

*Dance Forms of Pavaḱathakali and  
Tholpavaḱoothu In Palghat District*

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## CHAPTER 5

### DANCE FORM OF PAVAKATHAKALI AND THOLPAVAKOOTHU IN PALGHAT DISTRICT

This Chapter explains puppetry, puppets and the dance form of Pavakathakali and Tholpavakoothu in Palghat District. Palghat is a gateway into Kerala and this is a District with a history of migrants. It also became a melting pot of cultures and emerged with a fusion, that is now distinctive of Palghat. In Kerala, the traditional glove puppet play is called Pavakathakali. Tholpavakoothu, also known as Pavakoothu (puppet play) and Nizhalattam (shadow play) are a ritualistic puppet show, performed in Palghat, Malappuram and the northern part of Thrissur Districts.

#### **Puppetry**

Puppetry has been one of the most vibrant and thriving theatrical forms in India. It is at once the simplest and the most complicated of enactments, where there are infinite possibilities for innovation and improvisation.<sup>1</sup>



Parmer (1994) describes that puppetry is an ancient art and its antiquity can be established through old scriptures.<sup>2</sup> Puppetry is the product of an age when time did not

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<sup>1</sup> *Akhyan a Celebration of Masks, Puppets and Picture Showmen Traditions of India*, Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts and Sangeeta Nataka Akademi, New Delhi, 2010, p.35.

<sup>2</sup> Bhanumathi, R., *A Study on the Status of Traditional Shadow Puppetry and Puppeteers of South India*, The Gandhigram Rural Institute Deemed University, Gandhigram, Tamilnadu, 2004, p.4.

as yet have a ticking clock face and “entertainment” was a community activity. Puppetry is more complex and more formal and the stories they narrate are the stories, myths and legends of a community.<sup>3</sup> Puppetry, as an art form, is originally linked to a particular social structure and derives its meaning from it.<sup>4</sup>

Indian puppetry has been one of the most ancient arts and still practised throughout the length and breadth of the country.<sup>5</sup> India is blessed with multi structured puppets from different regions, suit to the regionalist, proving its uniqueness in unity in diversity. Traditionally in India, puppetry was used as a popular and an inexpensive medium to transmit knowledge about Indian myths and legends. In India, this art form is practised by a group of families involved in folk art, prevalent in villages. In traditional puppetry, different types of puppets are used in different regions of India. The differences exist in names, structure, and manipulation and presentation methods.<sup>6</sup> Many puppetry forms in India and each region has its own unique form. All of them are performed by specific communities for whom puppetry is a hereditary occupation and they narrate stories from the Ramayana and Mahabharatha already familiar to the audience.<sup>7</sup>

The origin of puppetry in India can be dated back to the pre-historic period, when man residing in the caves, was enamored by the images cast on the wall by flames whereby he could envision a shadowy picture of himself and his fellow beings, with all their gestures and attempts at communication being replicated visually, upon the walls of the caves.<sup>8</sup> Puppetry is earliest theatre, as old as civilisation itself. In India, it exists since 200 B.C in the state of the Maharashtra.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *The Hindu*, 14/9/2012.

<sup>4</sup> *The Hindu*, 23/3/2002.

<sup>5</sup> Sampa Ghosh and Utpal K. Banerjee, *Indian Puppets*, Abhinav Publications, New Delhi, 2005, p.9.

<sup>6</sup> Padmini Rangarajan, *Puppetry: A child plays than serious art form*, Artistic Narration a Journal for Visual and Performing Art Vol -III, Journal Anu Books, Meerut, 2012, p.5.

<sup>7</sup> *The Hindu*, 23/3/2002.

<sup>8</sup> *Akhyana a Celebration of Masks, Puppets and Picture Showmen Traditions of India*, Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts and Sangeeta Nataka Akademi, New Delhi, 2010, p.35.

<sup>9</sup> Article; *Dancing Dolls: Pava Kathakali*, Padma Jayaraj, Thrissur, April 7, 2006.



### **Animal puppet figurine from Harappa**

The ancient Indus Valley Civilisation of Harappa and Mohenjodaro makes significant reference to the existence of puppetry art form. The archeological remnants of terracotta bull, with detachable head with a string and terracotta monkey, that slides up and down a stick, are not only the evidence to prove the prevalence of this performing art but also adaptation of animation technique too. In Mahabharatha, one can find a reference to the art of puppetry and shadow theatre. The Ashokan rock edicts mention about the art of puppetry. Kalidasa and Patanjali talked about the dance drama and puppet theatre and the musical narrative of story telling in their respective Sanskrit plays. In fact, Panini refers to Natya Shastra by Bharatha, in the Second Century. The most important reference is to the Sutradhar, in classic Sanskrit plays about the prime coordinator or stage manager, who holds the strings of dramatic performance.<sup>10</sup>

Puppetry has been successfully used to encourage emotionally and physically handicapped students, to grow their mental and physical faculties. The aesthetic pleasure derived from making of puppets and communicating through them, helps in the all round development of the personality of the child. The presentation of puppet programmes involves the creative efforts of many people functioning together. Nearly all types of puppets are found in India. Puppetry, throughout the ages, has held a significant place in traditional entertainment. Puppets, from several parts of the country, have their own identity. Regional styles of painting and sculpture are reflected in puppets.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Padmini Rangarajan, *Puppetry: A child plays than serious art form*, Artistic Narration a Journal for Visual and Performing Art Vol -III, Journal Anu Books, Meerut, 2012, p.5.

<sup>11</sup> [www.ccrindia.gov.in](http://www.ccrindia.gov.in)

Puppetry, as an art form, not only provides entertainment but also conveys a meaningful and valuable message. Over the years, it has grown into a powerful media of communication. Today, it is not only a form of entertainment but also used by educators and students as a form of communication. Puppetry offers a real challenge to the imagination and creative skill of the individual.<sup>12</sup>

## **Puppets**

A Puppet may be defined as any inanimate figure, given life by the will and spirit of man. The Puppeteer applies various techniques of manipulation and various types of puppet forms, corresponding to the demands of the character.<sup>13</sup> Helen Binyon, in her work, *Puppetry Today*, maintains that “Puppet is man-made actor, inanimate object to which human beings have found a means of giving an appearance of life”.<sup>14</sup>

Puppet performance opens up a thrilling world of entertainment to children and men of all ages and countries. Although the traditional puppet performances are slowing down on the one hand, on the other side, noticeable emergence of the contemporary puppeteers, with varied background innovative use of this art form, is also seen. The utility of this art form is increasing beyond traditional puppet horizon. Now puppets are part of classroom education, teaching with puppets, health and puppets, puppets in prison and so on.<sup>15</sup>

In fact puppets have formed a vital part of our folk art from time immemorial and therefore they, are a valuable contribution to the dramatic and dance folk forms in India. Each region has its own style of puppet theatre, interesting techniques of manipulation, presentation, story value, song rhythms and costume. Like the dance dramas, they too use singers and story narrators, who elucidate the descriptive and dialogue features in the play, supported by music and the drum. The subjects too, as in the dance dramas, cover mythology the epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata and Puranas. Another common

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<sup>12</sup> Bhanumathi, R., *Op. cit.*, p.4.

<sup>13</sup> *Akhyana a Celebration of Masks, Puppets and Picture Showmen Traditions of India*, Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts and Sangeeta Nataka Akademi, New Delhi, 2010, p.35.

<sup>14</sup> Sampa Ghosh and Utpal K. Banerjee, *Op. cit.*, p.13.

<sup>15</sup> Padmini Rangarajan, *Puppetry: A child plays than serious art form*, Artistic Narration a Journal for Visual and Performing Art Vol -III, Journal Anu Books, Meerut, 2012, p. 4

factor is the use of mime. In the actual dance, it is the living performers, who utilize the science of Abhinaya with the use of hand gestures and facial expressions to interpret the story and songs or lyrics but and in the puppet shows, a special vocabulary of just the most necessary words has been evolved, through the years, for easy facile interpretation. Actions and words are made to coincide perfectly in a recognised code and the puppet doing the appropriate and specially worked out actions, for the particular words. In the themes covering mythology, history, legend and romance, there is scope for actual dance to be introduced in these puppet plays.

In India, the effective use of both doll puppets and the more elaborate leather cut and painted puppets are used in the shadow plays. There are the elaborately dressed and ornamented Orissa String Dolls, the Putli Khel of Bengal, the Kathputli of Rajasthan, the Bommalattam wood ad cloth string dolls of Tamil Nadu and the puppets that appear regularly in Kerala and Kerala puppets. The finely cut, designed and painted transparent leather puppets, used in the shadow plays of the Tolu Bommalatta of the puppet theatre of Andhra, the century old transparent deer and goat skin Bommalatta puppets of Tamil Nadu and the Pavai Koothu of Kerala, make interesting and fascinating study.<sup>16</sup>

One possible future direction for puppetry, as a live meaningful tradition, is to change the form to address contemporary concerns.<sup>17</sup> In modern times, educationalists all over the world have realised the potential of puppetry as a medium of communication. Many institutions and individuals in India are connecting students and teachers, in the use of puppetry, for communicating educational concepts.<sup>18</sup> The performance of colourfully dressed puppets will be performed in specially made stage with attractive backgrounds, illuminated lights and background music.

The Puppeteer in India usually culls materials from his own traditions and also applies his creativity in formulating the appearance and function of his puppets.<sup>19</sup> In most

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<sup>16</sup> Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, *The Dance in India*, Taraporevala's Tressure House of Books, Bombay, 1963, p.199.

<sup>17</sup> *The Hindu*, 23/3/2002.

<sup>18</sup> [www.ccertindia.gov.in](http://www.ccertindia.gov.in).

<sup>19</sup> *Akhyan a Celebration of Masks, Puppets and Picture Showmen Traditions of India*, Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts and Sangeeta Nataka Akademi, New Delhi, 2010, p.35.

parts of Asia as well as in India, there are four distinct types of puppets. These are Glove puppets, Rod puppets, String puppets and Shadow puppets. Finger and fist puppets, humanettes and water puppets are also some of the popular forms of puppetry today.

### **Hand/Glove Puppets**

Glove puppets are also known as sleeve, hand or palm puppets and have their head made of papier mache, cloth or wood, with two hands emerging from just below the neck. The rest of the figure consists of a lengthy flowing skirt.<sup>20</sup> This tradition is not so widespread. It is, therefore, seen in very few pockets of the country.<sup>21</sup> Glove puppetry grows popular with its simplicity in rural parts, carried on by nomadic tribes. They sang of local legends and lore.<sup>22</sup> These puppets are like limb dolls, but in the hands of an able puppeteer they are capable of producing a wide range of movements. The manipulation technique is simple. Fingers are inserted into the head and arms of the puppet. With the help of these fingers, the glove puppet comes alive. The tradition of glove puppets in India is prevalent in Uttar Pradesh, Odisha, West Bengal and Kerala.<sup>23</sup> This group of glove puppeteers is composed by itinerant performers, who move from one place to another, with their performances.<sup>24</sup>

### **Rod Puppets**

Rod puppets are an extension of glove-puppets, but often much larger and supported and manipulated by the rods from below.<sup>25</sup> These puppeteers are trained artists in different art forms, that puppetry adapts like skilled in carving, designing, stitching, colouring, scripting, narrating, dance, music and they are good story tellers. Each member of the family incorporates and equips the essential skill of puppetry and it is then passed on to the next generation. Many traditional puppet-shows are deep-rooted in its religious fairs and festivals, narrating stories of the gods and goddesses, in order to seek blessings

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<sup>20</sup> [www.ccertindia.gov.in](http://www.ccertindia.gov.in).

