

## The Art of Kūṭiyāṭṭam

D. APPUKUTTAN NAIR

**K**ūṭiyāṭṭam is one of the performance styles of the temple art form called Kuttu. The other two performances are Prabandha Kūttu and Naṅgiār Kūttu. Prabandha Kūttu gives emphasis to the verbal (*vachika*) mode of presentation. Here, Sanskrit narrative poems (*prabandhas*) of poets like Melpattur Bhattathiripad are taken up and interpreted in detail, using a simple yet metaphorical language imbued with humour, satire and double meaning, and interspersed with reference to topical events. In this, the Chakyar narrates the story, while the Nambiar plays on the *mizhavu*.

Naṅgiār Kūttu lays stress upon histrionic acting (*angikabhinaya*). Adapted from the introductory scene of *Subhadrādhanaṅjaya*, this art form presents the story of Krishna in the form of Nirvahanam enacted by the Nangiar as a female attendant of Subhadra. There is no place for humour; the Nangiar acts and the Nambiar plays on the *mizhavu*.

Kūṭiyāṭṭam as an art form gives scope for combined acting by several characters in the play. It adapts scenes from Sanskrit plays. In Kūṭiyāṭṭam, while the hero and the heroine primarily employ *angika* and *sāttvika abhinaya* the Vidushaka resorts to *vachika*, which is conveyed through prose, verse, music, Vidushaka's Tamil, Prakrit and Malayalam. The male and female actors together present a great variety of characters. The different forms of drama—like Vyayoga, Rupaka, Prahāsana—have been adapted to Kūṭiyāṭṭam. Thus it is an integration of several modes of acting, forms of drama and types of actors.

In *Chilappatikaram* composed by the Tamil poet Ilango Adigal, roughly 1800 years back, there is a reference to the enactment of the story of the burning of Tripura (Tripuradahanaṁ) by Parayur Kuttachakaiyan (Paravur Chakyar). Based on this, Kūṭiyāṭṭam is believed to date back to about two thousand years.

However, Kūṭiyāṭṭam as it exists today was remodelled during the time of Kulasekhara, the author of *Subhadrādhanaṅjaya* and *Tapatisamvarana*. This Kulasekhara seems to have been none other than Bhaskara Ravi Varma who ruled from 978 to 1036 A.D. He also seems to have written *Vyangyavyākhyā*, a critique, after seeing the stage production of both these plays. Kulasekhara, along with his friend Tolan—a vernacular poet who was also a great humourist and a connoisseur of drama, thoroughly modified Kūṭiyāṭṭam. As a result:

1. For the Vidushaka's verbal narration, apart from Prakrit, Sanskrit words, Malayalam interpretation and counter verses to the hero's *slokas* were introduced.
2. The hero's verses were codified, first by analyzing their word meanings, then elaborating them through *angika* and *sāttvika abhinaya* and re-enacting them in their regular sequential order.

3. For elaborating the previous story, the convention of *Nirvahanam* was introduced.

Tolan was mainly responsible for composing *Attaprakaras* and *Kramadipikas*; but it is clear that from time to time, many elements were added on to them.

During ancient times, Sanskrit plays were enacted as dance-dramas in many parts of India. *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* can be regarded as a regional adaptation. Many scholars have found a close similarity between *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* and the description of Damodaragupta's production of *Ramavali* in Kashmir in the 9th century A.D.

#### *Sanskrit Plays Adapted in Kūṭiyāṭṭam*

Though *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* is the enactment of Sanskrit plays, usually a full-length play is not taken; only an act from it is presented on the stage. The story from the play up to the beginning of the act is presented through the dramatic convention called *Nirvahanam*. Even the enactment of individual scenes are adequate for aesthetic appeal, for each act has its own *sthāyirasa*. The device of the elaborate performance of individual acts stretching over several days intensifies dramatic appeal by heightening the *sthāyirasa*.

Thus, in *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*, a full play is not as relevant as its separate acts. The individual acts are treated as full-fledged plays in themselves, and given different names.

Acts from the following plays are adopted in *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*:

1. Bhasa's *Pratima*, *Pratijnāyauḡāndhārayana*, *Swapnavāsavadattā*, *Abhisheka*, *Bālacharita*, *Dūtavākya*, *Karnabhāra*, *Dūtaghatokacha*, *Chārudatta*, *Madhyamavyāyoga* and *Pancharātra*.
2. Harsha's *Nāgananda*
3. Kalidasa's *Sākuntala*
4. Saktibhadra's *Ascharyachudāmani*
5. Kulasekhara's *Subhadrādhananjaya* and *Tapātisamvarana*.
6. Neelakantha's *Kalyāṇasaugandhika* and *Srikrishnacharita*.
7. Mahendravikramavarman's *Mattavilāsa*
8. Bodhayana's *Bhagavadajjukīya*

Now let us see which acts are taken up:

*Mattavilāsa*, *Kalyāṇasaugandhika*, *Madhyamavyāyoga*, *Bhagavadajjukīya*, *Dūtavākya*, *Dūtaghatokacha*, *Karnabhāra* and *Urubhanga* being one-act plays, each of these acts has the same name as the play itself; 'Vettankam' and 'Bhimadutankam' from *Pancharātra*, 'Anottankam', 'Dutankam', 'Abhisārikankam', 'Parvānkam' and 'Matamettānkam' from *Avimāraka*; (Referring to the Ramayana plays, *Ascharyachudāmani* and *Abhisheka* and *Pratimā*, the Chakryars used to call them 'Cheriyā' (small) *Abhisheka*, 'Valiya' (big) *Abhisheka* and 'Paduka' *Abhisheka*); 'Parnasalankam', 'Surpanakhankam', 'Mayasitankam', 'Jatayuvadhankam'

'Asokavanikankam' and 'Anguliyankam' from *Ascharyachudamani*; 'Balivadhankam', 'Toranayuddhankam', 'Mayasitankam' from *Abhisheka*; 'Vicchinnabhishekankam', 'Vilapankam', 'Pratimankam' 'Atavyamankam', 'Ravanankam', 'Bharatankam', 'Abhishekankam' from *Pratima*; 'Mantrankam', 'Mahasenankam', 'Arattankam' from *Pratijnayaugandharayana*; 'Brahmacharyankam', 'Pantattankam', 'Poothootankam', 'Sephalikankam', 'Swapanankam', 'Chitraphalakankam' from *Swapnavasavadatta*; 'Mallankam' from *Balacharita*; 'Rantamankam' and 'Parakkum Kūttu' from *Nagananda*; 'Vasantasenankam' from *Charudatta*— our information is limited to the enactment of these acts only. (There is a story that while *Sakuntala* was being performed, the Chakr who depicted through his eyes the flight of the deer and the king aiming the arrow at a simultaneous moment suffered a stroke in his eyes, and henceforth the enactment of *Sakuntala* was stopped.)

'Mantrankam' presents the verbal elaboration of the Vidushaka stretching to forty-one days. It is a well-known fact that it deals with a wide variety of topics covering all facets of life and the actor who can perform it is a master in the art of verbal communication. Similarly, 'Anguliyankam' is the acid test for *angika abhinaya*. In this play which extends for 21 days, Hanuman enacts in *angika* the entire story of Ramayana and also dwells on other topics like the origin of the monkey race, etc. In the Kūttu *Mattavilasa* the dance element predominates.

#### Stage

Prabandha Kūttu is performed in the form of narration of a story, like that of a Suta enumerating the story in Naimisharanya. It is addressed to the sages and a divine audience.

Kūṭiyāṭṭam is performed in the theatre house called Kūttampalam, which is one of the five structures attached to a typical Kerala temple. Kūttampalam is situated on the right side of the sanctum sanctorum in front of the main temple.

