

*Influence of Dance on Socio-Cultural  
Aspects in Palghat District*

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## CHAPTER 6

### INFLUENCE OF DANCE ON SOCIO-CULTURAL ASPECTS IN PALGHAT DISTRICT

This Chapter explains the influence of dance on socio-cultural aspects, in Palghat District. Dance occupies a significant place in the social structure of all human cultures throughout history. Dance can be defined as a cultural practice and as a social ritual whereby dance is seen as a means of aesthetic pleasure and means for establishing ties and specific structure in the community.<sup>1</sup> Pavakathakali is the only known glove puppets tradition of Kerala.<sup>2</sup> Tholpavakoothu (shadow puppetry) is a traditional ritual practice mainly performed for satisfying goddesses Bhadrakali. Its performance is based on episodes from Kamba Ramayana.<sup>3</sup>

#### Pavakathakali



Pavakathakali is a performance of puppets, a full-fledged dance drama on the lines of the classical theatre. The puppets are miniatures of Kathakali characters but it is not an imitation of Kathakali but rather it embraces the intrinsic features of Kathakali. Pavakathakali, in the Palghat District is traced to a little village of Paruthipully, home to the Andi Pandaram families, who came originally from Andhra Pradesh. For Centuries,

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<sup>1</sup> *Anthropological Notebooks*, XVI/3, Slovene Anthropological Society, 2010, p.5.

<sup>2</sup> *Welcome Kerala*, Vol. VII, Issue-6, 1/11/2015.

<sup>3</sup> *Calicut University Folkloristics Journal*, Vol. 4, Issue-4, May 2015, p.77.

they practised the art of Pavakathakali, or glove puppetry, with stories based on the Mahabharatha.<sup>4</sup> The great grandparents of the artistes were migrants from Andhra Pradesh. These experts of puppetry imbibed the splendour of their adopted homeland, to give birth to a new form of puppetry, the Pavakathakali (Puppet Kathakali).<sup>5</sup>

### **Tholpavakoothu**



Many scholars consider shadow play to be the oldest of all theatre forms and also it was originated in India. The word ‘Chayanataka’ is used since the 13<sup>th</sup> century A.D. In the ancient days, Tholpavakoothu was known as ‘Olapavakoothu’ because palm leaf was used for making puppets for performing Tholpavakoothu.<sup>6</sup>

In Pavakkooth, the story of Kamba Ramayana is frequently used. Pavakali is performed by singing songs. It is by assigning special seats for both the supporters of Sri Rama and Ravana on opposite sides. The expert performers move the puppets easily. In Kerala, the most popular doll dance is the leather puppet dance. These types of dolls are made out of the skin of animals. In the regions of Palghat, it is also made of skin of wild beasts like deer. Generally, the Pavakooth (doll dance) is conducted during night time. Its exhibition is done by making the shadows of dolls fall on the curtain.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Teresa Cannon, Peter Davis, *Kerala*, Lonely Planet Publications, Australia, 2000, p.37.

<sup>5</sup> [www.Keralatourism.Org](http://www.Keralatourism.Org)

<sup>6</sup> *Calicut University Folkloristics Journal*, Vol. 4, Issue 4, May 2015, p.77.

<sup>7</sup> Philomina, K.V., *Folk Arts of Kerala*, Financial Assistance from the Southzone cultural centre, Tanjavore, Tamilnadu, 2009, pp.77-78.

Tholpavakoothu is considered an ancient ritualistic art form, dedicated to goddess Bhagavathi, worshipped as the Mother Goddess by the Hindu community in Kerala.<sup>8</sup> About 180 puppets are required for a full performance.<sup>9</sup> The recitation is accompanied by instruments such as Chenda, Maddalam, Ezhupara, Ilathalam, Shanku, Chilanka, Kurum-kuzhal and Cheru Kuzhal.<sup>10</sup> Vellala Chetti, Muthan, Nair, Mannadiar, Ezhuthachan etc. are the communities, who are related to shadow puppetry.<sup>11</sup>