<sup>21</sup> Shovana Narayan, *Folk Dances of India Unity in Diversity*, Shubhi Publications, Gurgaon, 2017, p.68.

<sup>22</sup> Article; *Dancing Dolls: Pava Kathakali*, Padma Jayaraj, Thrissur, April 7, 2006.

<sup>23</sup> [www.ccertindia.gov.in](http://www.ccertindia.gov.in)

<sup>24</sup> *Akhyan a Celebration of Masks, Puppets and Picture Showmen Traditions of India*, Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts and Sangeeta Nataka Akademi, New Delhi, 2010, p.37.

<sup>25</sup> [www.ccertindia.gov.in](http://www.ccertindia.gov.in)

from the almighty, for safeguarding the village community. All puppeteers perform more than a few ritual ceremonies before a puppet show begins.<sup>26</sup> Putul nach of West Bengal imitates the Jatra theatre while in the Kath-nach of Eastern India, the story of Sati Behula is important.<sup>27</sup>

### **String Puppets**

India has a rich and earliest custom of string puppets or marionettes.<sup>28</sup> Today however they are to be seen in a few selected pockets. These are the Kathaputali of Rajasthan, Sakhi kundali of Orissa, Gombeyatta puppets of Karnataka, Kathputali nach of UP, Bihar and Assam, Malasutri, Bahulya of Maharashtra and Bommalattam puppets of Tamilnadu, Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka. Marionettes, having jointed limbs, commanded by strings, allow far greater flexibility and they are therefore, the most articulate of the puppets.<sup>29</sup>

### **Shadow Puppets**

Shadow puppetry is said to have originated in India and China, and they carried Buddhism to countries like Thailand and Germany.<sup>30</sup> Shadow puppets are found in the States of Orissa, Kerala, Andhra, Maharashtra, Tamilnadu and Karnataka. Ravan Chaya from Orissa and Tholpavakoothu from Kerala are the two prominent shadow puppet theatre traditions of India.<sup>31</sup> These puppets are usually made of animal hides, especially of deer and goat. Sometimes, they are ornately coloured and performed.

### **Pavakathakali**

#### Traditional Glove-Puppet Play of Kerala

Pavakathakali or Puppet Kathakali is an art form, that has had its share in making Kathakali the classical dance theatre in its evolution. Bunraku is thus the puppet

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<sup>26</sup> Padmini Rangarajan, *Puppetry: A child plays than serious art form*, Artistic Narration a Journal for Visual and Performing Art Vol -III, Journal Anu Books, Meerut, 2012, p.6.

<sup>27</sup> Shovana Narayan, *Op. cit.*, p.69.

<sup>28</sup> www.certindia.gov.in

<sup>29</sup> Shovana Narayan, *Op. cit.*, p.68.

<sup>30</sup> *The Indian Express*, 27/11/2016.

<sup>31</sup> *Akhyana a Celebration of Masks, Puppets and Picture Showmen Traditions of India*, Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts and Sangeeta Nataka Akademi, New Delhi, 2010, p.38.



adaptation of the Japanese Kabuki and the Chinese puppet theatre has elements that compare with the Beijing Opera. The dance drama of Yakshagana from Karnataka has regional variations in its incarnation in the Yakshagana puppet. When children and young viewers see a character unfold through puppets, it leaves a strong impression in their minds.<sup>32</sup>



Pavakathakali comes from pava, meaning “puppet” and kathakali meaning “story play”. Though it is now confined to Palghat District and a few surrounding areas, its main centre is the remote village of Paruthipully, where a few families have been its traditional custodians and practitioners for several generations.<sup>33</sup> The theme for glove puppet plays in Kerala is based on the episodes from either the Ramayana or Mahabharatha.<sup>34</sup> Functions of Sivarathiri and Thiruvathira demanded awake as religious observance and the devotees to keep themselves on these occasions, Pavakathakali was organised. The episodes were from the Mahabharatha and the artists were quite well known once upon a time.<sup>35</sup>

It is a valuable introduction to Kathakali. The distinctive stamp of Pava Kathakali, compared to other parts of India, is its classical dimension.<sup>36</sup> This form of glove-puppet

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<sup>32</sup> *Vihangama*, the IGNC A Newsletter, Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, New Delhi, 2012, p. 9.

<sup>33</sup> C.A Menon, *Kerala Festival Message-2007* A Directory of festivals in Kerala with glossary of Kerala festivals, Chembakassery Publications, Thrissur, 2006, p.29.

<sup>34</sup> [www.certindia.gov.in](http://www.certindia.gov.in)

<sup>35</sup> Article; Padma Jayaraj, *Dancing Dolls: Pavakathakali*, April 7, 2006.

<sup>36</sup> Personal Interview with K.C Ramakrishnan (Pavakathakali Artist), Paruthipully, Palghat, dated on 24/9/2019.

play evolved in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century and it was soon heavily influenced by the popularity of Kathakali.<sup>37</sup> Pavakathakali came into vogue in Kerala two centuries ago, through the influence of the famous classical dance theatre, Kathakali. By including some Kathakali techniques and modelling puppets, based on their characters, the Pavakathakali art-form emerged. The glove puppet theatre form is of great significance because of its ability to present Kathakali, our classical dance-drama, through puppetry.<sup>38</sup>

Puppeteers adopt Attakatha texts of Kathakali and only four or five stories are performed. It uses the narration style, similar to that found in Kathakali artform. Kathakali character types, in admiration to costumes, headgear, make-up and color, are followed in Pavakathakali.<sup>39</sup> Pavakathakali was in existence prior to Kathakali but it is clear that it has been influenced by it. Nowadays, the popularity of the art form has waned.<sup>40</sup> New generations of puppets, resembling the Kathakali characters, were crafted and the folk art form gained popularity by door to door performance. The padam or verses are rented from the original Kathakali padam itself. The lack of expression, owing to the still faces of the puppets, are to a great extent compensated by modulating variations in the padams.<sup>41</sup>

The Pavakathakali movements are very fluid. Glove puppetry is not to master easy. It needs at least five years of continuous practise, to master the art form. The rhythm, of course, is very important and unlike the original Kathakali, Pavakathakali cannot be performed for two hours at a stretch. ‘We have abridged the song, sequences because it is difficult to hold the audience’s attention for more than 45 minutes’, said K.C Ramakrishnan.<sup>42</sup>

Pavakathakali almost died out a decade or so ago and had it not been for the efforts of Sri G.Venu, the Director of the Natana Kairali at Irinjalakuda, it would have

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<sup>37</sup> Menon, C.A., *Op. cit.*, p.29.

<sup>38</sup> *Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA)*, in association with Yelahanka United Environmental Association (YUVA), Bengaluru.

<sup>39</sup> Personal Interview with K.C.Ramakrishnan and Hareesh (Pavakathakali Artists), Paruthipully, Palghat on 9/1/2018.

<sup>40</sup> Teresa Cannon, Peter Davis, *Kerala*, Lonely Planet Publications, Australia, 2000, p.37.

<sup>41</sup> [www.Keralatourism.Org](http://www.Keralatourism.Org)

<sup>42</sup> *The New Indian Express*, 7/6/2017.

disappeared. Due to his determination to save it and the help provided by the Sangeet Natak Akademi in Delhi, the troupe has become popular and it is regularly invited to perform all over the world.<sup>43</sup>

## Puppets



The height of a puppet varies from one foot to 2 feet. The head and the arms are carved delicately on wood and joined together with thick cloth cut and stitched into a small bag.<sup>44</sup> The manipulator puts his hand into the bag and moves the hand and head of the puppet.<sup>45</sup> The puppets are beautified with dissimilar paints, small and thin pieces of gilded tin, the hard carapaces of big bees, transparent corals, the stem of the feathers of the peacock etc. and the manipulator inserts his hand into the bag and moves the hands and head of the puppet with his fingers. The hands are manipulated with the thumb and middle and the head with the index-finger.<sup>46</sup>

It is interesting to note that this puppet carved out beautifully in wood, bears no resemblance to Kathakali figures, which decisively shows that the glove-puppet play must have existed in Palghat long before the advent of Kathakali. The hairstyles of this

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<sup>43</sup> Menon, C.A., *Op. cit.*, p.29.

<sup>44</sup> Venu, G., *Puppetry and Lesser Known Dance Traditions of Kerala*, Natana Kairali, Thrissur, 2004, p.14.

<sup>45</sup> [www.ccertindia.gov.in](http://www.ccertindia.gov.in)

<sup>46</sup> *National Centre for the Performing Arts* Quarterly Journal, Vol. XIV, Number-4, December 1985, p.1.

puppet and the ornaments worn on the hair, are in a remarkable manner different from those found in the ancient sculptures of Kerala. Its ears are lengthened like those seen in the images of the Buddha. But another puppet, belonging to the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, which this Researcher discovered, is modeled closely on Kathakali performers. It resembles the Pacha character of Kathakali, differing from it only in that it does not have a Chutti on the face.<sup>47</sup>



The puppets, at thirty cm to sixty cm height, are carved in wood, with their limbs joined by cloth. They are painted and decorated with peacock feathers, pieces of tin and coral.<sup>48</sup> The head and arms of the puppets are made from ‘Kumizh’ tree wood. Each puppet takes about a month to make. They exhibit detailed carvings. They are up to two feet in height, weighing less than two kilograms, painted in different shades and decorated with gilded tin, transparent corals and peacock feathers. The puppeteer sits on an elevated square platform, manipulating the head by the index finger and the arms by the thumb and the middle finger. While manipulating, puppeteers perform dramatic expressions, which cannot be done by puppets.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Venu, G., *Op. cit.*, pp. 13-14.

<sup>48</sup> Teresa Cannon, Peter Davis, *Op. cit.*, p.37.

<sup>49</sup> Personal Interview with K.C.Ramakrishnan and Hareesh, Pavakathakali (Artist), Paruthipully, Palghat, dated on 9/1/2018.

