

## The Training Methods of Kūṭiyāṭṭam

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### *The Training Schedule of the Chakyar and the Nangiar*

1. Get up very early in the morning, exactly at 3 a.m.; wash the face and the feet, and recite *slokas* in *ragas* like Srikanthi, Puraniru, Artan, etc.

2. Sit cross-legged and practise eye movements, eyebrow movements and cheek movements.

3. Learn the basic stance—the front portion of the feet are kept open, the heels are pushed in, and taking care that the hips are not thrust backwards, the body is to be poised well. Now, while remaining standing, the body is lowered to a sitting posture (*taṇu nilkkuka*). Usually a stick is placed in between the two knees, so that they do not come closer to each other. Starting with a duration of five minutes, this stance should be practised every day; and the training should make it easy for the student to stand in this position for about an hour.

4. While standing in the basic stance, the hands are rotated, with the palms in open and closed positions and *slokas* are recited.

5. After feet exercises, start *nityakriya*. Until the actor learns to do *nityakriya* himself, the other *kriyas* are not taught. Once he learns to do it without mistakes, the *kriyas* of plays like *Ascharyachudamani*: *Anguliyankam*, *Mattavilasam* etc. are taught. Even while the other *kriyas* are being taught, it is necessary to practise *nityakriya* once every day.

6. After learning all the *kriyas*, *ilakiyattam* is taught. Its method: the *slokas* are recited according to the *ragas*. The *mudras* are shown according to their nature, with stamping and jumping (*chavitticchatu*), raising the leg, stamping with spreading of the feet (*parathicchavitti*), stamping and jumping sideways, turning, swinging and twisting the body. The acting is done up to the end of the *sloka*, with the meanings explained elaborately, interspersing it with other *attams* and specialised *kriyas*, according to the context. This method of acting is called *ilakiyattam*.

7. Now special *attams* like *Purappadu* (commencement), *Kesadipadam* (head-to-foot description), *Koppaniyikkal* (decking up, usually the heroine), *Parvatavarnana* (description of a mountain), *Vrikshavarnana* (description of a tree), *Pakshistobhan* (the simulation of the character of a bird), *Talam chavittuka* (taking steps in rhythm), etc. are taught.

All the items mentioned above are to be done before 8.00 a.m.

8. At noon, the *slokas*, plays and *Attaprakarams* are memorized according to the level (of the actor) and recited.

9. At night, first, eye movements are practised. In between, when the eyes are given rest, the roots of the palms are kept on the elbows and the fingers moved vigorously. Now

raising the arms and showing *hamsamudra*, the palms are tilted inwards and outwards. This is followed by movements of the eyes, eyebrows, again eyes and cheeks and so on for about an hour. Once the eyes are supple with rigorous practice, *rasabhinaya* and the learning of *mudras* etc. are to be done at night. Once the eyes become rather well-trained, and are able to express the *rasas* effectively, the *mudras* should be shown with their appropriate *rasas*.


Before retiring at night, the *slokas* memorised at noon should be recited in their specific *ragas*. After getting trained in this manner, the student learns *Anguliyankam*, *Mantrankam* etc. With this, the subject-matter of the play (*attam*) and the role of the *Vidushaka* become thoroughly familiar to the student. Apart from this, the study of Sanskrit also should be commenced, right from the beginning. In due course, he becomes a good scholar by learning *kavyas* (poetry), *natakas* (plays) *alankaras* (rhetoric) etc. as well as several scientific branches like *tarka* (logic), *vyakarana* (grammar), etc.

#### *Method of Eye Exercises*

The training is done by sitting cross-legged, applying *ghee* to both eyelids, massaging the eyes by stretching them sideways and pushing up the upper eyelids as much as possible with the fingers. During these eye exercises, the teacher should sit in front of the student and guide the movement of the eyes by rotating his hand, etc. and observe him closely. Once the eyes become rather well-trained and fully open, then the eye lids need not be pulled up with the fingers.

According to the movement of the pupil of the eye, there are twenty-one varieties of exercises, which are listed below:

1. ○ Circular movement of the pupil, towards the left and the right.
2. ↔ Pupil at the centre, moving to the left and the right.
3. ↑↓ Pupil at the centre, moving upwards and downwards.
4. \ / Movement sideways, to the left and right.
5. ∪ From the side of the left eye, moving downward, reaching the right, in the shape of a half-moon.
6. ∩ Same movement, from the top.
7. ω Movement of the eye imitating this figure.
8. ∞ Eye movement following the pattern.
9. ∑ Eye movement following this pattern.
10. ⊖ Opposite movement from the above.
11. V Movement imitating the figure 'V' — starting from the left corner, coming down towards the centre, and going up to the right corner.
12. Λ The opposite movement of the above.
13. W Taking three positions in the upper portion.
14. M Opposite of the above.

