual festival.<sup>58</sup>

### **Meenakshinatakam and Kamsanatakam**

Meenakshinatakam and Kamsanatakam are two crude dance dramas, which are still in vogue in some parts of Palghat District. There are some scholars, who believe that

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<sup>52</sup> Mallika Sarabhai, *Op. cit.*, p.67.

<sup>52</sup> *Welcome Kerala*, 21/2/2016.

<sup>53</sup> Chummar Choondal, *Studies in Folklore of Kerala*, College Book House, Trivandrum, p.60.

<sup>54</sup> Mallika Sarabhai, *Op. cit.*, p.67.

<sup>55</sup> Venu, C., *Puppetry and Lesser Known Dance Traditions of Kerala*, Natana Kairali, Thrissur, 2004, p.82.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p.88.

<sup>57</sup> *Folk India- A Comprehensive study of Indian Folk Music and Culture*, Vol-11, *Op. cit.*, p.218.

<sup>58</sup> Mallika Sarabhai, *Op. cit.*, p.67.

these dances are earlier than even Krishnanattam and Ramanattam etc and these dances are the Kerala counter parts of Teru Koothu of Tamil Nadu, the Veedhinatakam of Andhra Pradesh and the Yakshagana of Karnataka. But there are others, who strongly argue that those two dances are hardly a hundred years old. Whatever that may be, both Meenakshinatakam and Kamsanatakam have the characteristics of Mohiniyattam and Kathakali. The lasya of Mohiniyattam and the thandava of Kathakali are well mixed in the dance sequence of Meenakshinatakam. Even the Elakiyattam of Kathakali, male characters have to be done by Meenakshi in Meenakshinatakam. The make-up and costumes bear considerable resemblance to that in Kathakali and the characters are all allowed to speak.<sup>59</sup>

### **Ottan Thullal**



Ottan Thullal is essentially a dance form, to be performed by a single person. In this art, the dancer should possess rare creative ability and an intuition and instinct to attract the minds of the common people. This is usually performed in the temples, marriages ceremonies and even for private entertainment.<sup>60</sup> Kunjan Nambiar, the most famous of all Malayalam poets and the founder of Thullal, a purely Kerala art form, was born in a small village called Killikurissi Mangalam (Lakkidi) in Palghat District.<sup>61</sup> It was he who popularised the Malayalam art and poetry by taking them out from the temple premises and brought them out to the public audience. His Thullal Pattu was a new

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<sup>59</sup> *Dances of Kerala*, Department of Information & Public Relations, Government of Kerala, 2004, p.76.

<sup>60</sup> Krishna Rao, U.S. and Chandrabhaga Devi, U.K., *Op. cit.*, p.48.

<sup>61</sup> <https://palakkadtourism.org>

device to attract the people. The trend of numerous expositions of social evils is seen in his Thullal works, composed for dance-recital.<sup>62</sup>



### **Killikurissi Mangalam**

The genius of a maverick rebel, the great Kunjan Nambiar, who could not tolerate the insult of a Chakkiyar, was responsible for the Ottanthullal. It was a revolt against the feudal monopoly over the arts and took classical themes and current social satire, direct to the masses.<sup>63</sup> Kunjan Nambiar, the renowned poet of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, first introduced Thullal art form. Kunjan Nambiar, the founder and a major exponent of this dance form, tried to bring out through his performance, the social conditions of his time, criticism against the malignant tendencies of the age and sarcasm against the wealthy and the aristocrats.<sup>64</sup> He is assisted by a musician, who gives lead from behind.<sup>65</sup>

### **Paana**

Paana is a ritual done, to propitiate the Goddesses Bhadrakali in Central Kerala, especially in Thrissur Malappuram and Palghat Districts. It is an offering done by individual families and communities. Paana is traditionally performed under a beautifully decorated pandal (awning), whose sacred space is occupied by an Ashtakom Kalam, a powder drawing of Tantric symbols in five different earth colours, featuring the eye-like design seen in a peacock's tail feathers.