## The Artistes

Gently winding across the Paruthipully village, in the once glorious Nila river valley civilization, is the Bharathapuzha. Connected with this river are a number of artisans who live on its fringes.<sup>50</sup>

The Pavakathakali artistes, called Andi Pandaram, belong to a few families of Paruthipully village. Their mother tongue is Telugu, which suggests that their ancestors were immigrants from Andhra Pradesh. It is believed that their forefathers belonging to the Veera Guru Saiva community came and settled in Palghat centuries ago.<sup>51</sup> The performers say that they are from Telugu speaking families, which migrated from Renigunta in Andhra Pradesh to Palghat centuries ago. Recognized as Aandipandarams, they came to Palghat to perform the Tamil folk drama, Aryamaala, as a puppet show. Later sensing Kathakali's fame here, they carved Kathakali figures, studied the text and shaped it to make it their own art form. Throughout the programme, the artists hold Kathakali's Pacha, Kathi and Kari characters on their fingers.<sup>52</sup>

For the Aandipandaras, such performances are traditionally the means of their living. It continues to be so for some families of such performers in Paruthipully and Kodumbu villages in Palghat. In olden times, puppeteers would bundle up their puppets and journey across villages, from house to house and perform in the home space for children and adults.<sup>53</sup> When such itinerant performers arrived at the ancestral homes called Manas, the host paid a lot of attention to their requirements and offered sumptuous 'Dakshina', after their performances that generated a lot of excitement, especially in children.<sup>54</sup>

The Andi Pandaras are outstanding devotees of Lord Subrahmanya and they are well known for their acquaintance with all aspects of Subrahmanya worship. In fact, they

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<sup>50</sup> *The New Indian Express*, 7/6/2017.

<sup>51</sup> Personal interview with K.C Ramakrishnan (Pavakathakali Artist), Paruthipully, Palghat, dated on 9/1/2018.

<sup>52</sup> *The Hindu*, 21/11/2016.

<sup>53</sup> Personal Interview with K.C Ramakrishnan, (Pavakathakali Artist), Paruthipully, Palghat, dated on 24/9/2019.

<sup>54</sup> Manjari Sinha, *the IGNCA Pavakathakali Festival and Workshop at Kerala*, December 26, 2011.

earn their living by arranging and performing poojas, in honour of Subrahmania for devotees and by organising pilgrimages to the famous Subrahmania Temple of Palani, for which they have been invested with special rights and privileges. Many families seek their help whenever they plan to perform a poojas, at home. The Andi Pandaras gladly accept these invitations which are mainly for pooja-s in the months of December, January and February. On days when there is no pooja in any home, the Andi Pandaras visit various villages with their puppets.<sup>55</sup>

They make their living by performing pujas for devotees of Subramaniam and organising pilgrimages to the Subramaniam shrine at Palani. They get food materials from various families in order to make offerings to Subramaniam. Feasting puppeteers is called Andiyuttu. After the feast, they perform the show in the same house for one to two hours. There is no fixed amount of remuneration for the show and remuneration depends on the attitude of the house owner and not on their performance.<sup>56</sup> A troupe from Paruthipully, under the leadership of Chamu Pandaram, travelled with their performance covering different places up to the Purnathrayeesha Temple in Thripunithara.<sup>57</sup>

Pavakathakali was in vogue and alive till about thirty years ago. The most well-known and talented Pavakathakali artistes of the past, who are not alive today, were Andivelan, Kuttiyappu Velan, Karappan, Raman, Chinnan, Thengara, Chami Velayudhan, Chamu and Veeran. Chamu was a prominent puppeteer.<sup>58</sup> The oldest living puppeteer is Velappan, who still follows this tradition and visits aristocratic homes in and around, to conduct solo performance of Pavakathakali on special occasions.<sup>59</sup> With the passing away of these artistes, the art of Pavakathakali fell into decay and it was on the verge of extinction.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> *National Centre for the Performing Arts* Quarterly Journal, Vol-XIV, Number-4, December 1985, p.2.

<sup>56</sup> Sampa Ghosh and Utpal K. Banerjee, *Op. cit.*, p.41.

<sup>57</sup> *The Hindu*, 14/9/2012.

<sup>58</sup> *National Centre for the Performing Arts* Quarterly Journal, Vol-XIV, Number-4, December 1985, p.4.

<sup>59</sup> *Welcome Kerala*, Vol-VII, Issue-6, 1/11/2015.

<sup>60</sup> Venu, G., *Op. cit.*, p.17.

## Chamu Pandaram and Velayudhan Pandaram



### Chamu Pandaram

Chamu Pandaram and Velayudhan Pandaram, the main practitioners of Pavakathakali, had passed away.<sup>61</sup> This art form was popular till the 1960s, when noted Pavakathakali artiste, Chamu Pandaram, travelled across villages with his troupe, to stage performances.<sup>62</sup>

### K.V Ramakrishnan and K.C. Ramakrishnan

K.V. Ramakrishnan and K.C. Ramakrishnan, Irinjalakuda based Pavakathakali artistes, were jointly selected for Kendra Sangeet Natak Akademi Award, for their contributions to Pavakathakali.<sup>63</sup> K.C Ramakrishnan and K.V Ramakrishnan were the last among the practising Pavakathakali puppeteers of Kerala.<sup>64</sup> Shri K.V. Ramakrishnan and K.C. Ramakrishnan belonged to a family of traditional Aandipandaram puppeteers. They received their initial training in Pavakathakali glove puppetry, from Shri Velayudhan Pandaram and Chamu Pandaram, for a period of three years.

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<sup>61</sup> *The Hindu*, 14/9/2012.

<sup>62</sup> *Deccan Herald*, 16/8/2014.

<sup>63</sup> *The New India Express*, 23/1/2011.

<sup>64</sup> *The New India Express*, 7/6/2017.



K.V. Ramakrishnan is the son of the late Pavakathakali artiste, Velayudhan Pandaram of Paruthipully village in Palghat. K.C. Ramakrishnan is the son of the late Chamu Pandaram, a Pavakathakali artiste, also from Paruthipully. K.V. Ramakrishnan and K.C. Ramakrishnan have participated as master puppeteers and presented various Pavakathakali plays, including Kalyanasaungandhikam, Duryodhanavadham and Dakshayagam, staged by the Irinjalakuda based Natanakairali. The art form has been presented at lots of venues in India and abroad.<sup>65</sup>

Afterwards, they received general training in puppetry at the traditional arts institution, Natana Kairali. They have also been taught in playing the Chenda. Acquiring high proficiency in their art, the duo performed nationwide, in festivals organized by Sangeet Natak Akademi and the Indira Gandhi National Centre of Arts (2010). They have also performed in festivals in Poland, Japan, Switzerland, Denmark and Italy.



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<sup>65</sup> *The New India Express*, 23/1/2011



DVDs, on their work, have been produced by the Ateliers d'ethnomusicologie in Geneva and by Natanakairali (2006). Their art has also been recognized by Sangeet Natak Akademi, the Centre for Cultural Resources and Training and the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts. They have participated in a seminar, prepared by the Modern Puppet Foundation in Japan (2004), a Theatre Seminar at the University of Copenhagen (2001) and the festival, Torino Settembre Musica, in Italy (2004). K.V. Ramakrishnan taught Pavakathakali to a number of students. K.V. Ramakrishnan and K.C. Ramakrishnan received the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award for their contribution to the art of Pavakathakali of Kerala.<sup>66</sup> K.V. Ramakrishnan and K.C. Ramakrishnan are now with G. Venu's team.<sup>67</sup>

### **Ravi Gopalan Nair**



Ravi Gopalan Nair is a puppeteer, puppet maker and trainer. In his kalari at his home in Nedumangad, K.V Ramakrishnan and K.C Ramakrishnan were jointly selected for the Sangeet Natak Academy's award in 2011. At the same time, Ravi was awarded the Dakshina Chitra Virudu by the Madras Craft Foundation and Friends of Dakshina Chitra Museum in Chennai. His initiation into Pavakathakali also happened to be the period of revival of this art form of puppetry.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> [www.sangeetnatak.gov.in>sna>citation-popup](http://www.sangeetnatak.gov.in>sna>citation-popup)

<sup>67</sup> *Welcome Kerala*, Vol-VII, Issue-6, 1/11/2015.

<sup>68</sup> *The Hindu*, 14/9/2012.

## G. Venu

G. Venu, a Kathakali and Kudiyattam artist and director of Natanakairali, Irinjalakuda, literally adopted this art form, pooling in his talents and creativity and uplifted it into a professional team with international exposure.<sup>69</sup> Venu grew up as an artiste and soon realized that his role was cut out for more than mere performance of the art forms, that he had mastered. Venu realised that some of the performing art forms were on the verge of decline, and the thought of losing them forever ignited a passion, which prompted him to take timely efforts for the resurrection and popularity of many less known performing art forms of Kerala, which included puppetry, dance and theatre. Venu's determination to revive them, took him to places and few of the remaining artistes authoritatively shared their wealth of knowledge on some of the vanishing art forms like Tholpavakoothu, Pavakathakali, Mudiyettu, Kakkarissi Natakam Kummattikali and Padayani etc. Venu is credited with training youngsters in these art forms and giving them adequate exposure and thereby, a means of living.<sup>70</sup>



Pavakathakali, the traditional glove puppetry art form of Kerala, survives to this day, only because of Gopal Venu's efforts. It is a good way of introducing children to the rich classical art heritage of our country, says Gopal Venu.<sup>71</sup> His initiative to give maximum exposure to some of the performing art forms, took him to international venues

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<sup>69</sup> *Welcome Kerala*, Vol. VII, Issue-6, 1/11/2015.

<sup>70</sup> <https://www.keralatourism.org>

<sup>71</sup> *Deccan Herald*, 16/8/2014.

as in the case of his presentation of Tholpavakoothu at the international festival of Asian countries. Puppet Theatres at Tashkent in 1979. In 1984, he staged of Pavakathakali at the 11<sup>th</sup> International Puppet Theatre Festival in Poland and also in 1986, at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Asian UNIMAS Regional Meeting in Japan.<sup>72</sup> This group has also staged presentations in Netherlands, Switzerland and Paris etc.<sup>73</sup>

### **The role of Natanakairali**

The overall responsibility of training was entrusted with Venu, who is known for his knowledge of Kathakali and Pavakathakali. The venue for preparation was provided by Vijnanakalavedi, the Chengannur based Kathakali Vidyalayam. After nearly one year, the venue was shifted to Natanakairali, Irinjalakuda. Since those students, selected for training from the Andipandaram family, went for training in other professions, they were not available for Pavakathakali. In 1984, when Venu choreographed the story of Kalyana Sougandhikam for Pavakathakali, the artform revived by Kamaladevi, it was presented at the India International Centre, New Delhi. Duryodhanavadham, Dakshayagam and Utharaswayamvaram were also choreographed and presented in numerous stages in India.<sup>74</sup>

At present, there is only a small troupe at Natanakairali, to preserve Pavakathakali art form. This troupe has at present K.V Ramakrishnan, K.C. Ramakrishnan, Ravi Gopalan Nair, K. Srinivasan, V. Thankappan and Kalanilayam. Ramakrishnan had also given training in similar stories to get better manipulation techniques and participation of the puppeteers.<sup>75</sup> With the national award, by the Kendra Sangeet Natak Akademi, to K.C. Ramakrishnan and K.V. Ramakrishnan in 2011 and the Dakshina Chitra Viruthu award for Ravi Gopalan Nair, this art form received a boost for its morale.<sup>76</sup> Pavakathakali resuscitated at Natanakairali, that it got a new lease of life.

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<sup>72</sup> <https://www.keralatourism.org>

<sup>73</sup> *Welcome Kerala*, Vol-VII, Issue-6, 1/11/2015.