The main Kūttampalams in Kerala are in Trichur, Irinjalakuda, Kidangur, Thrippunithura, Haripad and Guruvayoor. These might have been constructed between the 12th and 17th centuries A.D.

These Kūttampalams are in different shapes and sizes. The one in Trichur is rectangular, with a length of 35 *kol* and width of 25 *kol*. The Kidangur Kūttampalam is 22 *kol* long and 15 *kol* wide, whereas Chengannur Kūttampalam has an egg-shaped base. The main pillars, ceiling and poles of a Kūttampalam are adorned with many sculptures and paintings. Apart from lotus petals and lotus buds, the supporting boards near the ceilings have several engravings like Krishna's sports, elephant's head, the figures of the eight presiding deities (*ashtadikpālas*) etc. In the Kidangur Kūttampalam, on the four sides each pillar (there are fourteen pillars) has episodes of Gajendramoksha, Gopikavastrapaharana etc., as well as figures of Subrahmanya, with a total of fifty-six paintings. With the worship of the eight dikpālas, the prayer to Lord Vishnu's mace (*gada*) as well as the worship of jarjara are also done. (It is said that Vishnu's mace and Indra's jarjara have eight sides).

Only one half of a Kūttampalam is open to the spectators; half of the other half covers the stage and the rest is the green-room (*nepathya*). The wooden frame (*mizhavana*) for

the *mizhavu* is kept behind the stage. There are two doors from the green-room to the stage. On the four sides of the stage, supported by the pillars, is the ceiling (*melkettu*). The pillars are full of engravings. During a performance, the pillars are covered with bunches of plantains and tender coconuts. The *melkettu* is also known as *vitanamacchu*.

It is not perhaps correct to say that the Kūttampalam is constructed according to the prescriptions in Bharata's *Natya Sastra*. Kerala's Kūttampalam has not accepted the three basic sizes (*Shrestha*, *Madhyama*, etc.) or basic shapes (*Chaturasram*, *Tyasram* etc.) given in the *Natya Sastra*. The *mattavarinis* are also absent in Kūttampalam.

The architectural pattern of Kūttampalam is based on texts like *Tantrasamucchaya*, *Silparatna* and *Mayamata*.

Paryante pratiyonibhāji bahirunthevottarasya  
thavā madhyasthe dalite, tato vibhajite samyak chaturvargakeih  
syādamsaḥ pada, mā yatistu vitater dvābhyām padābhyām yutam  
tacchishtātati, ruttaram natanadhāmnām dvitrisamkhyam matam.

This *sloka* defines the size, shape and position of a Kuttampalam. The *slokas* in *Tantrasamucchaya* also describe the number and features of poles, the measurements of the domes, the position and measurement of the stage etc.

#### Actors

The major difference between Kūttu and the other art forms is that only certain Chakyar families attached to the temples have the right to perform this theatre. Kūttu is the only art form that gives monopoly to a single community for its performance. (Now liturgical rights are slowly slipping away even from the Brahmins.)

The origin of the Chakyar community, which does not have a membership of even a hundred people now, is as follows: when the family of a *suta* who accompanied a chieftain was on the verge of extinction, they took the permission to adopt the offspring of Brahmin ladies born out of illicit relations. If the adopted child had already completed his brahminical rites, he was accepted as Chakyar; if not, he became a Nambiar. The girls were adopted without such differences.

It is observed that the word 'Chakyar' is derived from 'Slaghyar'. They are 'slaghyar' (commendable ones) because of their erudition, knowledge of scriptures and intellectual acumen. They are from a *slaghya* race because they belong to the Brahmin community. Because of their verbal facility, they are '*slaghyavachas*'. For all these reasons, they deserve the honorific of '*slaghyars*'. It is also not improper to say that 'Chakyar' was derived from the word 'Chakaiyan' (one who performs dance and drama in the temples).

In olden days, though there were eighteen families of Chakyars, not much is known about four of them. Out of the remaining fourteen, the seven Chakyar families are Potiyil, Cheriya Parisha, Valia Parisha, Ammannur, Kuttancherry, Koypa and Mani. The Nambiar families are Kaviyoor, Trikkariyoor, Vellivattam, Edanadu, Chattakkutam, Kalakkattu and Kochampally.

The ancient Chakyars were great masters of this art form. Among them, Evoor Damodaran Chakyar was an adept performer in *vachika* and *angika*. In addition, he was

also a poet but his family became extinct. Ambalappuzha Narayanan Chakyar was famous for his role of 'Azhakiya Ravana'. Ammannur Ityamman Chakyar, the great actor, was famous for the role of Garuda in *Nāgānanda*.

Even after the battle of Tipu Sultan, there were many eminent Chakyars who survived. Ammannur Valia Parameswara Chakyar and Cheriya Parameswara Chakyar were eminent artists in histrionic action. Cheriya Parameswara Chakyar had given lessons in *rasābhinaya* to Iswara Pilla Vicharippukar\*. Kuttancherry Chakyar senior, Mani Parameswara Chakyar, Kidangur Parameswara Chakyar, Ammannur Chachu Chakyar, Kuttancherry Cheriya Narayana Chakyar (who died at the age of nineteen) were masters in verbal acting. Kuttancherry Chakyar Senior was a Namboothiri who had learnt Vedic chanting (*othu*) and 'Pantrantoottu'. When he was excommunicated, he had to go through Pantrantoottu again to forget the Vedic chants, and once again to learn Kūttu. Thus he is a noble soul who had to make a successful shift from 'othambalam' to 'Kūttampalam'.

Mekkattu Rama Chakyar was famous for his rendering of *Ramayana*. Koypa Rama Chakyar mastered both *vesha* (histrionic acting) and *vakku* (verbal acting) before he died at the age of thirty-two, in Kanyakumari. Kuttancherry Narayana Chakyar's *vakku* was famous for its predominance of *hasya rasa*. Kidangur Madhava Chakyar, the celebrated *vesha* actor who had received a golden bracelet as award, was the teacher of Kesava Kurup, the great Kathakali actor. Potiyil Neelakantha Chakyar was eminent in *vesha*, *vakku*, and also in ritualistic conventions. Kidangur Rama Chakyar and Potiyil Kochu Narayana Chakyar were famous for their *vesha*; the latter taught Tottam Potti, the Kathakali actor. Ammannur Madhava (Kochukuttan) Chakyar was famous for the roles of Hanuman in *Toranayuddha* and Sri Rama in *Surpanakhanka*. Ammannur Chachu Chakyar was famous for his rendering of the *prabandhas*, the role of Vidushaka and some other *veshas*.

During the time of Melpattur Bhattathiri, there were two Chakyars named Kuttancherry Itteeri and Ammannur Ityamman who were contemporaries. A lot could be said about both of them.

The last links in the chain of this great tradition who are living today\*\* are Painkulam Narayana Chakyar, Mani Madhava Chakyar, Painkulam Rama Chakyar and Irinjalakkuda Madhava Chakyar.

### Rituals

Is Kūṭiyāṭṭam a ritualistic theatre? Or is it a realistic art form? Or is it merely a convention-ridden form?

Kūṭiyāṭṭam perhaps lays more emphasis on religious rituals than any other art form. At the same time, it keeps a close affinity with ground realities from a thoroughly practical point of view. All matters relating to the life on the earth is dealt with in 'vinoda' (entertainment), 'vanchana' (treachery), 'rajaseva' (service under a king), etc. At the same time, it is also a skilful combination of *nāṭyadharmi* and *lokadharmi* elements, using a technique full of rigid conventions. Therefore the components of ritual, realism and

\* The celebrated Kathakali actor.