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<sup>62</sup> Kareem, C.K., *Kerala District Gazetteers: Palghat*, Government of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, 1976, p.554.

<sup>63</sup> Singh, K.S., *People of India Kerala*, Vol- XXVII, Part- 1, Anthropological Survey of India, Affiliated East-West Press Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 2002, p.65.

<sup>64</sup> Vilanilam, J.V., Antony Palackal and Sunny Luke, Vol. I, *Op. cit.*, p.244.

<sup>65</sup> Vilanilam, J.V., Antony Palackal and Sunny Luke, Vol. II, *Op. cit.*, p.1307.



In places where a kalam is not customary, a branch of a Pala tree is brought to the area, accompanied by around a dozen dancers and musicians playing various percussion instruments and the crowd shouting as they move. The rituals begin with offerings to the eight directions and a dramatic dance known as Thiriuzhichal, in which the dancer passes a bunch of burning tapers over his body. More offerings are made and songs are then sung in praise of Bhadrakali, before groups of dancers wielding canes and goes around the deity. Finally, the Velichapadu, the shamanic medium of the goddess, becomes possessed by her spirit and performs a dance accompanied by cymbals and a drum, called a Para, a type of chenda. Paana starts at dusk and last until the early hours of the morning.<sup>66</sup>

Small provisional shrines are constructed and variously decorated. A branch of the pala tree is taken around the temple, by about ten to twelve, who dance all the way to the rhythm set by percussion instruments and to the vociferous shouting and chanting of the accompanying crowd. This part of the dance is called the Piditham. The bough is then installed in the centre of the shrine and pooja is performed by the village leader. The pooja consists of floral offerings to the accompaniment of dancing around the god. Then a person dances around the god, with burning torches.<sup>67</sup> This is followed by ten or twelve persons, again dancing around with canes in their hands. After this, songs are sung, glorifying the success of Kali over Darika. The final part of the dance is Velichapad

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<sup>66</sup> Menon, C.A., *Op. cit.*, p.27.

<sup>67</sup> *Dances of Kerala*, Department of Information & Public Relations, Government of Kerala, 2004, p.26.

Thullal.<sup>68</sup> One of the most antiquated offerings to Kali is Pana, often performed by Nairs in their homes. Treated as a three days village festival, the Pana is also performed inside the precincts of the Kavu.<sup>69</sup>

The folk ritual, Pallipaana, seen in Central Kerala, is performed to please goddess Bhadrakali. It is a twenty four hour ritual, with a variety of ritualistic functions. Due to its difficult nature and the expensive budget, only few temples conduct this ritual annually. But several temples conduct this, with less number of performers, as there is a lack of trained artists. The greatest worry for today's performers is that youngsters do not wish to enter to this field, to uphold the tradition of Pallipaana.<sup>70</sup>

Till a few decades ago, blood sacrifices formed an integral part of Pana rituals. Today blood-coloured water, a mixture of turmeric and lime, has replaced blood in this rite called Kuruthi, where the priest pours the liquid onto himself. There are variations of Pana which are shorter and can last one or two days. In one such variation, Pallipaana, an additional rite consists of dancing on burning embers. In another, an idol of the goddess is taken around the village in a procession, stopping at each house or hut, to enable the residents to pay homage. Spiritual preparations for Pana last forty one days, during which all the participants-dancers, singers and musicians- prepare themselves and rehearse the event. Though the dancers do not require great technical skill, what they lack in technique, they make up in fervour and frenzy.<sup>71</sup>

### **Pallukali**

This is a dramatic visual and ritualistic art. Very popular in Chittoor Taluk in Palghat District. It is handled by those belonging to the Pariah community. An artist, in the costume of Ganapathy, appears initially on the stage. He is preceded by such characters as Panakaran (rich man), his servant, his two wives, a Kolkaran (he is also the comedian). After the other characters make their entrance, the Ganapathy withdraws.