<sup>74</sup> Article; Kapila Venu, *Pavakathakali*, 4/12/2011.

<sup>75</sup> *Welcome Kerala*, Vol-VII, Issue-6, 1/11/2015.

<sup>76</sup> <https://www.natanakairali.org>

## Srinivasan

Srinivasan's tryst with Pavakathakali was "quite accidental". He regards Pavakathakali to be almost equal to Chinese puppetry.<sup>77</sup>

## Performance

The performance lasts for an hour or two.<sup>78</sup> The staging of a Pavakathakali performance is unusual because unlike any other form of puppetry, there are no screens for puppeteers to hide behind. The puppeteers are on the stage, visible to the audience, and so is their art of puppeteering.<sup>79</sup>



In the performance of Pavakathakali, no specially built stage, platform or equipment is necessary. It is customarily presented in houses, where the cultural background is appropriate for the performance. The minimum number of artistes, necessary for a good performance of Pavakathakali, is six. When a troupe of puppeteers arrives at a house, Nilavilakku is lit in the eastern courtyard of the house and the puppeteers stand before it and sing hymns in praise of the gods. Next, in answer to an invitation from their hosts, they present a story through Pavakathakali.<sup>80</sup>

Normally, the performance lasts for one or two hours, but on certain special occasions like Tiruvathira or Sivarathiri, the show continues throughout the night.

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<sup>77</sup> *Deccan Herald*, 16/8/2014.

<sup>78</sup> Personal Interview with K.C.Ramakrishnan and Hareesh, Pavakathakali (Artist), Paruthipully, Palghat, dated on 9/1/2018.

<sup>79</sup> *Deccan Herald*, 16/8/2014.

<sup>80</sup> *National Centre for the Performing Arts* Quarterly Journal, Vol. XIV, Number-4, December 1985, p.4.

Staying awake is a religious observance on certain nights during which time Pavakathakali troupes are specially invited to come and perform throughout the night. The puppeteers are paid a handsome fee called Arangu Panam, meaning stage money, for their performance. In addition, the leader of the troupe is customarily given a brocaded dhoti by the master of the house. The spectators also present the artistes, with gifts in cash, called Poli Panam, each according to his financial means.<sup>81</sup>

Pavakathakali puppets are colourful, with Kathakali style masks and embellishments. The natural style in which a puppeteer manipulates his puppets is almost awe inspiring. The movements are so fast that the audience is left wondering if it is only the fingers that are at play.<sup>82</sup> The episodes, usually performed in Pavakathakali, are from the Mahabharatha. They include Kalyana Saugandhikam, Uttarasvayamvaram and Duryodhana Vadham. It is said that the stories from the Ramayana and the Tamil tale, Aryamala Natakam, were also performed in the past.<sup>83</sup> There was a greater demand for Pavakathakali in the villages of Tirur, Kottakal, Valancheri, Desamangalam and Guruvayur.<sup>84</sup>

### **Musical Instruments**

The performance is accompanied by music, played on traditional instruments like Chenda, Cymbals and Conch Shells.<sup>85</sup> The musical instruments used during the performance are Chenda, Chengila, Ilathalam and Shankh.<sup>86</sup> The puppeteers come from the right, blowing conch Shells, beating a drum and singing songs from the Puranas.

### **Revival**

Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, who strove for the revival of several traditional art forms of India, chanced upon Pavakathakali puppets on display at a museum in Thrissur.

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<sup>81</sup> Venu, G., *Op. cit.*, p.16.

<sup>82</sup> *Deccan Herald*, 16/8/2014.

<sup>83</sup> Personal interview with K.C Ramakrishnan (Pavakathakali Artist), Paruthipully, Palghat, dated on 24/9/2019.

<sup>84</sup> *Explore Rural India*, Vol. V, Issue I, Indian Trust for Rural Heritage and Development (ITRHD), 2014, p.68.

<sup>85</sup> Personal Interview with K.C.Ramakrishnan and Hareesh, Pavakathakali (Artist), Paruthipully, Palghat, dated on 9/1/2018.

<sup>86</sup> [www.ccertindia.gov.in](http://www.ccertindia.gov.in)

Impressed by the art form and enthused to revive it, she entrusted Gopal Venu with the task of digging Pavakathakali's root and documenting the art form as a positive step towards reviving it. In 1972, Gopal Venu filmed the Pavakathakali of Chamu Pandaram in 16mm film, making it the only documentation of Pavakathakali from that period. Again in 1980, following Kamaladevi's suggestion, Gopal Venu undertook an intensive research programme on this art form and collected priceless information about it.<sup>87</sup>



**Smt Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya**

In 1981, serious work was undertaken to revive this dying art-form. Smt Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, former Chairman of the Sangeet Natak Akademi, arranged a detailed study of the condition of Pavakathakali (in its native village of Paruthipully). Venu.G learnt that there were only three surviving practitioners, who knew something of the techniques of the art but they were incapable of presenting even one play fully. Much information about the details of this art was documented. Intensive was given training was given in music, puppet manipulation and puppet making, to select youngsters from six villages, for two years.<sup>88</sup>

The Sangeet Natak Akademi decided to sanction scholarships to these trainees. When this training was over, the play, Kalyana Sougandhikam, was revived in its full form. The Department of Culture, the Government of India, was good enough to offer some financial aid for its revival. With its assistance, a number of new puppets were

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<sup>87</sup> *Deccan Herald*, 16/8/2014.

<sup>88</sup> *National Centre for the Performing Arts* Quarterly Journal, Vol. XIV, Number-4, December 1985, p. 5.

made and the plays Uttarasvayamvaram, Duryodhana Vadham, Dakshayagam and Balivadham, were performed. In May 1984, the Pavakathakali troupe was invited to participate in the XI International Puppet Theatre Festival, held in Poland and at the Puppet Carnival, held in the city of Iida in Japan in 1986. For the Pavakathakali, the year 1987 was a year of creditable achievements. Pavakathakali troupe presented performances at the festival called 'Marionnettes Traditionnelles d' Orient et d' Occident', conducted by the Ateliers d' ethnomusicologie in Geneva, from 4 to 15 November 1987.<sup>89</sup>

The troupe also presented puppet plays, at the cities of Locarno, Lausanne, Basel and Zurich of Switzerland. In the International Puppet Festival, held at Amsterdam, the capital of the Netherlands, from 19 till 29 November, India was represented by the Pavakathakali troupe. The Pavakathakali artistes presented five performances at the theatre, SOETERIJN of the Royal Tropical Museum of Amsterdam. At Paris, the performances of Pavakathakali were arranged by the 'Masion des Cultures du Monde', which lasted from 1 to 6 December. This art form is now developed and protected by Natana Kairali.<sup>90</sup>

This form continues to find patronage from the village audience and it was revived by Kamala Devi Chattopadhyaya in 1981. Six villages were selected for training in puppet making, manipulation and music and the trainees were granted scholarship by Sangeet Natak Akademi. The Department of Culture, Government of India also offered some financial aid.<sup>91</sup> In 1981, Sangeet Natak Akademi and the Department of Culture, Government of India unearthed old puppets and made new ones, trained artistes and composed plays. From 1984 to 1987, they performed in various international forums, representing India. The artists are often invited by educational institutions and research centres abroad. The distinctive stamp of Pavakathakali, compared to other forms of puppetry in other parts of India, is its classical dimension.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Venu, G., *Op. cit.*, p.17.

<sup>90</sup> Venu, G., *Op. cit.*, p.18.

<sup>91</sup> Sampa Ghosh and Utpal K. Banerjee, *Op. cit.*, p.41.

<sup>92</sup> Article; Padma Jayaraj, *Dancing Dolls: Pavakathakali*, April 7, 2006.

In the modern period, atleast till the 1960s, Pavakathakali was very much alive. Aharya Krishnankutty Pulavar, the leather puppetry maestro's help was instrumental in getting to know that Chamu Pandaram and his troupe were in Paruthipully village.<sup>93</sup>

## **Tholpavakoothu**

### Traditional Shadow Puppet Play

Puppet shows are one of the most old theatre arts, that are deep rooted in almost every civilization and across different ages. Tholpavakoothu is a form of puppetry, with a difference. The theatre art, performed in different parts of Northern Kerala, is different in its style of presentation and it is all about the play with shadow puppets.



Tholpava Koothu is the shadow theatre of Kerala, which is performed year around the temple festival in Kerala.<sup>94</sup> Tholpavakoothu, also known as Pavakoothu (puppet play) and Nizhalattam (shadow play), is a ritualistic puppet show performed in Palghat, Malappuram and the northern part of Thrissur Districts, by families known as Pulavanmar. They are believed to have migrated from Tamil Nadu to Kerala in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>95</sup>

Tholpavakoothu means the dance of dolls.<sup>96</sup> Tholpavakoothu (leather puppet play) occupies a very prominent place among the ancient art-forms of Kerala. This art is

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<sup>93</sup> Article; Kapila Venu, *Pavakathakali*, 4/12/2011.

<sup>94</sup> Kapila Vatsyayan, *Traditions of Indian Folk Dance*, Indian Book Company, New Delhi, 1976, p.259.

<sup>95</sup> Menon, C.A., *Op. cit.*, p.33.

<sup>96</sup> *The Indian Express*, 27/11/2016.



presented periodically, at the Bhagavathi or Bhadrakali temples of Palghat and the neighbouring areas as part of the ritualistic worship of the goddess. Tol means leather. Pava means puppet and Koothu means play. The theme of the Tholpavakoothu is always the story of the Ramayana.<sup>97</sup> The performers of Tholpavakoothu usually belong to the Vellalchetti and the Nair castes.<sup>98</sup>

It is believed that the goddess will be watching the performance right from the beginning till the end and will be pleased by it. This faith is based on a legend which is even today current among Pava Koothu performers and devotees.<sup>99</sup> The legend behind this art is that Goddess Kali was dejected as she was not able to witness the battle between Rama and Ravana since she was engaged in killing Darikasura (demon king). The Lord asked her to go to Kerala bhoomi, the sacred land created by Parasurama from the sea and go to a temple, there. When she reached the temple, some devotees were reciting the Kamba Ramayana. She overheard the story and wanted it to be enacted.<sup>100</sup>

The theme of Tholpavakoothu is the Ramayana story, extending from the birth of Sri Rama to his coronation. It is presented as twenty-one parts on twenty-one days. The story of the Ramayana is specially written in twenty-one parts for Tholpavakoothu. This work, written partly in poetry and partly in prose, is called Adal pattu. Adal means 'acting' and pattu means 'relating to'. The poetry portion of Adal Pattu is called Koothu Kavikal. The Adal pattu, as presented nowadays, includes a large number of verses from the Kamba- Ramayana, which is the Ramayana written in Tamil by the great Tamil poet, Kambar. But some of the poetry of the Kambar has been modified, to suit the usual needs of Pava Koothu performance.<sup>101</sup>

Tholpavakoothu is based on the epic of 'Kamba Ramayana' and the language used is a mix of Sanskrit, Malayalam and Tamil.<sup>102</sup> The action is accompanied by songs

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<sup>97</sup> Krishnankutty Pulavar, K.L., *Ayodhyakanda of Tolpavakoothu*, Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi, 1983, p.vii.