The stage is prepared by placing a front curtain and covering other three sides. The colour of the curtain would be half white and half black. On the top of the Koothumadam, a wick is lit, in an oil filled coconut piece. It is in front of these lamps, the Nizhal Pavakoothu (shadow puppet dance) is conducted. The doll's shade appears on the white portion of the curtain. In the realm of such arts, dolls, dressings have much importance and each doll has its own prescribed dress and colour. As each dress stands for each character, best suited clothes are used. No dress would be given, that hinder the movement of the dolls. Stage is arranged for the maximum utilisation of the possibilities of the dolls. There are dialogues and sound effects, suitable for the best performance of the dolls. The pavakkooth is prevalent in the States of Rajasthan, Orissa, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Kerala.<sup>12</sup>



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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.keralatourism.org>

<sup>9</sup> Bhavya Malviya, *Tholpavakoothu*, The Fashion Communication Department National Institute of Fashion Technology, Karnataka, 2016, p.17.

<sup>10</sup> Bhavya Malviya, *Op.cit.*, p.36.

<sup>11</sup> *Calicut University Folkloristics Journal*, Vol-4, Issue-4, May 2015, p.79.

<sup>12</sup> Philomina, K.V., *Op.cit.*, p.78.

In Kerala, the traditional culture of the festival is shifting from religious and spiritual to fun and entertainment. This social problem has affected the popularity of shadow play today. The older generation, who are well versed in the description of epics, do not share the same values with the younger generation. As a result, the younger generation does not help senior puppeteers during performance. Since the artistes depend upon patronage, it has created a social problem.<sup>13</sup>



One problem, with the features of performance, is the long narrative style. In the olden days, people liked this long narrative because they got much information from Tholpavakoothu.<sup>14</sup>In the past, the puppeteers survived by their usual performances. Today, due to television, cinema and video, along with low patronage, there is a decline in performance, resulting in their poor economic status.<sup>15</sup>The older generation artists continued on the patronage of temple and income from agriculture, as they led a simple life without much needs.<sup>16</sup>

The folk life of Tholpavakoothu depends upon three factors- spectators, organizers and performers. The spectators demand these performances for propitiating goddesses. But the performers want to reform the performance. They prefer longer

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<sup>13</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. 261-262.

<sup>14</sup> *Calicut University Folkloristics Journal*, Vol-4, Issue-4, May 2015, p.81.

<sup>15</sup> Personal Interview with Ramachandra Pulavar (Tholpavakoothu Artist), Koonathara, Palghat on, 14/3/18.

<sup>16</sup> Bhanumathi R, *Op. cit.*, p.262.

narration and duration of time is the main problem linked to lack of viewership. They want active spectators only with whom they can perform dynamically.<sup>17</sup> Today the youngsters from the artiste's family are better educated and therefore, aspire to take up professions on a permanent basis, which will give them a permanent source of income to maintain their family. In other words, lack of sustained remuneration keeps the youngsters away from the performance.<sup>18</sup>



Training classes at the Centre start for young children when they are about five or six years of age. With an exact syllabus, the training sessions are started, with simple songs and then slowly take the youngsters on to difficult ones. After three years from learning the art, dolls are given at around eight years of age. The Tholpavakoothu Centre at Shornur also has a Museum, with doll exhibits as old as nearly seven hundred years as well as a custom-made showroom for the dolls. The puppeteers belong to different caste groups and follow the customs and habits of their ancestors in connection with life rituals and social customs but they are worshippers of goddess Bhagavathi.<sup>19</sup>

### **Social Campaign**

Ramachandra Pulavar and his brothers are propagating it worldwide, by adapting literary and social themes. They also do puppetry shows, on social campaign issues such as AIDS. Apart from these brothers, there are 12 artistes from Koonathara, who are

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<sup>17</sup> *Calicut University Folkloristics Journal*, Vol-4, Issue-4, May 2015, p.82.

<sup>18</sup> Personal Interview with Ramachandra Pulavar (Tholpavakoothu Artist), Koonathara, Palghat on, 21/11/2016.