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<sup>68</sup> *Kerala an Authentic Handbook*, Information Public Relations Department, Government of Kerala, 2010. p.355.

<sup>69</sup> Mallika Sarabhai, *Op. cit.*, p.75.

<sup>70</sup> *Welcome Kerala*, 21/2/2016.

<sup>71</sup> Mallika Sarabhai, *Op. cit.*, pp.75-76.

Then the theme is expounded. The chief sings a song in Kavu style. According to the song, those on the stage start acting and singing the dialogues. Of the two wives of the rich man, one turns informant against him. This and the misfortunes that go along upon this, form the core of the theme. With prayers about the other wife, it all ends happily. The male characters have costumes similar to those of Kathakali. The feminine characters don dhotis and upper cloth. Facial make up is used. The female characters tie up their hair. Nandanar, who was refused admittance into the temple, but finally got himself admitted through his high devotion and won many devotees to him, is presented in this art form, with the help of music and dancing.<sup>72</sup>

### **Poratt and Porattukali**

Porattukali is a fascinating form of folk theatre, that emanates from the resolute will of the downtrodden. In the folk theatre of Palghat, Porattukali is an interfusion of dance, music and satire. Humour is the characteristic of these productions and caste was the basis on which they were written and designed. This 150 year old art form, is perfect in its conception and presentation. These performances are easily accepted by the people.<sup>73</sup>



Porattukali is the favourite game of Pana tribe. Humour is the soul of this art. The term ‘Poratt’ is derived from the nature of this art because this dance is on the outside or exterior. Poratt forms are also seen in Poorakkali, Kanyarkali and Kaliyoot. In addition to this, it is also present in Kothamoori, Kurathiyattam, Ivarnatakam, Kenthronpatt, Mudi yettu, Chavittunatakam etc. The major participants in Poratt are

<sup>72</sup> Shovana Narayan, *Folk Dances of India Unity in Diversity*, *Op. cit.*, p.212.

<sup>73</sup> <https://www.keralatourism.org>

Kuravan, Kurathi, Cheruman, Cherumi, Mannathi, servant, Choklian and Vidooshakan. Along with these participants, Porattu actors also used to come on the stage. Porattu actors include servant, Kuravan, Kurathi, Pookari, Vannathi, Thottian, Thottichi, Cherumi, Vannan etc. Vidooshakan raises questions in this artistic form.<sup>74</sup>

The word, Purattu, means imitation or mimicry. It is a humorous folk-play which a lot of characters like Chettiar, Chettichi, Kuravan and Kurathi are cleverly imitated to evoke laughter. The accompanying songs are almost Tamil. The Purattu is performed by Ezhavas or Pulayas.<sup>75</sup> Interesting songs and humorous dialogues are the chief factors, which make Porattukali an interesting folk art. Porattu dance is based on rhythmic songs. This art is performed in temple places, paddyfields and playgrounds. A shamiana is arranged and a green room and other facilities are provided to perform Porattu. Porattukali starts with *kelikott* as any other ritual art and before starting, there is a custom of singing devotional songs by all participants under the leadership of Vidooshakan. Each artist worships the god before performing his role. Each actor has different costumes. Loose pyjama and suit are the dress of Vidooshakan. Others have colourful dresses. Female characters are also performed by males. Vidooshakan controls the performance by the dialogues with humour and sarcasm and there lies the success of Porattukali. Porattukali is very common in Palghat District. This is also performed in Thrissur and Kasargod Districts.<sup>76</sup>

Porattu dramas are conducted at public places, aiming at social criticism. Their aim is to convince the society about the contemporary events, through their dramas in a humorous and critical manner. Porattu dramas are performed by the Pana communities. It is prominently performed in the District of Palghat. Chief instruments are Chenda (drum), Harmonium, Mridangam and Ilathalam (cymbal). All characters, including female ones, are presented by men artists.<sup>77</sup> As the dusk creeps into the coziness of night, the stage will be lit by the yellow refulgence of lamps to commence the play.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Philomina, K.V., *Op. cit.*, p.80.