\*\* The article was written in 1971. Since then the first three mentioned have died. The only surviving one is Irinjalakkuda Madhava Chakyar.

technical skill are blended here in a unique manner.

Let us examine some of the rituals performed in Kūṭiyāṭṭam.

Kūṭiyāṭṭam is performed within a Kūttampalam, one of the five structures (*pancha prāsāda*) attached to a temple, which has been sanctified with rituals like *ashtabandhapratishṭhā* and *kalasam*. It is limited to actors from the communities of Chakyar (each temple has particular families ordained to perform the plays) and Nambiar, and is performed as a mode of worship or offering (e.g., *Mantrankam*, *Anguliyankam*, *Mattavilasam*) or as an annual programme in the temple. Only a Chakyar who has performed his *upanayana* ceremony and has his sacred thread has the right to take part in it. Kūṭiyāṭṭam is a ritualistic theatre (*natya yajna*) which, once commenced, should not be stopped till its successful completion. In the Kūṭiyāṭṭam performance in Kidangur temple, the Devi herself is imagined to be the chief spectator, and to mark the divine presence, in the Kūttampalam, the deity is propitiated every day. In other temples also, Kūṭiyāṭṭam is performed facing the deity, and the Kūttampalam is situated accordingly.

The Chakyar purifies himself by ablutions in the pond attached to the temple. He pays obeisance to the gods and preceptors in the green-room. He should wear only a fresh cloth that the washerman provides. As a beginning, when he ties a red cloth on his head, he is believed to have divine sanction, and nothing can defile him any more. No spectator, even a king, can criticise him; in fact the red cloth should not be removed until the performance is over.

Before Kūṭiyāṭṭam, the main priest (*mel-santi*) gives his blessings to the Chakyar and gives him to 'Koorayum pavitravum'. The lamp on the stage is lighted with a wick from the sanctum sanctorium. The Chakyar offers *naivedyam* to Ganapati and Saraswati, while the Nangiar invokes these deities as well as the *dikpālas* by singing 'Akkitta' verses.

The three lighted wicks in the lamp on the stage signify the presence of the *trimurtis*. In heaven, the Devas are considered to be the spectators, while in Naimisharanya, the sages take this place. On the earth, the *brahmins* are deemed as spectators, and so the Chakyar addresses his performance to them.

The convention of stage purification (*arangu-tali*), while it is a process of cleaning the stage, is also a preventive measure for any possible pollution during the performance.

'Mutiyakkitta', which is recited at the close of Kūttu, is also an invocation to God, like Akkitta. After this, the Chakyar washes his feet, takes a wick from the lamp, puts it out and lights it again. This mode of salutation to God has a close resemblance to the rituals propitiating Bhagavati, the goddess.

#### *The Source Texts*

The basic text for Kutiyattam is the primary work of Sanskrit play. For the literary text, the *Nirvahana slokas*, *Vidushaka Tamil*, *Vidushaka's slokas* are used, while for invocation, Akkitta verses and *arangutali slokas*; for choreography there are *Attaprakarams* and *Kramadipikas*, while for orchestra, there is *Talaprasthana*—this constitutes the corpus of source texts used in Kūṭiyāṭṭam.

Needless to say, the most significant in this corpus are *Attaprakarams* and *Kramadipikas*. Though these are available with the Chakyars, they are closely guarded by them as secret documents. However K. P. Narayana Pisharoti has published the

Attaprakaram and Kramadipika of *Ascharyachudamani*. He has also managed to procure the Kramadipika of *Pratimānātaka* and *Abhishekanātaka*.

There is no Kramadipika for 'Anguliyankam', the sixth act of *Ascharyachudamani*, but the Attaprakaram for this act is very important. The single character Hanuman, in the form of Nirvāhana, elaborately enacts from the *Ramayana* the episodes of Kishkindha, the crossing of the sea, Ravana's conquest of Swarga, the Incarnation of Vishnu as Vamana, the birth of Hanuman, and the entire action of the five acts of *Ascharyachudamani*. Sita is only an imaginary presence on the stage, and the Nangiar recites her dialogues. 'Anguliyankam', which is performed solely through *abhinaya* takes forty-one days to complete. Its Attaprakaram is given in *Ascharyachudamani* published by K.P. Narayana Pisharoti.

Another significant item is the Attaprakaram of 'Mantrankam', the third act of *Pratijnayaugandharayana*. Dominated by the action of the Vidushaka, this play is the ultimate test of the actor's verbal skills. This act, which takes forty-one days for performance, includes the episodes of the birth of Vyasa, the incarnation of Vishnu as Vamana, the burning of Tripura, the story of Ramayana, the wedding of Panchali and Subhadra, the burning of Khandava forest, the victory of Kirata, etc., interspersing them with many realistic and even bawdy topics.

*Bhagavadajjuka* gives prominence to philosophic discourse. It has a separate Attaprakaram and Kramadipika. It discusses in detail all systems of philosophy from Vedanta to that of Charvaka, all rites from birth to death, the daily rituals of the Buddhists and so on. The language is a mixture of Sanskrit and Malayalam.

In the same manner, all the acts used in Kūṭiyāṭṭam have Attaprakarams and Kramadipikas.

#### Method of Acting

Among the four modes of *abhinaya*, Kūṭiyāṭṭam lays more emphasis on *angika* and *vachika*. It is the importance of *vachika* that gives prominence to such dramatic conventions as Vanavarnanam (description of a forest), Parvatavarnanam (description of a mountain), Patappurappadu (preparation for battle), Kesāḍipādavarnana (description of the beauty of a woman from head to toe) and Nephayam kettatuka (action in response to an imaginary voice from behind the scene).

#### a. *Angika and Sattvika abhinaya*

If *angika* is in order, *sattvika abhinaya* follows.

Yato hastastato dr̥ṣṭi-  
-ryato dr̥ṣṭistato manah  
Yato manastato bhāva-  
ryato bhāvastato rasaḥ

(Where the hand goes, the eyes follow: where eyes go, so does the mind. Where the mind is, *bhava* also follows and with *bhava*, comes *rasa*). In Kūṭiyāṭṭam, it is *rasabhinaya* that arrests the attention of the spectator.



In the stage lamp (*nilavilakku*) with a height of one *kol* and four finger-lengths, two lighted wicks face the eyes of the actor and the third one points towards the spectator. The actor positions himself on the stage in accordance with the two large wicks in front of him. If there is more than one actor, the main actor sits in front of the wicks. If one of the characters has more scope for dramatic action, the other characters make a temporary exit into the green-room. Thus, in *Toranayuddha*, while *Sankukarna* elaborately presents the battle preparations of the war-chieftains and the murder of *Akshakumara*, etc., *Ravana* withdraws into the green-room. Similarly in *Surpanakhāṅka*, *Rama* withdraws for *Lalita*. This helps the spectator to give his undivided attention to the character in action. Apart from *angika*, even in *vachikabhinaya* *angika* has a place; hence the sayings 'chollikkattuka' (do it with words) and 'chollate kattuka' (do it without words). Apart from this, there is also 'mootikkattuka' (do it concealed). In order to represent less important characters who have only very few words to utter, rather than bringing them on the stage, someone (who covers his body with a red cloth) is made to repeat the words in the appropriate *raga*. Even in *sattvika*-dominated scenes (for example, the verse beginning with "sikhinisalabha . . .") *vachika* and *angika* are necessary.