<sup>19</sup> Bhanumathi R, *Op. cit.*, p.255.

struggling to keep the art form alive. Ramachandra Pulavar's father, Krishnan Kutty Pulavar gave tholpavakoothu a new lease of life years ago. A museum, in reminiscence of him in the village, shows visitors the evolution of the art, using puppets made of leather. The fifteen member outfit designs and manufacture the puppets they use. Believed to be 2000 year old art form it depends mainly on the Kamba Ramayana as the text, and the language of Tamil is used, along with Sanskrit and Malayalam words. It was only latterly that the Pulavar and family have started using Hindi.<sup>20</sup>

Puppetry versions of Shakespeare's 'Othello', 'Kristhu Charitham' and 'Gandhi Charitham' have won wide appreciation.



According to Ramachandra Pulavar the tradition of Tholpavakoothu or shadow puppetry is vanishing in Kerala because of the paucity of well trained artistes.<sup>21</sup> The troupe, as part of the Tholpavakoothu, comprises members of the only surviving Tholpavakoothu family in Kerala, who are doing their best, to preserve the art form by training new artistes.<sup>22</sup>

What is lacking is genuine, talented artistes. It might sound ironic that even when the circumstance is very bad, Tholpavakoothu is still conducted in over hundred Devi temples in Thrissur, Palghat and Malappuram Districts. In fact, the number of days of performance is going up, from seven days, it has gone up to seventy or eighty days.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> *The Hindu*, 14/6/2016

<sup>21</sup> Personal Interview with Ramachandra Pulavar (Tholpavakoothu Artist), Koonathara, Palghat on, 14/3/18.

<sup>22</sup> [www.Keralatourism.Org](http://www.Keralatourism.Org)

<sup>23</sup> *The Hindu*, 14/6/2012.

Earlier Tholpavakoothu was performed in the whole of Palghat District and in parts of Thrissur and Malappuram Districts, in about 105 temples. At present, it is being performed in about eighty seven Devi temples from December till 10<sup>th</sup> June, as part of the annual festival.<sup>24</sup> The Aryankavu Temple, owned by a family, is perhaps the only venue where all episodes (Kandams) of the Kamba Ramayana are staged.<sup>25</sup> Tholpavakoothu is a fine example of the integration of Aryan and Dravidian cultures.<sup>26</sup>

Although shadow puppetry used to be an integral portion of our culture, the art has been on the decline in the recent past. In an attempt to bring back the lost magnificence of shadow puppetry, different shows and workshops are being organised.<sup>27</sup> As Tholpavakoothu is a temple art form, the Ramayana story is performed in the temples and to popularize the art form, diverse modern stories of social relevance are included such as Jesuskoothu, Gandhikoothu, Mahabharatham, Panchathantra stories and stories of women empowerment and those with themes of social awareness, among others. The Centre has a puppet theatre in which they have exhibited puppets of varied styles, including deer skin puppets.<sup>28</sup>

The art form has been modified, by using Ramayana and Rama Rajya concept, to comment on modern socio-political situations, though their act still uses a mix of Tamil, Malayalam and Sanskrit. Thirty ancient households are still part of the tradition. According to Vipin Viswanatha Pulavar (a 15<sup>th</sup> generation puppetry artiste from Palghat based tholpavakoothu Sangam) the spread of Buddhism played a pivotal role in taking this form across East Asia, about 2000 years back.<sup>29</sup>

This chapter narrated the influence of Dance on socio-cultural aspects in Palghat District. Pavakathakali is the traditional glove puppet play of Kerala. The Tholpavakoothu is

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<sup>24</sup> Personal Interview with Ramachandra Pulavar (Tholpavakoothu Artist), Koonathara, Palghat on, 21/11/2016.

<sup>25</sup> *The Hindu*, 4/11/2017.

<sup>26</sup> Bhavya Malviya, *Op.cit.*, p.23.

<sup>27</sup> *Deccan Chronicle*, 19/11/2017.

<sup>28</sup> Personal interview with Ramachandra Pulavar (Tholpavakoothu Artist), Koonathara, Palghat, dated on 14/3/2018.

<sup>29</sup> *The New Indian Express*, 9/6/2017.



a very popular visual art since ancient times. This art is performed either hereditary or not. It is performed in association with the ancestral occupations, Godliness and other rituals. The next chapter is focused the contemporary relevance of dance form in Palghat District.