<sup>75</sup> *Dances of Kerala*, Department of Information & Public Relations, Government of Kerala, 2004, p.30.

<sup>76</sup> Philomina, K.V., *Op. cit.*, p.80

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p.81.

<sup>78</sup> <https://www.keralatourism.org>

Porattu Nadakam is an ironic conversational drama, performed traditionally in the paddy fields after harvest. This is an art form, performed mainly by the Panan community in Palghat District. Porattu factually means the art form, that is performed outside. Naturally it is the dance of people who were thrown out or uncared for. The humourous drama has both song and dialogue, presented in a question and answer format. When caste system was much more widespread in Kerala, people from the lower castes, who were downtrodden by the upper caste communities, used Porattu drama as a tool for criticism. When caste system was widespread, the people of the lower caste did not have opportunities to question the inequality they faced. Hence they used this art form, as a device of criticism of the power structure.<sup>79</sup>

### **Poothan and Thira**

Poothan and Thira is a ritual dance whose emphasis is on its costumes. It is performed, with slight variations, in many parts of Kerala. In Palghat, Malappuram and the northern part of Thrissur Districts, it is called Poothanum Thirayam after its two chief characters. Though the dance is unsophisticated, its appeal lies in the spectacular costumes consisting of large headdresses, long false hair, huge pleated skirts and masks with projecting eyes, high-ridged noses and protruding tongues. The dancers also wear anklets and belts of bells.<sup>80</sup>

The ritual art form of 'Pootha and Thira' is played in connection with the seasonal and occasional celebrations of Pooram and Talappoli, in the temples and kavus situated in Kerala. This can be done only by veteran and more skilled artists, as a martial exercise. Thira symbolizes Kali and Pootham, the demons. Pootham would leave two days earlier during the celebrations like Pooram in certain regions of Kerala whereas Thira would leave only on the last day.

The people belonging to Mannan community perform this art. It is performed in the kavus of Valluvanad. The Paraya communities came to know that the tribal communities, inhabiting the forests and the adjoining areas, used to represent the figures of Gods for propitiating and they adopted this ritual for themselves, by making

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<sup>79</sup> *The News Minute*, 17/8/2017.

<sup>80</sup> Menon, C.A., *Op. cit.*, p.31.



remarkable changes. Believing in the gain of wealth and prosperity by propitiating the gods and goddess like Parama Siva, Bhadrakali etc, the Mannan communities began to represent the figures of their gods, in front of their installed images of Siva, Bhadrakali and Mulliar on certain festive occasions. The powder of charcoal, turmeric and soil are smeared on their bodies without any prescribed measure. All sorts of clothes are used. Their costume settings have no wrinkles or foldings. Figures are named as Siva, Bhadrakali etc.



A systematic and rhythmic dance would be seen in the arts of Pootha and Thira. Thira actors do their performances for a long period. They have distinct dresses and different instruments. Thudi is for Pootha and Para for Thira. The players wear fascinating and distinct dresses for both the Thira and Pootha. Thira artists wear turmeric lined dresses and Pootha artists ribbon. A chain of flowers would be seen on the neck. For Pootha, the edge portion of ribbon would be tied and semicircular wooden kolam is made out of the jackfruit tree's stem. Chenganam grass and the network of peacock's feather are suspended on either side. For Pootha kola, coral tree (Munk) and pala are preferred for mask. The tongue would be pushed forward. There is a system of pouring rice and flowers before dressing. After having performed the dances in the Kavuu, each and every house would be visited, for receiving gifts. The Pana communities would use Pootha, having no mask. Along with these Pootha, Thekkan and Thekkathi art forms can be seen.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Philomina, K.V., *Op. cit.*, pp.78-79.