*Angika* may be divided into three parts—*irunnattam* (in a sitting position), *patinjattam* (in a slow tempo) and *ilakiyattam* (elaborate, improvised action). In *irunnattam* the actor sits on the *pitha* or on the ground while he is acting. In *patinjattam* he keeps his feet close together; even while the body moves, the position of the feet should not change. In *ilakiyattam*, the actor is free to indulge in all kinds of movements, like turning, jumping etc. *Ilakiyattam* is employed in the communication of *rasas* like *vira*, *adbhuta* and *bhayāṇaka*. There are many rules for the movement of the feet known by the common term *chari*; this can be divided into *bhaumikachari* and *akasa chari*. For an ordinary *Purappadu*, *charis* are used. The movement with feet touching the ground is called *bhaumikachari* and the movement above the ground, for example, jumps etc., are *akasa chari*. *Bhaumika charis* are *Kalakalavadyam Chari*, *Konattu Chari*, *Kettittiriyuka*, *Matametukkuka*. The *akasa charis* are *Vattattil chatuka*, *Ambarayanam*, *Jati meyyu*, *Parikramam*, *Nrittam*, *Rantam nata*, *Konottam*, *Kriya* and *Hasyakriya*.

Each character is assigned a different kind of movement. All animals except an elephant should jump about simulating the character of an animal. Monkeys should leap in circles; demons should leap in circular movement, with the feet not raised too high. *Srirama* and *Lakshmana* should walk *kalappurathu*. Women, holding the hand of their maids, should have the gaits of *chellunthi natakkal*; but *Surpanakha*, simulating the character of an ogress, should jump about. If the man and the woman hold hands, the man should imitate the gait of the woman. Brahmins should fan themselves with their towels. There are other modes of gait also, like 'group' walking, etc.

Though, like *Kathakali*, the hand gestures (*kaimudra(s)*) in *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* are drawn from *Hastalakshanadipika*, there are some differences also. The hands are held in five positions below the navel, on level with the navel, on level with the chest, on level with the forehead and above the forehead. The hands should not go beyond the field of the elbow of an extended hand. The gestures should not exceed the field of vision while keeping a straight face.

In verses where elaborate acting is required, the *angika abhinaya* is four-fold. First, the



verse in recited, with action. Secondly the meaning is enumerated. At the third level, it is split according to its word meaning, supported by verbal utterances, and as a fourth step, the word meaning is elaborated and interpreted. An instance is "Chalakuvalaya" in *Subhadradhananjaya*.

Here is how K.P. Narayana Pisharoti describes the scene of the entry of Sugriva in 'Balivadhankam' Kūṭiyāṭṭam.

To the accompaniment of the five instruments of Mizhavu, Sankhu, Idakka, Kurumkuzhal and Kuzhitalam, onto the stage illumined by the lamp, Sugriva enters, clad in appropriate costume, with clenched fists (and in the characteristic gait of a monkey) and jumps about in specified *talas*. Reaching in front of the lamp, he simulates the character of a monkey—shaking the branches of a tree, plucking leaves from branches, showing his canine teeth, hooting and shouting, scratching, smelling his own tail, etc. Then he gets into the character of Sugriva, for there are different hand postures for Sugriva, Bali, etc. Later, enacting the destruction of the seven *Sal* trees (by Rama), he expresses confidence in the killing of Bali. Then, looking at Rama, he acts *kesadipada*. It is after this that he addresses Rama as 'Deva'. Showing the gesture of address, he utters the word in an extended chant. Then he enacts the meaning, with action only (no words). Taking the meaning of the word from the root 'diva', he analyses the appropriate sense of the words 'krida', 'iccha', 'santosham', 'kanti' etc., connects them to the situation and interprets them in an elaborate manner. In the first instance, he enacts that, to Rama who had easily destroyed the seven *Sals*, the killing of Bali is as simple as a sport (*krida*). He again addresses Rama as 'deva'. Since Rama destroyed the seven *Sals* with one arrow, his desire (*iccha*) to kill Bali is evident. Thirdly he again calls Rama as 'deva'. There is no one as resplendent (*kanti*) as Rama, who destroyed the seven *sals* and eagerly awaits the killing of Bali. In this way, the inner meaning of each word is minutely explored and elaborated, according to the demands of the situation.

#### *Vāchikabhinaya*

In *vāchika*, apart from Sanskrit from the source-text, prose and poetry, Malayalam and Vidushaka's Tamil are also used. Even prose utterances are according to specific rules, with an incantatory tone based on *udātta*, *anudātta*, *svarita* patterns. The endings are also recited clearly, and in extended notes. The verses have specified 'ragas.'

#### *Aharyābhinaya*

Kūṭiyāṭṭam employs costume and make-up suitable for the evocation of *rasa*. An art form with such variety is *aharya* is rare to find. The hero is either in *paccha* or *pazhukka* make-up like Arjuna, Srirama (before his coronation), Bhima, Samvarana, Jimutavahana have *pazhukka*. The heroes who are not kings have *paccha*. The rule may be that *dhirodatta* heroes have *paccha* and *dhiroddhata* heroes *pazhukka*. Ravana and Ghatotkacha have *katti veshha*, while Bali has a red beard (*chuvanna tadi*). Sugriva, Hanuman, Jambavan, old sages, young sages have different costumes. Similarly Samkhachuda (the serpent king), Jatayu, Kapalivaryan, Santikkaran, Suta have specified costumes. The Vidushaka decks himself up by painting his face with rice paste, turmeric, collyrium, adorning one ear with *kundala* and the other with *tecchi* flower; his adornments are *kataka* for hands, waistband, knotted hair for the head, red cloth *pilippattam* and *vasukiyam*.

When the headgear is *kesabhara*, it is made with clusters of *tecchi* flowers. All characters have breastplate, ornaments and waist-bands. Below the waist, there is padding and the pleated cloth is worn above. Hanuman's headgear, jacket and tail are made of cotton. Instead of *kesabhara*, there is a headgear called *kolappurathattu* for Sankukama,

as well as for Rama and Lakshmana (before coronation). There are other ornaments like *kozhai*, *panakkettu* etc.

The women have *pazhukka* make-up, with a special headgear; but there is no padding at the waist. There is a different breastplate, ornaments as well as *uttariya* tied like a sacred thread. Surpanakha has a *kari* make-up.

In *aharya*, the stage-setting is as important as costume. With simple stage properties like a stool (*piṭha*) and a lamp, the Chakyar, with the aid of his verbal and histrionic skills, can bring to life any scene or situation for the imaginative spectator. This is the unique feature of Kūṭiyāṭṭam.

At the same time, several spectacular stage settings are also used in Kūṭiyāṭṭam, revealing the excellence of *aharya* aspects, leading to the representation of flying, drowning, hanging oneself, falling from the sky, soaking oneself in blood, etc.

The fourth act of *Naganandam*, called 'Parakkum Kūttu' or ('the flying scene') is visually very interesting. Standing at a height of forty-two *kols*, the Chakyar who takes the role of Garuda has a thousand and one strings attached to his hands, legs, waist and neck. With the manipulation of these strings, the actor as Garuda shows the slow spreading of the wings, encircling the roof, reaching the stage, taking a floral garland from the silk-clad sleeping Jimutavahana and flying back with the garland. The 'Sutradhara' Nambiar who controls each of the body movements and flight of the actor here literally plays with the life of the Chakyar.

Another spectacular scene is the drowning of the heroine in *Tapatisamvarana*. In a river made with white threads in a straight warp, the Nangiar jumps in and drowns. The great difficulty and danger in the representation of these scenes has led to the saying that 'a Chakyar who has flown and a Nangiar who has drowned are fit to be saluted.' For several years now, this salute has become unnecessary.