<sup>98</sup> Venu, G., *Op. cit.*, p.25.

<sup>99</sup> Krishnankutty Pulavar, K.L., *Op. cit.*, p.vii.

<sup>100</sup> *The Hindu*, 14/11/2009, p.2.

<sup>101</sup> Krishnankutty Pulavar, K.L., *Op. cit.*, p.ix.

<sup>102</sup> *The Hindu*, 14/11/2009, p.2.

from the Kamba Ramayana, the Tamil version of the epic, each puppet dancing or moving to their rhythm. Amusing descriptions of the characters are given after each song. To illustrate and interpret the meaning of the verses, the performers of Tholpava Koothu have, from time to time, added stories, episodes, explanations and dialogue. They are orally transmitted by the teacher to the student. In the explanations and interpretations, each performer demonstrates his originality, depending on his gifts and scholarship. The explanations of the verses and dialogue are in a language, which is a mixture of Tamil and Malayalam.<sup>103</sup>

The text of the Adalpattu of Pavakoothu is mainly based on Kambaramayana, the epic offering of Kampan, the acclaimed Tamil poet, attributed to the 11<sup>th</sup> Century A.D. Palm leaf Granthas, containing Pavakoothu Ramayana or Adalpattu (song for acting), as it is commonly termed, are preserved with care in the homes of the puppeteers or Pulavars, as they are known. However, they enjoy the freedom to modify the lines according to the mood of the moment and to add stories, explanations and the like. Training in this art form is by oral transmission.<sup>104</sup>

Several scholars believe that the influence of Kamba-Ramayana on Tholpava Koothu must have begun about 350 years ago. At Puthur in Palghat, lived a person of great learning, named Chinna Tampi Vadhyar, belonging to the Vellalchetti caste. It is believed that Chinna Tampi Vadhyar first incorporated verses from Kamba-Ramayana into the existing Adal Pattu. One day, Chinna Tampi Vadhyar, who was deeply rooted in the Ramayana, went to a neighbouring Brahmin's house to listen to the recitation of Ramayana. But he was not admitted into that assembly of Brahmins because he belonged to a lower caste.<sup>105</sup> The humiliated Chinna Tampi decided to present Kamba- Ramayana in such a way that people of all castes could have access to its beauty. He chose the medium of Tholpava Koothu. He altered the existing Adal Pattu by introducing several poetic passages from Kamba- Ramayana. Chinna Tampi was responsible for enhancing the popularity of Tholpava Koothu.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Krishnankutty Pulavar, K.L., *Op. cit.*, p.x.

<sup>104</sup> Princess Aswathi Thirunal Gouri Lakshmi Bayi, *Glimpses of Kerala Culture*, Konark Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 2010, p.135.

<sup>105</sup> Venu, G., *Op. cit.*, p.26.

<sup>106</sup> Krishnankutty Pulavar, K.L., *Op. cit.*, p.x.

Kunchan Nambiar has referred to Pava Koothu, with veneration, in his Thullal poem called Ghoshayatra. This indicates how popular Pava Koothu was in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>107</sup> Its popularity soared and even the great Malayalam poet, Kunchan Nambiar, was among the gems adorning the court of the powerful Travancore King, Anizhom Tirunal Marthanda Varma. Though this play is believed to be restricted to central Malabar Kali temples, records of the Sree Padmanabha Swamy Temple, Thiruvananthapuram, reveal that it was used to be a regular feature during the Utsavas (festivals).<sup>108</sup>

### **History**

It is said to have originated in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century Tholpavakoothu is an integration of Aryan and Dravidian cultures.<sup>109</sup>

### **Artistes**

Tholpavakoothu is preserved as a family tradition by the Pulavars. The name Pulavar itself is a title given to such a person, who has gone through an intensive training in puppetry and puppet making, that includes an in-depth knowledge of Tamil literature, especially the Kamba Ramayana. The name is thus used as a word placed before a person's name as a title like Sir, Lord, Shree or Pandit in Sanskrit and Hindi.<sup>110</sup>

In the past, the villages held the puppeteers in high esteem, addressing them as "Pulavars" or scholars. They were deemed to be the wise ones and they were also approached by many for finding solutions to diverse problems. These Pulavars were formerly farmers, who took to puppetry during the lean season, activated by their deep devotion to god. For some of those families, Pavakoothu was dearly cherished as a traditional heritage. Koonathara family in Shornur, well established in this field, has four generations of these artists to its credit. Tampi Pulavar, Iliya Pulavar, Muthappa Pulavar

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<sup>107</sup> Venu, G., *Op. cit.*, pp.26-27.

<sup>108</sup> Princess Aswathi Thirunal Gouri Lakshmi Bayi, *Op. cit.*, p.136.

<sup>109</sup> [www.tholpavakoothu.in](http://www.tholpavakoothu.in)

<sup>110</sup> Krishnan Kutty Pulavar Memorial Tolpava Koothu & Puppet Centre, Kerala, *Tolpava Koothu The Shadow Puppet Play of Kerala*, Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, Bengaluru.

and Lakshmana Pulavar are great names from this family. Koonathara Krishnankutty Pulavar continued the proud legacy. Pudusseri, Muthur, Kuthantir and Kayiliyad too fostered families with strong tradition in this play.<sup>111</sup>

There are different Sangams who performed Tholpavakoothu in Kerala. Kavalapara Sangam, Pallapuram Sangam, Mathur Sangam, Pudusseri Sangam, Karipode Sangam, Kollengode Sangam are some of them. Kavalapara Sangam led this troupe with efficient and proper way to promote this art form in India and abroad. Koothu artistes used to enjoy the support of the Kavalappara family in Shornur, who ruled the areas of Valluvanad and parts of the erstwhile Cochin State. These rulers bestowed the title of Pulavar on those who were learned. These artistes had to have deep knowledge about not only the art form but also about a broad range of subjects.<sup>112</sup>

Puppets are hand built by the artists and their families. A puppeteer should be well, versed in Ramayana, Vedanta, Astrology, Ayurveda, temple architecture, Puranas and agamas, said P.K. Ramachandra Pulavar, one of the leading Tholpavakoothu artistes from Koonathara in Shoranur.<sup>113</sup> The Pava Koothu artists have also added their own verses, wherever necessary, to suit certain occasions or contexts. The verses thus added by the Pava Koothu artists are mostly in Tamil. There is a combination of Tamil and Sanskrit in a few verses. The verses and the story of the Ramayana were written on palm leaves and these are carefully preserved in the houses of the puppeteers.<sup>114</sup>

When the performance is on it is usual for the puppeteers to digress without disrespect to anyone, into topics of practical interest or concern, as and when the chance offers itself. Poetry and prose follow a special style and tone in presentation even though there are no specific Ragas. While one artist recites a verse, his companions accompany him with the assenting sound “Aam”, which creates a sort of musical effect.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Princess Aswathi Thirunal Gouri Lakshmi Bayi, *Op. cit.*, p.138.

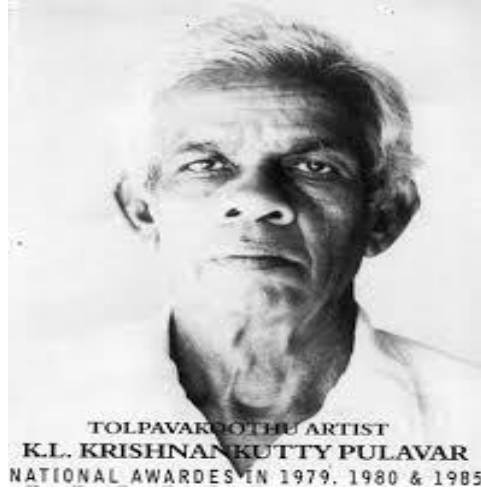
<sup>112</sup> *The Hindu*, 14/6/2012.

<sup>113</sup> *The Hindu*, 14/11/2009, p.2.

<sup>114</sup> Krishnankutty Pulavar, K.L., *Op. cit.*, p.ix.

<sup>115</sup> Princess Aswathi Thirunal Gouri Lakshmi Bayi, *Op. cit.*, p.136.

## **K.L Krishnankutty Pulavar**



Krishnankutty Pulavar comes from a traditional family of puppeteers, performing Tholpavakoothu, a style of shadow theatre over six generations. He learnt the art from his father, Lakshmana Pulavar. Though the art is gradually disappearing for lack of support, he has kept the art alive, with rare determination and dedication. He is one of the few survivors, who keeps the art in traditional style. He was deputed by the Government of India, to participate in the festival of Asian countries, held at Tashkent USSR in 1979 and his performance was highly appreciated. For his eminence in the field of traditional puppetry and his contribution to its enrichment, he received the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award, for Tholpavakoothu, in 1980.<sup>116</sup>

## **K.K Ramachandra Pulavar**



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<sup>116</sup> <https://sangeetnatak.gov.in>

Ramachandra Pulavar represents the eighth generation puppeteer in his family. He was initiated into the art of tholpavakoothu, the shadow puppet theatre of Kerala, by his father, Krishnankutty Pulavar. Today Ramachandra Pulavar performs the ritualistic art form, Tholpavakoothu, in around 40 temples, all over Palghat, Thrissur and Malappuram. He has been training teachers at CCRT workshops, for the past 10 years and he has been giving regular demonstrations in schools. He has performed in India, Russia, Sweden, Spain Ireland, Germany, Greece, Singapore, Japan, Holland, Poland, Israel, Thailand, Muscat and China. Ramachandran troupe of Tholpavakoothu is the major troupe in Kerala, to preserve the art form and train the new generation artists. He has received a Junior Fellowship in 1991 and a Senior Fellowship in 2004, from the, Ministry of Culture, the Government of India and has authored a book titled, 'Tholpavakoothu' in Malayalam. Shri Ramachandra Pulavar received the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award, for his contribution to tholpavakoothu- shadow puppet theatre of Kerala. He has received many honours such as the Lifetime Achievement and Excellence Award, Dakshina Chithra Viruthu from the Madras Craft Foundation in 2008, the Thailand Government Puraskar in 2011, Dr B.R Ambedkar Kerala State Award in 2011, the Kerala State Folklore Academi Award in 2012 and the Kerala Sangeetha Nataka Academi Kalasri Puraskar in 2013.<sup>117</sup>

### **Krishnankutty Pulavar Memorial Tholpavakoothu and Puppet Centre**

Krishnankutty Pulavar Memorial is located at Koonathara near Shornur and the centre was named after the late shadow puppetry artiste, Krishnankutty Pulavar Tholpavakoothu. This Puppet Centre is one of the few such centres in Kerala, which promote actively the promotion and sustenance of Tholpavakoothu. The troupe, as part of the tholpavakoothu and puppet centre, comprises members of the only surviving Tholpavakoothu family in Kerala, who are doing their best to preserve the art form, along with training new artistes. The puppetry team, at the Krishnankutty Pulavar Memorial Tholpavakoothu and Puppet Centre, has Mr. K.K Ramachandra Pulavar as its chief, who is also the eldest son of the late Krishnankutty Pulavar. The art of Tholpavakoothu is surviving in the hands of a few committed souls and the Krishnankutty Pulavar Memorial Tholpavakoothu and Puppet Centre, is where one can still witness, comprehend and even