Poothan-Thira is an art form, entrenched in Hindu Mythology. During the January and March every year, Poothan and Thira visit all the households in the region, before they conclude their performance at the Bhadrakali temple. When Poothan and Thira visit the households, they are given gifts by the families. In the past, it was restricted to rice, but now, many families also give them money as a mark of respect. They believe that god blesses the houses visited by Poothan and Thira and they can get away from misfortunes.<sup>82</sup>

The Poothan and Thira are the native art forms of Valluvanadu region (The area forming the intersecting locations of the present day Palghat, Malappuram and Thrissur Districts). Members of the Mannan and Perumannan communities largely perform this dance form, which is now a dying art form. Prof A.K Nambiar, former Secretary of Kerala Folklore Academy, said that Poothan and Thira art forms must be protected in the modern context, considering the message they encompass.<sup>83</sup>

“Our ancestors did this traditionally and even now, we follow it in the same way”, says Satheesan, Poothan-Thira artist, who plays Thira, the goddess.<sup>84</sup> Prof A.K Nambiar, former Secretary of Kerala Folklore Academy, said Poothan and Thira is a vibrant artistic expression of the Kerala’s ancient culture of worshipping the mothers and the women power.<sup>85</sup>

While traditionally these rituals were performed, at the local temple grounds, nowadays they are performed through the year, at cultural events and on stage. As P. Vasudevan, the performer says, “Previously, we hardly survived because of it, now we see that it can actually give livelihood”. The Poothan has changed from a bhayanakam or frightening character to a hasyam, or comical one. The Thira performers, in turn, are now more gymnastic in their performances in order to attract audiences. P. Vasudevan trains young members of the community and has been successful in taking performances outside traditional milieus. There is a sense of achievement of crossing caste and class barriers and a sense of pride that audience come to watch because of the virtuosity of the

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<sup>82</sup> *The News Minute*, 17/8/2017.

<sup>83</sup> *Times of India*, 9/12/2019.

<sup>84</sup> *The News Minute*, 17/8/2017.

<sup>85</sup> *Times of India*, 9/12/2019.

art form. There may be some small support from governmental agencies but it is the success that the performers will have in evolving their tradition and art, with their local spaces, that will ensure their sustainability.<sup>86</sup>

### **Thekkanum Thekkathiyum**

It is a popular in Palghat and Malappuram Districts. This is handled by the Panars. Their daily profession is the creation of palm leaf umbrellas. Two characters (one male and one female) and two percussion instrumentalists form the troupe. The characters sing, exchange dialogues and perform stylized movements, through well formed steps. The instrumentalists repeat the songs and set questions to the characters. Some portions from the Ramayana form the theme of the play and sometimes, portions from the Mahabharatha are used. When wanted by the actors, the accompanist keeps time with tiny cymbals (Kuzhithalam).<sup>87</sup>

### **Vithuchoriyal**

This dance, also recognized as Vishuvela, is a ceremonial dance of Parayyas, held during the sowing season. There are two dancers, one in the make-up of a Bootham and the other like a Velichappadu, with red scarf and sword. They go from house to house, to the accompaniment of percussion instruments and they are offered a full measure of paddy. This is called Parayeduppu. Then they move to the temple where the Thullal (dance) and Kalpikkal (divine ordering) are performed. It is accompanied by songs which seek blessings for an early and bountiful crop. Variations of this dance are also seen in Palghat District, where it is called Vithiduka or Kathiru<sup>88</sup>.

This chapter narrated various dance forms in Palghat district. The next chapter is focuses on the dance form of Pavakathakali and Tholpavakoothu in Palghat District.

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<sup>86</sup> *The New Indian Express*, 12/1/2017.

<sup>87</sup> *Dances of Kerala*, Department of Information & Public Relations, Government of Kerala, 2004, p.57.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 45-46.