Similarly, the scene in *Nagananda* where Malayavati attempts to commit suicide by hanging herself is also very touching. Another masterly scene is the fall of Subhadra from the skies in *Subhadradhananjaya*. Surpanakha's *ninam* (blood-display scene) in Kathakali must have come from Kuttiyattam.

#### Music

The *vāchika*, both prose and poetry, are presented in a particular mode of chanting. The *svaras* of Chakyar resemble the *svaritas* of Vedic chant. They have no affinity either to realistic sounds or to the notes of music. The sound pattern employed in Kūṭiyāṭṭam represents the mental states of the characters not by imitating real life, but in a more suggestive manner.

Classical Carnatic music is an art form that exploits the sentiments of love (*srṅgāra*) and devotion (*bhakti*) for evoking the experience of aesthetic delight. In Kūṭiyāṭṭam, music is only a medium for effective theatric communication. Apart from *srṅgāra* and *bhakti*, several other sentiments or moods are depicted in Kūṭiyāṭṭam; but these are not expressed, but only suggested through the *ragas* in Kūṭiyāṭṭam. While *raga* expresses the *sthayi bhava* and the instrumental music expresses the *sanchāri bhava*, they also have a decisive role in *nayika-nayaka-bheda*.

Kūṭiyāṭṭam employs twenty *ragas*:

Muddhan srikanthi tontarthanindalam muralindalam  
Veladhuli tatha danam tarkanum viratarkanum  
Korakkurinji paurali puranirum tatheiva ca  
Srikamaram kaisikiyum ghattantariyumantari.

Let us examine the situations where they are used:

1. Muddhan : In the *sringara* of Rakshasas.
2. Srikanthi: At the end of an act; killing of an evil person; description of evening and noon time; in *bhaktirasa*.
3. Tontu: In *santa*, *bhakti* rasas.
4. Arthan: In *shringara*.
5. Indalam: In usual situations for heroic, grand personalities; in middling ones occasionally.
6. Muralindalam: In situations of erotic love for Srirama.
7. Veladhuli: In situations of fear and mental stress.
8. Danam: In wonder and occasionally in fear.
9. Tarkan: In anger and rage (*krodha* and *raudra*).
10. Viratarkan: In valour (*vira*).
11. Korakkurinji: For monkeys.
12. Paurali: At the summit of love-in-separation (*vipralambha*).
13. Puraniru: In the description of morning and the rainy season.
14. Dukkagandharam: In sadness, grief (*soka*, *karuna*).
15. Chetipanchamam: For children and low characters on all occasions; for middle-level characters on almost all occasions.
16. Bhinnapanchamam: In occasions of great joy.
17. Srikamaram: On unexpected happiness.
18. Kaisiki: In laughter (*hasya*) and revulsion (*bibhatsa*).
19. Ghattantari: In the description of the killing of an evil character.
20. Antari: In the description of states.

#### *Instrumental Music*

The most important instrument in Kūṭiyāṭṭam is *mizhavu*, while the accompanying instruments are *sankhu* (conch), *idakka*, *kuzhal* and *talakkootam* (a pair of small cymbals). Before using *Mizhavu*, there are elaborate rituals like the sacred thread ceremony (*upanayanam*), sixteen rites including *suddhikalasam*. It is believed that the *Mizhavu* leads the life of an ascetic (*brahmachari*) inside the divine theatre house (which is one of the five structures of a temple), constantly meditating on *nadabrahma* and chanting *Rgveda* and *pranava mantra*. It should not be touched by anyone except Chakyars and Nambiars who have had their first performance (*arangetram*); even they can do so only during the performance of *Kūttu* or *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*.

The *mizhavu* is placed inside the Kūttampalam in *Kutapa sthana*, and its mouth is covered by leather. The notes (*svaras*) that emanate from the *mizhavu* are *udattam*, *anudattam*, *svaritham* and *plutam*. The cymbals are played by the Nangiar. The other instruments used are *idakka* and *kuzhal*.

### Talas

*Vadya* (instrumental music), *gita* (vocal music) and *nritta* (dance) are dependent on *tala*. The *talas* in Kūṭiyāṭṭam are Ekam, Dhruvam, Tripura, Champa, Atanta and Rupakam; these are used according to the *rasas*, *svaras*, *abhinaya*, character and *kriya*.

1. *Ekatala*: In the *rasas* of *hasya*, *bibhatsa*; *ragas* of Srikanthi, Tontu, Puraniru, Kaisiki, Indalam, Bhinnapanchamam; in the conveyance of *adbhuta* by *dhirodatta* heroes. Ekatalam with a *laghu* can also be used in the expression of the Vidushaka and on occasions of 'kundalamittu mutichu kottotukuti chollal'.
2. *Dhruvatala* (14 *matras*): In *adbhuta rasa*; *ragas* of Muddhan, Arthan, Tarkan, Chetipanchamam, Danam, Korakkurinjii; *sambhoga sringara* and *bhayanaka* of Rakshasas; *vipralambha shringara* of *Dhirodatta* heroes; in the action of 'Valiakki' the 'Vattam tattal' of the description of 'kesadipada'. In Sri Rama's *sambhoga sringara*, this could be used in a slow tempo.
3. *Tripura tala*: Can be divided into *Vilambitam* (7 *matras*), *Madhyamam* (3½ *matras*), and *Atidrutam*. Among these, *Vilambita matra* is used for *krodha*, *raudra*, *ghattantari*, *tarkam* and *antari*; *raudra* of *dhirodattanayaka*; Ravana's lifting of Mount Kailasa, etc. *Madhyama matra* may be used for *bhayanaka rasa*, *Veladhuli raga*, and for the dramatic conventions of 'matametukkuka' 'parikramam', 'arangu perumattattil natakuka', 'perumbara kottuka', etc. *Atidrutam* can be used in *Tripura*, *Srikamaram* and in *Paurali ragas*.
4. *Champatala*: used in Yaugandharayana's 'kalankapatratil natakka' in *Pratijnayaugāndhārayana*.
5. *Atantatala*: A character who overhears an imaginary conversation acts in *Atantatala*. This is called 'kettatal'.
6. *Chempatatala*: used in orchestral items like *Goshthi*, *Tayambaka* etc.
7. *Lakshmitala*: *Jatayu*'s dance sequences in *Jatayuvadha* are in this *tala*.

Apart from these, there were others like *Mallatala* in Kūṭiyāṭṭam. Several others are used for the enactment of *Nityakriya*, *kalappurattu natakka*, *chellunti natakka*, *udghattanam*, *pakshisthobham*, *pantati*, *ammanattam* etc. On any occasion, the Nambiar has the right to use *Ekatala*.

### Rituals

As per dictum, the stage in Kūṭiyāṭṭam is decorated with fruit-bearing plantain trees, the tender leaves of a coconut tree, a vessel full of paddy (*nirapara*), and decorated, covered pillars. The pillar decorations are preordained, and they should not cover the statues of *dikpalas* that adorn the roof.

The Chakyar after taking a purificatory bath comes to the green room, washes his feet, worships the Lord, ties a red cloth on his head. Applying ghee on his face, he puts on the make-up and costume of the character he represents on the stage. After this he pays obeisance to the family deities and his preceptors. If there is any lapse here, it is believed

that the gods would be angry and that sufficient atonement should be done. Though this can be done on the stage also; since there is no need for orchestral accompaniment, it is done inside the green-room.

By then the lamp on the stage is lit with three wicks—two facing the actor and one facing the audience. The Nambiar pays respects to the *mizhavu* by touching the instrument and his own forehead. Next he climbs on to the place near the wooden frame where the *mizhavu* is kept, and sounds the *mizhavu*. This takes about five minutes. Then the Nangiar recites the invocatory song called 'Akkitta' and the Nambiar plays 'Goshthi' according to a specific time and speed sequence. Akkitta, invoking Goddess Saraswati and Lord Ganapati, is sung in a low tempo.