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<sup>117</sup> [www.Sangeetnatak.gov.in](http://www.Sangeetnatak.gov.in)

associate oneself with this unique and age old ritual art. The training imparted includes the traditional method of presenting Tholpavakoothu as well as the making of the puppets out of animal skin.<sup>118</sup> A museum, in memory of him in the village, shows visitors the development of the art, using puppets made of leather.<sup>119</sup>

### **K. Viswanatha Pulavar and K. Lakshmana Pulavar**

They are the sons of Krishnankutty Pulavar, who was instrumental in popularising Tholpavakoothu and they belong to, perhaps, the only surviving shadow puppetry community in Kerala, based in Koonathara in Palghat. There is no scarcity of stages and they have even adapted the art form to the new themes of the contemporary period and moved out of temples to perform at events and functions.<sup>120</sup> According to Viswanatha Pulavar, Viswanatha had accompanied his father to performances in countries such as Sweden, Germany, Greece, Singapore, Spain, Ireland, France, Japan and Indonesia among others. Vipin, the son of Viswanatha Pulavar actively helps his father in performing this art form. Now Vipin is travelling across the world and he is also actively involved in conducting various workshops, to enlighten people on this art form.<sup>121</sup>

### **Tholpavakoothu Sangam**

Tholpavakoothu Sangam is dedicated to the performance and propagation of Tholpavakoothu. The activities of the Sangam include performance of Tholpavakoothu at over one hundred Bhagavathy temples, during the Pooram season. The Sangam also teaches this art to those who are interested in learning this craft, besides providing facilities to do research in this field. Authentic puppets are also available for sale.

### **Puppet Making**

The puppets of various characters are cut out from fine leather in the right shape and size and their shadows are projected on a white screen.<sup>122</sup> Deer skin is used to make

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<sup>118</sup> <https://www.keralatourism.org>

<sup>119</sup> *The Hindu*, 14/6/2016.

<sup>120</sup> *The Hindu*, 14/6/2012.

<sup>121</sup> Deccan Herald, 28/7/2019.

<sup>122</sup> Venu, G., *Op. cit.*, p.24.

the puppets because it is believed that deer-skin has holy and pure properties.<sup>123</sup> When the skin has been cleaned from dirt and dried, the outline of the puppet is drawn on it. The next step is to shape the puppets. It is their black shadow that should fall on the screen and so the natural thickness of deer skin is used with care. The skin is cautiously cut to ensure that the shapes, facial expressions and decorations of the puppets are accurately duplicated in their shadows. Tiny holes are punched into the leather, to highlight the shadow and about a dozen chisels of different shapes and sizes are used for this delicate job. A bamboo splint is fixed vertically along the whole length of the puppet right in its centre. This is done to prevent the leather from collapsing on the sides.<sup>124</sup>



About 130 puppets are in use, for the whole presentation of the Ramayana story. To help recognize the puppets and to make them attractive, they are painted in artistic colours. The bark of the tree, called Kasav and certain kinds of leaves, are used to make these colours. Each significant character in the story is represented by puppets in three different postures: sitting, walking and fighting. Usually, one hand of the puppet is fixed in such a manner that it can be moved and it has both the movable joints to be found in that human limb. But the puppet, which is shown fighting, has both its hands changeable. In order to hold the bow and arrow or to engage in a first fight, the puppet has to make use of both hands.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Personal interview with Ramachandra Pulavar (Tholpavakoothu Artist), Koonathara, Palghat, dated on 21/11/2016.

<sup>124</sup> Venu, G., *Op. cit.*, p.28.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, p.28.



The puppets, representing animals and birds, are provided with different types of joints. To depict natural scenes, for example, trees or a lake or a mountain or the sea, there are appropriately fashioned puppets. Likewise there are puppets, shaped to represent the elephant, the horse, the monkey, the peacock and other birds or animals. An important character, for instance, Sri Rama in a walking posture, is usually seventy nine cm. long and 46 cm. broad. The size of Ravana, in the fighting posture, is eighty cm. in length and sixty eight cm. in breadth. If we learn the shapes and facial expressions of the puppets, we find out a close resemblance between them and the figures in the mural paintings and sculptures of ancient temples in Kerala. If it is stored carefully, a puppet can be used and preserved for hundred years.<sup>126</sup> The puppets were made by using deer skin in the past, but now goat and buffalo hide is used.<sup>127</sup> The puppets are mounted on bamboo shafts, that act as supports for the flat figures and allow the puppeteers to operate them.<sup>128</sup> The articulation of these opaque leather puppets varies greatly from those in Karnataka and in Tamil Nadu. The reciters of the stories of Rama and Ravana are the ballad singers, either the Tamil Chetti Pulavars or Nayar Kavis. They have much in common with other traditional forms of dance and dance-drama.<sup>129</sup>

### **Stage (Koothumadam)**

Permanent stages for puppet shows have been constructed in the compound of various temples. They are called Koothumadam or playhouse. It is believed that more than a hundred temples in Kerala could boast of such permanent stages through a recent survey disclosed that only seventy stages are now extant.<sup>130</sup> It is so positioned that they face the image of the goddess in the temple because it is believed that she would be present to witness the performance.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Venu, G., *Op. cit.*, p.29.

<sup>127</sup> Personal interview with Ramachandra Pulavar (Tholpavakoothu Artist), Koonathara, Palghat, dated on 14/3/2018.

<sup>128</sup> *The Hindu*, 4/11/2017.

<sup>129</sup> Kapila Vatsyayan, *Op. cit.*, p.259.

<sup>130</sup> Venu, G., *Tolpavakoothu Shadow Puppets of Kerala*, Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi and Hope India, Publications, Gurgaon, 2006, p.15.

<sup>131</sup> Venu, G., *Puppetry and Lesser Known Dance Traditions of Kerala*, *Op. cit.*, p.29.



The structure, which is raised well above the ground level, is covered on its three sides, and provided with a roofing, with some minor variations.<sup>132</sup> The dimensions of the playhouse in Kavalappara Aryan Kavu Temple, which is famous for Tholpavakoothu, are eleven meters forty three cm. in length and three meters eighty one cm in breadth. The height of the roof from the floor is one metre eighty six centimeters and the height of the floor from the ground is one metre sixty eight centimeters. There are small ventilators, on the three walls, for the smoke from the lamps to escape. The roof is tiled.<sup>133</sup>



Kavalappara Aryankavu Temple



Kavalappara Aryankavu Temple Koothumadam

Traditionally, the religious art form was performed in Koothumadams of temples or 40ft tall permanent stages.<sup>134</sup> Stages are constructed invariably, during the annual Utsavas in Kali temples. Kavalappara Aryankavu (Palghat) is most famous in this

<sup>132</sup> Venu, G., *Puppetry and Lesser Known Dance Traditions of Kerala, Op. cit.*, pp.29-30.

<sup>133</sup> Venu, G., *Tolpavakoothu Shadow Puppets of Kerala, Op. cit.*, p.15.

<sup>134</sup> *The Indian Express*, 27/11/2016.

respect.<sup>135</sup> Tholpavakoothu Sangam, the last surviving troupe of the thirty odd families, performs in around 108 temples across Kerala.<sup>136</sup>

The Koothumadams in Palghat and its suburbs of bygone ages, boasted of over one hundred such edifices but the number has now diminished to sixty three. They are so located that they stand facing the goddess.<sup>137</sup> The Koothumadam of the Kammothukavu Temple at Mannur is very different in structure and construction from other Koothumadams.<sup>138</sup>

### **Illumination and Stage Arrangements**

Plays, based on the Ramayana, are depicted by projecting shadows of leather puppets onto a white screen. The stage with coconut leaves, flowers and oil lamps, faces the deity. Over hundred puppets, which may be up to eighty cm high, are required for a performance. They are made from a hide, which is considered to have sacred qualities. The operator has small anklet bells on his hand. To intensify the action during scenes of conflict, red liquid is tossed onto the curtain. Now widely recognised Tholpavakoothu is performed, both nationally and internationally.<sup>139</sup>



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<sup>135</sup> Princess Aswathi Thirunal Gouri Lakshmi Bayi, *Op. cit.*, p.136.

<sup>136</sup> *The Indian Express*, 27/11/2016.

<sup>137</sup> Princess Aswathi Thirunal Gouri Lakshmi Bayi, *Op. cit.*, p.137.

<sup>138</sup> Venu, G., *Tolpavakoothu Shadow Puppets of Kerala*, *Op. cit.*, p.15.

<sup>139</sup> Teresa Cannon, Peter Davis, *Op. cit.*, p.37.

The show is staged, depending on the temple, customs prevailing in each temple, for six to eight hours. It usually starts at 10 p.m. and continues till dawn.<sup>140</sup> It will be enjoyed by the general religious offering by the devotees.<sup>141</sup> The front portion of the Koothumadam is usually decorated with tender coconut leaves and flower garlands. During the presentation of some significant scenes, flower garlands also decorate the area behind the curtain. The stage manager (Madapulavar) supervises the stage arrangements.<sup>142</sup>

The front of the stage is curtained off with a skinny white cloth called Ayapudava. The lower half of this curtain is covered with black cloth, to represent Patala the neither world, while the white area stands for the earth and heaven. A long and narrow wooden plank is fixed at a height of one metre thirty cm. at the back of curtain and some distance away from it. This flat timber covers the whole length of the stage. The lights, wanted for the shadow play, are placed on this plank, which is called Vilakkumadam.<sup>143</sup> The screen is illuminated by twenty one lighted lamps, made out of coconut shelves, full with coconut oil, provided with cotton wicks and placed at equal distance from each other, on the Vilakkumadam (wooden beam) at the back of curtain.<sup>144</sup>

Dehusked coconuts, broken into two equivalent halves, serve as lamps. These coconut halves are located at equally spaced distances, in a line on the Vilakkumadam. Coconut oil is poured into these halves and thick, wide based cotton wicks are placed in them. Then they are lighted. Generally, there are twenty-one such lamps in use. On particular occasions, extra lighting effects are created, by throwing Telli powder (made by drying and pounding the gum of a special tree found in Kerala) on to the flame of the lamps, which then begin to blaze. Firetorches are also lit during some special scenes.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> *The Hindu*, 14/11/2009, p. 2.

<sup>141</sup> **Tolpava Koothu** *The Shadow Puppet Play of Kerala*, Krishnan Kutty Pulavar Memorial Tolpava Koothu & Puppet Centre, Kerala, Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, Bengaluru.

<sup>142</sup> Venu, G., *Puppetry and Lesser Known Dance Traditions of Kerala, Op. cit.*, pp.30-31.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.29-30.

<sup>144</sup> **Tolpava Koothu** *The Shadow Puppet Play of Kerala*, Krishnan Kutty Pulavar Memorial Tolpava Koothu & Puppet Centre, Kerala, Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, Bengaluru.