After this, the Nambiar in his traditional dress comes in front of the *mizhavu*, recites the benedictory verse and sanctifies the stage by sprinkling holy water. The verse that is recited here usually indicates the story of the act to be performed, with salutations to the hero. For instance, the benedictory verse in *Sakuntala* goes like this:

Svarlloke suravṛndavairimathaneśvāpatassakhā vajriṇa  
sthanvānomrgayām vaneṣu vicaran kaṇvāśramam sangatah  
dr̥ṣṭvā tatra śakuntalām śaśimukhīm kandarpabāṇāturah  
pāyādvah śaśivamśamauktikamaṇidduṣyanta namā nṛpaḥ.

However, if the hero of the act is a character like Ravana, then divine characters (like Rama) are saluted.

After this, the curtain is held. In order to indicate the entry of the actor, the *mizhavu* is played in a specific way, called *vayikkal*. Then the Sutradhara enters and salutes the *mizhavu*, and performs the benedictory *marayil kriya* behind the curtain. Then the curtain is removed.

After the entry of the character, there is *panchapadavinyasam*. Sitting in the position of *noopurapada*, the Sutradhara pays respects to the stage.

The next dramatic convention, called 'Purappadu' (entry), depends on the story. The entry of majestic, royal characters is accompanied by 'Panchavadya' (an ensemble of five drums). The entry of Sutradhara in *Balacharita* is as follows:

Sutradhara: Aha! I feel very happy. Why? How? After getting up in the morning and doing my daily chores like bath, worship to God and food, I came to the stage, when I see that many Brahmins have assembled. After paying my respects (by bestowing flowers and saluting) to these high-born, scholarly, astute and pious Brahmins, I tell them: "O brahmins, may Sri Narayana, the lord of the three worlds, bless you. Who is Sri Narayana? What is his real form?" Asking such questions, and elaborately interpreting this, he comes to the benedictory verse praising Krishna, the hero.

Now comes *nitya kriya*, which consists of several *charis* and actions. It starts with *dhruvam*, followed by *cheriya pakkam*, *valiapakkam* and four verses beginning with 'Ksheerasagara'. While these verses are sung by the Nangiar, the Sutradhara with a verbal enumeration of its *tala* pattern performs the dance of *bhramari*. Then follows the dance for the two verses beginning with 'Ambika Girije'.

Next, the *kesadipada* (head-to-foot description) of Siva and Parvati is depicted,

without the *sloka*. The next item is the *abhinaya* of three *slokas* beginning with 'Marasarira'. After this comes the salutation to eight *dikpalas* (guardian angels of eight directions). This *sloka* is also done through *abhinaya*.

Now the following passage is enacted:

I pay obeisance to all the living and non-living beings in this world, by bestowing flowers. From Brahma the Creator to the meanest blade of a grass; to the divine lords like Indra; sages like Narada; celestial beings like Yakshas, Kinnaras, Gandharvas, Vidyadharas, Siddhacharanas, Asuras and Serpents who live in the Netherworlds; earthly beings including Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas, Sudras and animals like cow and all birds.

Again *panchapadavinyasa*. Then the Sutradhara retires, after bowing down in respect, and Purappadu is over.

Now the play begins. In *angikābhinaya*, the first word from the introduction of the act is uttered. If it is a poem, some parts of it, and if it is prose, the whole of it is recited and enacted here.

After the *abhinaya* of the actor who performs that day, '*mangalakriya*' is done. There are *kriyās* assigned as common for every character, while there are some special ones for particular characters. For these innumerable *kriyās*, the Nangiar sings and the Nambiar plays on the instruments, while the Chakya acts. There are salutations to Vishnu and the *dikpālas*. For *Mangalakriya*, the Akkitta beginning with "Visvajanadhipa . . ." is sung.

From the second day onwards, the actor for the first day starts his *Nirvahanam*.

*Nirvahanam* denotes the narration of the story that has happened so far. This has two factors—*anukrama* and *samkshepa*. *Anukrama* is an overview of the major incidents of the story, enacted in the reverse order. The enactment of the incidents that have happened from the beginning to the commencement of the story is called *Samkshepa*. The *Nirvahanam* of the hero is integrated with several descriptions, like that of a mountain, palace, etc., and there are several *slokas* for its enactment. K. P. Narayana Pisharoti has included 331 *Nirvahana slokas* as an appendix to his *Ascharyachudamani Attaprakaram*. The *Nirvahana* in *Nagananda* up to the entry of the hero has 22 *slokas*. In *Nirvahana* the meaning of each of these *slokas* is elaborated. After this elaborate *abhinaya*, the Nangiar recites the *sloka* once again. Then the next *sloka* is taken up.

The convention of *Nirvahana* is not restricted to the main character. Ravana and Sankukarna in *Toranayuddha* can perform *Nirvahanam*, while both Jimutavahana and Atreya do it in *Nagananda*. The same situation is seen from two perspectives by two characters. For example, in *Nagananda*, the *Nirvahana* done by Jimutavahana is dominated by *sattvika* and *angika abhinayas*, while that of the Vidushaka is *vachika*-oriented. The hero's *Nirvahana* takes a few days to complete, after which he withdraws. Then he needs to appear only during a scene of combined performance (*kuttiyatuka*).

Next is the Purappadu of the Vidushaka. There is only a single *mizhavu* in the background. The Vidushaka, after coming on the stage, gets into his characteristic expressions, sits on the *pitha* (seat), covers his face with *uttariya*, and recites the benedictory verse:



Brahmā yena kulālavanniyamito brahmāṇḍabhāṇḍodare  
 Viṣṇuryena daśavatāragahane kṣipto mahāsankate  
 Śambhuryena kapālapāṇipūṭake bhikṣāmaṭaṇ vartate  
 Sūryo bhrāmyati nityameva gagane tasmei namaḥ karmaṇe

In Purappadu, the Vidushaka shows the characteristic expressions of a Vidushaka. For this, he bloats up his cheeks, as though munching something, scrubs his sacred thread vigorously, takes off his vest cloth (which is not tied round his waist), drains out (imaginary) water from it by squeezing it, fans himself, unties his lock of hair and ties it up again with great care.

Then the Vidushaka recites the next *sloka* and explains it in detail, skilfully interspersing it with humour. He describes how, due to the turn of fate, even the priest forgets his Vedas when they are stolen, and how he has to serve under a king. Even the *trimurtis* are not spared from the effects of fate. After elaborating these situations, he relates them to the thread of the main story and starts with the first sentence from the Act of the play.

Starting from 'Vivada' (argument and counter-argument), he presents vinoda (entertainment), Vanchana (treachery), Asana (eating), and Rajaseva (service under a king), the exposition lasting for several days. (Asana should be presented only during night). With Rajaseva, the Vidushaka joins himself with the hero from the story.

After this comes the Vidushaka's Nirvahana, which can be held during day-time also. Presented in the form of a mono-act narration, this Nirvahana comes up to the point of the beginning of the story. Kūṭiyāṭṭam (combined acting) starts from the next day, and should be over in the next three days. At that time, characters can go in and out of the stage. They recite the lines memorised from the text and elaborately enact the meaning. The Vidushaka repeats those words with a short introduction, and interprets them. Prakrit words are translated into Sanskrit and then the meaning is given. When the hero is present on the stage, two Mizhavus and the other instruments are used.

After the whole Act is performed in this manner, all the other characters, except the hero, retire from the stage. The hero, in place of 'Bharatavakya' performs 'Ankam mutikkal'. The Nambiar plays 'Mutiyakkitta'; the Nangiar recites Akkitta beginning with "Ksheerasagara . . ." and the Chakyar dances accordingly. All this is like *Nityakriya* in Purappadu.

After this, the Chakyar washes his feet, worships God, takes a wick from the lamp, puts it out, puts it back into the lamp and lights it. After this benedictory ritual the hero withdraws from the stage. This is how Kūṭiyāṭṭam is concluded.

#### *Some Special Features of Kūṭiyāṭṭam*

Kūṭiyāṭṭam has some significant features which make it different from other art forms: Firstly, the elaborate acting of *slokas*; secondly, the overriding importance of the Vidushaka.

The elaborate *abhinaya* of the *slokas* helps the spectator to unravel the multiple meanings and subtle shades of inner meanings embedded within a *sloka*. It also helps the spectator to understand the details of situations and incidents, even those remotely connected to the poetic content of the *slokas*. Some examples are given below.

1. In 'Toranayuddha' of *Abhisheka nāṭaka*:

Jitvā trailokyamājau sasuradanusutam yanmayā garvitena  
krāntvā Kailāsamīśam svagaṇaparivṛtam sākamākampya devyā  
labdhvā tasmāt prasādam punaragasutayā nandinānāḍṛtatvāt  
dattam śaptam catābhyām yadi kapivikṛticchatmanā tatvamasyāt

(I conquered all the three worlds in war, including the Devas. Then I attacked Kailasa and made Siva, Parvati and the *bhutas* tremble with fear. When I received blessings from Siva, I disregarded Parvati and Nandi, and they cursed me. Is it the result of that curse?)

This *sloka* reveals the thoughts of Ravana, when he comes to know that Hanuman has transgressed to Lanka, killed many Rakshasas in his army including his son Akshakumara and also destroyed a major part of Lanka.

But this *sloka* is subjected to a very elaborate enactment, which includes the fight between the Devas and the Asuras, the victory march, the description of Lanka, the lifting of Kailasa, the description of the separation of Parvati.

2. Similarly, in 'Asokavanikanka':

Yudhi sarabhasam hatvā rāmam balānmayi gr̥hṇati  
svayamanucitā bhartum śokādasūn na kimujjhati  
api ca manujam hantum rāmam spr̥śanti kimāyudham  
tridaśavijayaślāghāpātrī kṛtvā mama bāhavaḥ

(If I fight with Rama, kill him and abduct Sita, since she is not familiar with me, she would commit suicide, due to the grief of separation from her husband. Moreover my hands, renowned for their victory over the Devas, need not touch the weapon for merely killing a man.)

When this *sloka* is enacted, there is a detailed exposition of the victory over the Devas and the suicide of Sita.

The suicide of Sita is performed as follows: Sita and Rama live happily in the forest. Ravana approaches and beckons Rama to war. Rama takes up his bow and arrow, confronts Ravana, and they fight. Sita prays for the success of Rama and the defeat of Ravana. When she sees Ravana killing Rama, she closes her eyes and weeps. When Ravana approaches her and tries to placate her, she closes her ears. Ravana in anger pulls her hair. Sita dies in grief. Ravana here shows that if he killed Rama, Sita would take her own life in this manner.

For the conquest of the Devas, Ravana shows how he reaches Devaloka and challenges the Devas to war, how he fights and wins the war and how everyone praises the valour and strength of his arms.

3. In the first Act of *Subhadradhananjaya*:

Calakuvalayadhāmnorāñjanasnigdhamakṣnor-  
bhayacaladhṛtiyugmam keyamālodayantī  
mukhaparimalalobhāt bhṛṅgadattānuyātrā  
śīthilayati subhadrāmudritam mānasam me

This *sloka* describes how Arjuna is attracted to the lovely damsel whom he has just saved from a demon. While describing her beauty from head to foot (*kesadipada*), this passage pertains to the beauty of her eyes: “This damsel, with eyes like a fluttering *kuvalaya* flower, her fearful fluttering eyes darkened with collyrium, and a fragrant face thronging with bees, loosens my heart which has already been sealed by Subhadra.”

But what about performance? First the *sloka* is recited in a clear voice, in the *raga* Artham, with the depiction of *mudra* for each word. Next, it is shown again in the same order, without reciting the verse. Thirdly, the verse is split up into its proper sentence order and depicted in an elaborate manner. This *sloka*, to be enacted fully, takes about one or two hours.

Some important *slokas* with a lot of scope for elaboration are given below:

1. In *Abhisheka Nāṭaka*: Two *slokas* from Toranayuddha, beginning with ‘yudhi jagatrayabhiti kṛtopi me’ and “Jitva trailokya . .”
2. In *Ascharyachudamani*: “Jyāghoṣena nirakaromi..”, “Ācārānanucaratā..”, “Udyānam vanābhūmaya..” (Parnasālanka); “Sandhyarun Salilavaha..” (Surpanakhanka); “Yudhisarabhasamhatvārāmaṃ..”, “Indrānīmahamapsarodiranayaṃ..” (Mayasitanka); “Api vāsavavāranasya vaktre..”, “Nāham bandhuragātri..” (Jatayuvadhanka); “Sīhātum yasya purandaro..”, “Ete svargavibhūṣanaṃ..” (Asokavanikanka).
3. In *Nagananda*: “Madyādigajagaṇabhitti..” (Act I); “Śaśīmaṇisila..” (Act II);
4. In *Subhadradhananjaya*: “Śikhiniśalabhojvāla..”, “Calakuvalayadhāmno..”, “Saundaryam sukumārata..” (Act I).

The above *slokas* have potential for elaborate action through *angika* and *sāṅgvika* *abhinaya*. Similarly, *vachika abhinaya* also has an important place in Kūṭiyāṭṭam. The protagonist of *vachika* is the Vidushaka, the comic character. He accompanies the hero as his trusted friend, in all his good and bad actions, not so much by taking part, but by providing comic relief, criticizing and jesting, flattering, reprimanding, boasting. He always indulges in self-pity, and is a great lover of good food. When the hero indulges in romantic extravagances with beautiful damsels, the Vidushaka also has his own object of love, Chakki, who pounds paddy! The ‘chandrakantasila’ of the hero has a parallel for the Vidushaka in the servants’ quarters of Chakki.

The Vidushaka entertains the less initiated among the spectators, by providing comic relief from the long-drawn-out *abhinaya* of Sanskrit *slokas*. He interprets the meaning of the Sanskrit *slokas* in his own style, his own way, and recites counter-*slokas*. If it is a Prakrit stanza, he first translates it into Sanskrit and then explains in Malayalam.

Though the Vidushaka explains the meaning of Sanskrit *slokas*, more interesting is his exposition of counter-*slokas* and sequels. When the hero narrates something, the Vidushaka also takes up the theme and an incident or an experience closely similar to it.

Such accounts can usually be heard in friendly chats and discussions.

Here are some examples of counter-*slokas*:

In *Nagananda*, for diverting the mind of the hero (Jimutavahana) from his love-lorn state, the Vidushaka (Atreya) reminds him of his valour and courage:

Anṅgolam dhairyamullor taneṅṅumilla jagatraye  
Eṅṅupoyatidanīm te poṅṅgitum dhairyaivaibhavam.

(In all the three worlds, there is none as courageous as you. Where is all that swelling courage now gone?)