<sup>145</sup> Venu, G., *Puppetry and Lesser Known Dance Traditions of Kerala, Op. cit.*, pp.30-31.

Raised well above the ground and covered on three sides and with tiled roofing, curtain is concealed with a black cloth, which represents hell. They are normally twenty one in lamps, providing the lighting for the play. There is a long plank, running the full length of the stage. Extra effects are managed in this area by throwing some. Thelli powder (dried tree gum powder) into the flames, causing them to flare up all of a sudden.<sup>146</sup> In a small number of temples, however, chiratu, made of clay, have been used instead. The chiratu is now used only in the Koothumadam at Kammothukavu Temple.<sup>147</sup>

### **Musical Instruments and Sound Effects**

Ezhupara, a cylindrical drum made out of jack-fruit wood and covered with calf-skin on both ends and Ilathalam (cymbals) are the main musical accompaniments. Shanku (conch), Chenda and Maddalam (drums), Chengila (gong) and Kurum-Kuzhal (a short pipe) are further instruments to be used on special occasions.<sup>148</sup> On particular occasions, Chenda, Pipe, Drums and Gong are added to the orchestra.<sup>149</sup> The son of Viswanatha Pulavar, K.L. Krishnankutty Pulavar was instrumental in popularising Tholpavakoothu.<sup>150</sup>



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<sup>146</sup> Princess Aswathi Thirunal Gouri Lakshmi Bayi, *Op. cit.*, p.137.

<sup>147</sup> Venu, G., *Tolpavakoothu Shadow Puppets of Kerala*, *Op. cit.*, p.17.

<sup>148</sup> **Tolpava Koothu The Shadow Puppet Play of Kerala**, Krishnan Kutty Pulavar Memorial Tolpava Koothu & Puppet Centre, Kerala, Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, Bengaluru.

<sup>149</sup> *The Hindu*, 14/11/2009, p.2.

<sup>150</sup> *The Hindu*, 4/11/2017.

Situations are dramatically orchestrated, with the aid of visual and sound effects like throwing a red solution of turmeric and slacked lime, which represents blood. Appearance of a Garuda in fight is yet another attraction. At least five artists have to be present to manipulate the puppets, on whom rest the responsibility of vocal and verbal presentation. The instrumentalists occupy their own places near at hand. While twenty one days are needed for a full-fledged presentation, abridged versions too are sanctioned. This temple art form is either part of the annual festival of a Bhadrakali temple or takes the stage as an offering by devotees. At a time when visual agencies like cinema and television were unheard of, the characters of the Ramayana made an indelible mark in the minds of the devotees, who thronged the temples of Palghat, during festival seasons.<sup>151</sup>

### **Manipulation of the Puppets**

The puppets have to make gestures and movements, in conformity with the narration or dialogue. The Tholpavakoothu puppeteers manipulate their puppets to suit their needs. With one hand they hold the puppet, by the lower end of the bamboo strip, fastened to the puppet and with a stick in the other hand, they make the puppets perform the required movements. The stick they use is usually a thin strip of bamboo, some fifty centimeters long. At the end of the stick, tied to it with a string, is a very thin strip of wood, not more than three centimeters long. This thin end-piece is inserted in a hole in the puppet's hand when a hand movement is required. The moveable arms and fingers are uniform in shape in almost all puppets. While manipulating the puppets, the performer has with him a string of bells called Chilanka. Whenever the puppets have to make rhythmic movements, the puppeteer plays the chilanka, producing a jingle to match the movement. In order to ensure that the shadows on the screen are clear, the puppets are held very close to the screen.<sup>152</sup>

Since the puppets are to be presented over the whole length of the curtain, at least five artists have to be in charge of this work. On some occasions, they have actually to run from one end of the curtain to the other, with the puppets in their hands. The three or four artists entrusted with the singing of the verses and the delivery of the dialogue, take up their positions behind those who manipulate the puppets. This arrangement is necessary because

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<sup>151</sup> Princess Aswathi Thirunal Gouri Lakshmi Bayi, *Op. cit.*, p.137.

<sup>152</sup> Venu, G., *Tolpavakoothu Shadow Puppets of Kerala*, *Op. cit.*, p.31.

the play continues all through the night and it is too taxing for the same person to undertake both these activities for such a length of time. The artiste, in charge of handling the puppets, holds it by grasping with his one hand the lower portion of the wooden splinter fixed to the puppet. At the same time, he manipulates the hand of the puppet or the puppet itself with a stick held in his other hand. He also supports an anklet in his hand. When he manipulates a puppet, he also shakes the anklet producing synchronizing sounds.<sup>153</sup>



While a slaying or maiming of important characters is presented, a red liquid is thrown on the curtain to produce a realistic picture of blood. The scene in which Indrajit discharges Nagapasha, a divine snake-arrow is depicted in some temples, with special technical effects. A tall pole is fixed on the ground, some distance away from the front of the playhouse and a strong thread is tied to it while the other end is fastened to the roof of the Koothumadam. Garuda's puppet, shaped in wood and beautifully painted, is suspended from a string. It is moved to make the impression of flying. To the accompaniment of drums, pipes and fireworks, the Garuda puppet makes its appearance in front of the curtain, attracting large crowds.<sup>154</sup>

The ingenuity, that went into the manufacture of the puppets which number to around 130, is indeed remarkable and hence they deserve some elaboration. Deer skin is the material used, as it is deemed sacred and pure. The outline of the puppets, drawn on the dry skin, is chiselled with great attention. About a dozen chisels are employed. Thickness of the skin, shapes, facial expressions, decoration and all details are worked with care, to ensure that all the details could be duplicated in their shadows. A tiny hole,

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<sup>153</sup> Venu, G., *Tolpavakoothu Shadow Puppets of Kerala, Op. cit.*, p.31.

<sup>154</sup> Venu, G., *Puppetry and Lesser Known Dance Traditions of Kerala, Op. cit.*, p.32.

punched in the leather, highlights the shadow. To keep the puppet erect and in shape, a bamboo stick is fixed in the centre, along the entire length of the puppet.

Different degrees of mobility accompany different puppets, especially regarding hand and limb movements. This flexibility is need based. The main characters are represented by three types of puppets, in sitting, walking and fighting postures. Even animal and bird puppets are created and have their own kind of joints. Trees, mountains, lakes and the like also feature in the visuals. Colours are derived from natural resins and leaves. The facial expressions and style of the puppets offer considerable resemblance to the murals and wood sculptures, found in the ancient Kerala temples. The puppets are stored carefully so that they can be used and reused for a hundred years.<sup>155</sup>

The small puppets (pavakali) are made of deer skin and depict characters from the great epic, the Ramayana. A long line of small oil lamps are lit behind a white cloth screen in such a way that shadows of the puppets will appear to move and dance on the screen. The action is accompanied by songs from the Kamba Ramayana, the Tamil version on the epic, and each puppet dances or moves to their rhythm. Amusing descriptions of the characters are given after each song.<sup>156</sup>

Muthappa Pulavar, Ila Pulavar, Lakshmana Pulavar and Raman Nair were some of the famous puppet-makers of the last generation.<sup>157</sup>

## **Performance**

Tholpavakoothu is still performed, in more than hundred temples, all over Palghat, Trichur and Malappuram Districts. The troupe is made up of at least eight artists. Although it is not confined anymore to the Pulavars, all the puppeteers have to be experienced in all branches of knowledge, as the presentation of the story will be full of references to the present events also.<sup>158</sup> Pava Koothu is generally performed during the annual utsava (festival) in Kali temples.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Princess Aswathi Thirunal Gouri Lakshmi Bayi, *Op. cit.*, pp.136-137.

<sup>156</sup> Menon, C.A., *Op. cit.*, p.33.

<sup>157</sup> Venu, G., *Tolpavakoothu Shadow Puppets of Kerala, Op. cit.*, p.30.

<sup>158</sup> Krishnan Kutty Pulavar Memorial Tolpava Koothu & Puppet Centre, Kerala, *Tolpava Koothu The Shadow Puppet Play of Kerala*, Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, Bengaluru.

<sup>159</sup> Krishnankutty Pulavar, K.L., *Op. cit.*, p.vii.



Pava Koothu performances are conducted as part of the annual festival in temples, devotees pay, for their presentation, in fulfillment of a religious vow. In a lot of temples, there is a puppet show on every single day of the utsava. It would take twenty one days to play the Ramayana story in full. Shortened versions are presented on fourteen or even seven nights.<sup>160</sup> Till recently, it was regularly performed in about eighty temples in Palghat and neighbouring districts. Today, it is performed every year, in some seventy temples.<sup>161</sup>



Tholpavakoothu is based on performance scenes from the Kamba Ramayana.<sup>162</sup> According to Viswanatha Pulavar, “We use almost two hundred puppets for the twenty one day show, each representing a character in sitting, standing, walking or fighting posture. In other places, we use less than hundred and you can stage a Koothu with ten to fifteen too.” The Koothu is performed on a stage called Koothumadam, and a lot of temples have such permanent structures. The forty two foot long stage has a screen (white cloth) at the back, where the puppets are held. The shadow play unfolds, in the light cast by lamp light in coconut shells.<sup>163</sup>

Traditional shadow play, using leather puppets, is an important part of the temple festivals of Palghat. The performance spans seven to twenty one days in the belief that the Devi witnesses the performance. Her presence is symbolised by suspending the

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<sup>160</sup> Venu, G., *Puppetry and Lesser Known Dance Traditions of Kerala, Op. cit.*, p.32.

<sup>161</sup> Venu, G., *Tolpavakoothu Shadow Puppets of Kerala, Op. cit.*, p.21.

<sup>162</sup> *The Hindu*, 24/2/2018.

<sup>163</sup> *The Hindu*, 4/11/2017.

drapes that adorned the idol the previous day, to afford full view of the area for the puppet show (Koothumadam). Over 130 deerskin puppets are manipulated, across a twelve metre long curtain, during the twenty one day Tholpavakoothu.<sup>164</sup>

On the day in which the performance is to begin, special poojas and offerings are made to the goddess a little after sunset. Then a Tookuvilakku is lighted, from the oil lamp burning in front of the goddess image and brought to the Koothumadam. It is hung in front of the Koothumadam to the accompaniment of instrumental music. The next step involves the hanging of a curtain in the Koothumadam in a ceremonial manner. This rite is called Kooru Iduka (Kooru means curtain and iduka means placing or setting). Then the stage is decorated. By about 9 o' clock at night, a large crowd gathers in the compound of the temple, to witness the show.<sup>165</sup>

The Velichappadu, wearing a red silk scarf around his waist, an anklet on his ankles and holding his sword in his hand, encircles the temple three times. Then he comes to the Koothumadam and blesses all the Pava Koothu artistes. In certain temples, this entry of the Velichappadu, from the temple to the Koothumadam, is an elaborate religious ceremony. For example, in the Payilur Temple (at Kollengode), there is a distance of more than a furlong between the temple and the Koothumadam. The Velichappadu is led from the temple to the Koothumadam, in a colourful procession, headed by three caparisoned elephants and accompanied by music and fireworks. When the Velichappadu has blessed the Pava Koothu performers and given them permission to begin the performance, the instrumental music, which is a preliminary to the play begins. This is followed by the ritual called Kalarichindu.<sup>166</sup>

The puppeteers sing hymns to invoke the blessings of Ganapathi, Saraswathi, Mahavishnu and other gods and goddesses. Then they take the Tookuvilakku at the back of curtain and light it the twenty-one lamps, placed there. Then the Madapulavar sanctifies the stage by performing a special pooja called Ranga Pooja. The object of this pooja is to ensure the success of the performance. After this, the puppet of Ganapathi is

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<sup>164</sup> Shanavas, P. N., *Op. cit.*, p.326.