The hero admits that he is indeed courageous:

Nītāḥ kim nanisāḥ śasāṅkarucayo nāghrātamindīvaram  
kim nonmīlita mālatisurabhayaḥ soḍhāḥ pradoṣanilāḥ  
jhamkāraḥ kamalākare madhulihām kim vā mayānaśruto  
nirvyājam vidhureṣvadhīra iti mām kenābhidhatte bhavān.

(Didn't I brave moonlit nights? Inhale the fragrance of *kuvalaya* flowers? Put up with the evening breeze laden with the smell of jasmine flowers? Hear the sound of bees in the lotus pond? How can you say that I am not brave?)

The Vidushaka does not accept defeat, but recites a counter-verse to outdo the hero:

Nītāḥ kim prthumodakena divasānāghrātamammampalam  
kim nomīlita cārujīrakarasāḥ soḍhāśca pākānilāḥ  
śīlkāram kaṭukum varuttu kariyilkkūṭṭunna neram śruto  
nirvyājam viruneṣvadhīra iti mām kenābhidhatte bhavān  
Vāḷappaḷaṅṅaḷ valiyo cila kāṇmanappam  
vārkunna śīlkkaraṇanādamatuttu kelppan  
pālkkāṇṇiyāruvatu pārtu purattirippan  
ṇānallayo jagati dhīrarilagraganyan

Thus the Vidushaka is also no less than the hero, as far as courage goes. Now the hero argues that he is a great coward, because he cannot even suffer the flower-arrows of Kamadeva.

Now the Vidushaka, not to be outdone in cowardice, has the following counter-*sloka*:

Mannil collārṇna vāḷappaḷanikaramutan  
tinnotukkīlayo ṇān  
munnil kaṇṭṭṭunnappaṇṇaḷumutakaḷumā  
prītya tinnīlayo ṇān  
pinneppālkkāṇṇi mūkkolavumita  
sitādhyam kuṭippīlayo ṇān  
ennoḷam dhairyamillāttavar bhuvanatale  
pārkil mattārumilla

The hero dreams of the heroine the previous day; the Vidushaka also dreams of Chakki, the paddy-pounder. When the hero finds the chandrakantasila devoid of the heroine as empty, the Vidushaka also feels:

Ural poññumuralppura tñuralāle  
bhūṣitamahapriyam na mama  
kuralaccerumīrahitam  
kari kūṭātoru bhojanam pole

Apart from these counter-*slokas*, his interpretation of the other *slokas* is also in a peculiar manner. He explains the meaning of the *slokas* and ends with the refrain: "Is that what my friend says?"

Another important task of the Vidushaka is the exposition of the effects of *karma* (fate) and *vivada* (argument), as well as what is satirically called the, 'Purusharthas'— Vinoda, Vanchana, Asana and Rajaseva.

In the exposition of the *sloka* beginning with "Brahmā yena kulālava..", he describes how in Vishnu's incarnation as Fish (Matsyāvatara) when Hayagriva steals the Vedas, the priest forgets his scriptures. Finding it difficult to clear the doubts of his students, he tries to cover up his ignorance and makes a fool of himself. Describing this episode at length, in a language full of humour and satire, the Vidushaka comes to "tasmeiḥ namaḥ karmaṇe".

In order to show the effects of *karma*, he narrates the story of Oṭṭhakiḷayan Müssu. This Müssu marries again and again, for the sake of begetting a child. In due course, when children are born, all of them turn out to be girls: such a huge number that all the names in the world become inadequate for these girls. Finally after innumerable attempts, he gets a boy, but he accidentally falls into a well and dies. This is due to the trick of *karma* (fate), and even the Trinity (Brahma, Vishnu, Siva) are not exempt from the spell of fate.

The benedictory song for 'Vivada' is an argument that ensues between Parvati and Ganga. Two Brahmins, named Mekkantala and Kizhkkantala get into an argument revolving around the greatness of Siva and Vishnu. The argument is closed by reconciling both the sides by interpreting the same verse in two ways, celebrating both Vishnu and Siva. This narration satirizes the inferior poets and enumerates the features of good poetry.

After Vivada follows a satirical commentary on the people from different communities and castes, and their dress, manners and weaknesses. These people, assembled to discuss different matters relating to the temple, finally come to a decision that for effective running of the temple, the Purusharthas should be followed. The 'Purusharthas' depicted here are 'Vinoda', 'Vanchana', 'Asana' and 'Rajaseva'. For 'Vinoda' dealing with 'kama' (desire), there is a humorous narration of how the protagonist approaches Miśakkotippurathu Itunnūli, the prostitute (on this occasion, the qualities of different prostitutes are described in great detail), how he deceives her and steals a golden bowl from her house. This narration takes two days for its presentation. On the third day, the benedictory verse celebrates the breakfast of Ganapati, and commences Asana (Eating), the third Purushartha. Deciding on the place to go for Asana, he goes on to describe four

types of people—Sarasavirasa, Virasasarasa, Virasavirasa and Sarasasarasa. The choice for a companion falls on the fourth category. He goes to the house of Indindim Naykar, where a massive lunch is being hosted in memory of the head of the family who died exactly twelve months back. After eating his fill, he returns, giving the blessing that the hosts may hold a similar 'twelve-month' lunch every year! The performance of 'Asana Purushartha' is very entertaining. On the next day, there is Rajaseva where there are elaborate descriptions of several kings and the complications of service under a king.

The healthy social criticism inherent in the Purusharthas is crucial for the cultural development of the community. The argument between Mekkantala and Kizhkkantala finds a parallel in modern days also. Mekkantala represents Management interests, while Kizhkkantala seems to stand for Labour. This narration seems to underscore the fact that such unhealthy arguments, leading nowhere, cause obstruction to work, and therefore should be avoided at all costs. Similarly, Vanchana and Vinoda are also still relevant.

#### *Improvement of Kutiyattam*

Any art form when extended, elaborated, blown out of proportion or repeated endlessly, becomes stale after some time. Just as in Malayalam when the excesses of drama led to the composition of *Chakkichankaram*, when Kūṭiyāṭṭam showed signs of excessive overstatement, the critical work called *Natankusam* appeared. The author of this work subjected to severe criticism two plays—*Anguliyankam*, which gives predominance to *angikabhinaya*, and *Mantrankam* which has an exaggerated use of *vachika*. The main points of criticism are:

1. In the narration of the story, the Chakyar takes unlimited freedom to draw on subjects from everywhere and use them indiscriminately, thus hampering the *sthayibhava*.
2. The rituals of Purvaranga, called *kriya*.
3. The use of exaggerated descriptions which have been consciously avoided by the dramatist himself.
4. The humour of the Vidushaka; his use of Malayalam; the exposition of Purusharthas, etc.

Mani Madhava Chakyar has put forward the following suggestions for the modification of Kūṭiyāṭṭam, without destroying its traditional purity:

1. A single act from a play should be codified in such a way that it can be enacted in about three hours.
2. The Nirvahana and Purappadu are necessary only at the very beginning.
3. In Nirvahana, after the introduction, the *shloka* should be recited immediately and the meaning enacted. But the enactment of the meaning with the eyes alone (without use of *mudras*) is very essential. Similarly *vachikabhinaya* also cannot be avoided.
4. The Nirvahana of the hero and the Vidushaka should be curtailed. The Purusharthas should be narrated in a duration of three hours. Only Rajaseva needs to be shortened.
5. The repetition in *abhinaya* should be avoided.



6. The Tamil spoken by Nambiar should be translated into Malayalam, as a scene-by-scene account.

The people of Kerala can rightly be proud of this invaluable art form. They should ensure that it does not slowly disappear from the stage.

*From Margi Souvenir 1971, Trivandrum.  
Translated from Malayalam by Sudha Gopalakrishnan.*