<sup>165</sup> Venu, G., *Puppetry and Lesser Known Dance Traditions of Kerala, Op. cit.*, p.33.

<sup>166</sup> Venu, G., *Tolpavakoothu Shadow Puppets of Kerala, Op. cit.*, p.24.

presented on the curtain and the performers sing hymns to propitiate Ganapathi and invoke his blessings. Then the puppets of Brahmin characters are shown on the curtain. These puppets are called Pattapavakal, which means ‘Puppets of Brahmins’ (Pattar means Brahmin). These Brahmin characters are the Sutradhars of the Pava Koothu. They are recognized by names such as Mallika Pattar, Somasu Pattar, Mootha Pattar and Gangayadi Pattar. The puppeteer often converses with them in certain situations.<sup>167</sup>

Then the Brahmins sing the magnificence of Mahavishnu. Next they extol the Yagas and sacrifices performed for the welfare of mankind and sing hymns in praise of the gods. The next duty is the salutation to the former gurus of Tholpavakoothu. But as gurus of Pava Koothu belonged to lower castes, it is not considered proper for the Brahmin puppets to do obeisance to them and hence. Leaving that duty to the Pulavar, the Brahmin puppets disappear from the screen. The Pava Koothu performers perform the Guru Vandanam ceremony. When the Guru Vandanam is finished, the Brahmin puppets reappear on the curtain and address the audience thus: “Watching the beautiful dance of the peacock with its outstretched feathers, the wild cock also tries to dance in imitation of the peacock. Our attempts to present the play to the distinguished audience here may appear equally futile and ridiculous. So we humbly request the erudite audience to forgive us our blunders and failures”.<sup>168</sup>

Then the Brahmin puppets provide a summary of the story that is going to be enacted that day. This is followed by the ritual called Sadya Vazhthal (Sadya means feast and Vazhthal means praise), which involves thanking and blessing the members of the house where the Pava Koothu troupe had their meals on that day. While thanking them and invoking the blessings of Bhagavathi and Sri Rama for them, the artistes compliment the feast that the family prepared for them, even mentioning the items of food of that meal. When these ritualistic ceremonies are ended, the Pava Koothu performance begins. During the presentation of some incidents in the story, devotees offer money, or coconuts, plantains, jaggery, flower garlands or other auspicious items to the artistes, as an offering for the deity in the temple, to seek her blessings for progeny, good harvests

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<sup>167</sup> Venu, G., *Puppetry and Lesser Known Dance Traditions of Kerala, Op. cit.*, p.33.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, p.34.

and auspicious marriages. A significant type of offering is called Nadakam. Here certain auspicious events in the story are celebrated by exhibiting a dance of Devastris (women of heaven).<sup>169</sup>

At this time, the puppeteer prays for the wealth of the devotee who had made the offerings, specifying his name and even the date of his birth. After the twenty one day play is concluded, with the slaying of Ravana, the curtain is removed and sent for cleaning. The freshly washed curtain is again used for the next day's performance, namely, Sri Rama Pattabhisheka, which concludes the series. The curtain is removed and the Madapulavar cuts it into pieces, which are distributed among the artistes. Convention demands that a curtain once used, should not be used once again. The villagers call the puppeteers Pulavars. They respect a puppeteer not just for his art but they also look for his advice on their problems. When a Pava Koothu troupe arrives for a programme in the temple, families undertake the responsibility of sponsoring the puppet show in the temple on each day. The artistes are thus the guests of that family till dusk, when they proceed to the temple in a ceremonial procession.<sup>170</sup>

During certain auspicious events in the story, devotees offer money, coconuts, flowers, jaggery, plantains and the like to the artists, as an offering to the Devi temple, for divine grace. Pavakoothu season is from January to May.<sup>171</sup> During the performance, the artists offer explanations and interpretations of the verses, as demanded by the context. Sometimes, this commentary on poetry lasts for hours. Furthermore, the puppeteer, when he relates a story, tends to digress though with a show of relevance and introduces topics of interest to the common people. The story teller is constantly looking for opportunities to digress into ayurveda, astrology, architecture and allied topics. In Pava Koothu, the recitation of verses and the delivery of prose pieces follow a special style and tone. For the singing of verses, though there are no set ragas the tone is modified to suit the context and the characters. When one artist is reciting a verse, the others produce the Aaa sound

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<sup>169</sup> Venu, G., *Tolpavakoothu Shadow Puppets of Kerala, Op. cit.*, p.25.

<sup>170</sup> Venu, G., *Puppetry and Lesser Known Dance Traditions of Kerala, Op. cit.*, p.35.

<sup>171</sup> Princess Aswathi Thirunal Gouri Lakshmi Bayi, *Op. cit.*, pp.137-138.

in harmony with its tone and rhythm and produce a sort of musical effect.<sup>172</sup> Ramachandra Pulavar and his troupe from Kerala, spoke of how every year they performed in temples for four months, starting in January.<sup>173</sup>

### **Dying Art**

The tradition's survival is debated by Anurag Wadehra, Salil Singh and Marc Stone, in their documentary, *Borrowed Fire* (2000), which focuses on Krishnankutty's company, with Krishnankutty introduced as "last surviving master of thousand year old form of shadow puppetry". The film honors his commitment to keeping the tradition alive, with all its adherent protocols and to passing it on to his sons for its future. According to Ramachandra Pulavar, after long nights of sitting in chilly puppet houses for several hours and drive home with little recompense, sometimes only a few rupees per night, left him hungry and with only one shirt to his name, his father would allow him to choose his path but still insisted that family members should know Ramayana in depth, for its religious benefits and because of the family's reputation as Pulavars. In the modern era, loss of royal patronage contributed to worsening conditions, for puppeteers, throughout India. The final blow came in 1971, when the 26<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Indian Constitution ended royal status. Historically artists had enjoyed royal patronage, expressed through lavish multicourse meals, that fed the troupe during their performing months. Their work was honored in concrete terms that showed appreciation and kept performers fed and happy. When royal status was withdrawn their patronage to Tholpavakoothu also stopped,<sup>174</sup>

Government support is very important to preserve local traditions. Sangeet Natak Academi (SNA) has implemented several programmes for the sustenance and development of traditional Indian puppetry since the 1950s. Besides organising exhibitions, festivals and workshops, where puppeteers from different parts of India get an opportunity to come together and see each other's work, Akademi has supported

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<sup>172</sup> Venu, G., *Puppetry and Lesser Known Dance Traditions of Kerala, Op. cit.*, pp.26-27.

<sup>173</sup> *The Hindu*, 24/2/2018.

<sup>174</sup> Dassia N. Posner, Claudia Orenstein and John Bell, *The Routledge Companion to Puppetry and Material Performance*, Routledge Taylor and Francis group, London and New York, 2014, p.209.

training programmes for some endangered styles. Under the leadership of Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, SNA has brought together several scholars, experts and traditional shadow puppeteers, perhaps for the first time at the National Shadow Puppetry Festival in 1978 at Bangalore, where Tholpavakoothu performer, Krishnankutty Pulavar, with his group, performed outside the temple for the first time. Another institution, which sponsors artists, is the ICCR, New Delhi. It provides a forum or interaction with puppeteers from other countries, through sponsorship of participation of traditional puppeteers in international puppet festivals and visits of foreign puppeteers to India. Besides SNA, ICCR, State Government, the District Administration, the Commissioner of Handicrafts in Ministry of Tourism also make endeavors to either support or promote arts. Dadi Pudumji's Ishara Puppet Theatre Trust and Mallika Sarabhai's Darpana Academy of Performing Arts are a few private institutions, in the field of puppetry, which are supporting shadow puppetry in India.<sup>175</sup>

After Annamalai's death, there are only twenty four puppeteers left, who have to perform at 105 temples every year. This task is herculean and it cannot be done without the help of youth. Documentation helps in familiarising younger generation, with traditions as well. Krishnankutty Pulavar's endeavors to take this art out of temple, have increased information about the art in artistic forums and it has often become a point for research. Krishnankutty's son, Ramachandran, has started performing outside, with ideas other than that of Ramayana. In 2006, Ramachandran performed Tholpavakoothu on Mahatma Gandhi. He has also performed on Ambedkar. Komal Kothari once told Rustum Bharucha, "But the State can neither create nor sustain talent. For the survival of traditional musicians, we have to look somewhere else". He meant community by elsewhere.<sup>176</sup>

The highest fee, which an artiste of Pava Koothu can now hope for, is only fifteen rupees. A long period of training goes into the making of a good Pava Koothu artiste, who begins when he is no more than seven years old, to recite the verses, to learn them by heart and to imbibe the art of making and manipulating puppets. For some families,

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<sup>175</sup> *Nartanam*, A Quarterly Journal of Indian Dance, Volume XIV, No.4, Sahrdaya Arts Trust, Hyderabad, October- December, 2014, pp.118-119.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, p.120.

Pava Koothu is a traditional inheritance. The well known Koonathara family can boast four generations of Pava Koothu artistes. Its members (Tampi Pulavar, Ila Pulavar, Muthappa Pulavar and Lakshmana Pulavar) are names to reckon with in this field. In Mathur, Kuthanur, Pudusseri and Kayilyad, there were families, with a strong tradition of accomplishment in Pava Koothu. The younger generation in these families, however, has no interest in this art form. The state of affairs justifiably gave rise to the fear that Pava Koothu was on the decline.

Fortunately, during the last three or four years, fresh life has been infused in this art. The National Shadow Theatre Festival, organised by the Sangeet Natak Akademi at Bangalore, in 1978, helped to confer a national status on Tolpava Koothu. This art form was selected for presentation at the International Festival of the Puppet Theatres of Asian Countries, held in the Soviet Union, in 1979. In August, 1987, at the festival called Indian Manifestation in Sweden, a Tolpava Koothu troupe, led by Guru Krishnankutty Pulavar and G. Venu, presented performances. After the performances at Sweden, the troupe went to Greece where, in Hydra Island, an International Puppet Festival was conducted under the leadership of the famous artiste, Michael Meschake. The Tolpava Koothu troupe performed at this festival also.<sup>177</sup>

This Chapter narrated the dance form of Pavakathakali and Tholpavakoothu in Palghat District, artistes, musical instruments, performances, revival and manipulation of puppets. The next chapter is focused on the influence of dance on socio-cultural aspects in Palghat District.

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<sup>177</sup> Venu, G., *Puppetry and Lesser Known Dance Traditions of Kerala, Op. cit.*, p.35-36.