15. > Sideways movement
16. < Opposite movement.
17.  $\Sigma$  Taking three positions sideways.
18.  $\Sigma$  Opposite of the above.
19.  $\infty$  Like a horizontal 'eight'.
20. 8 A vertical 'eight'.
21.  Like the figure, three positions each, horizontally and vertically.

When the student gets rather well-trained in these movements, the rest of the eye training involving 'breath' (*vayu*) in the pupil of the eye (*krishnamani*) depends entirely on the skill and practice of the teacher. While doing this complicated *vayu* exercise, special care should be taken to avoid the "serpent-eye" (*sarpadrshi*). The training should make the student bring three *vayus* in his eyes. Only after the completion of this training does the actor become capable of expressing adequate *rasa* in his *abhinaya*.

In *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*, the training for the Chakyar, as well as the Nangiar who takes female roles, is the same; but a Nangiar need not have as much suppleness of the body as a Chakyar in terms of basic stance, etc.

#### *The Training Methods for a Nambiar*

Next we come to the training given to a Nambiar who plays on the Mizhavu during a performance. Getting up early in the morning and doing daily chores like bath, etc., the student practises hand manipulations (*pathakkayyukal*) according to the direction of his teacher. This is done according to the rhythmic vocalizations called *vayttari* or oral formulae beginning with a slow tempo, gradually increasing the tempo to a fast speed, and coming down to the slow tempo again. The hand manipulations are usually taught in four or five ways: (1) Takkita (2) Tarikita (3) Takkita kitataki tarikita kitataki (4) Dhikkattakka Dhikkattakka Dhikkattakatta.

While practising *pathakkayyukal*, the student also learns many other items in fast, medium and slow tempos, and also to do *kalasa* items. When the hands become well-trained in this manner, he starts learning the items required for a performance proper—these include the sounding of the Mizhavu (*mizhavocchappettutuka*), *goshthi kottuka* (playing *goshthi*), learning *nityakriya* etc. After this he is taught to play the drum for the *kriyas* of Anguliyankam, Mattavilasam and Mantrankam. The *Kriyas* in the above acts have been choreographed strictly according to each *tala*. Therefore the student learns to do the drumming for these *kriyas*, according to their specified *talas*. After this, the drum beatings for special *attams* are taught separately. For this, the player learns to maintain congruent rhythms move according to set patterns, and play in conjunction with the *mudras*, in *talas* like Tripata, fast Tripata, Ekatala, Vidushaka's Ekatala, Atanta, Dhruvatala and Champatala.

The Nambiar should understand the *ragas* recited by the Chakyar or Nangiar, and play in *talas* suitable to these *ragas* and suitable to the occasion; he should learn to modulate his drumming in varying degrees of intensity, like the natural, light, violent, etc. Apart

from this, the drum manipulations along with their rhythmic vocalizations should be practised correctly for special conventions like Patappurappad (preparation for battle), Kailasodharanam (lifting of Mount Kailasa), Yuddhachari (dance indicating battle), Vrkshavarnana (description of a tree), Kesadipadam (head-to-foot description), Talam chavittal (rhythmic steps), Udghattanam, Mayilattam (peacock dance), Koppaniyikkal (decking up), Krida (play), Munnam talattil Purappadu (commencement in the third *tala*), Uttariyam visal (fanning with the upper garment), Pravesikam (entry), Madyapanam (drinking liquor), Vanarastobham (characteristic expressions of a monkey), Pakshistobham (characteristic expressions of a bird) and Chuvatu chavittal (dance steps).

After all these items, Tayambaka drumming, which can be regarded as an attractive embellishment of Kūṭiyāṭṭam, is also taught. Just like drumming on a Chenda, the right hand follows the beats usually done with a stick, and the left hand executes its own rhythms. Another method is to play all the beats with both the hands—for this the practice goes on at night also, in the moonlight. Most of the training is usually done in the morning and learning the beats are done at night. At noon, the student learns to chant the Tamil portions, acquires a general knowledge of the plays, understands the *ragas* and *mudras*, and also learns the content of the *attams* by referring to Attaprakarams and Kramadipikas. He also learns to play in tune with the blowing of the pipe (kuzhal). This is one of the tricks by which the attention of the audience is engaged, while the actors sometimes retire to the green-room. The practice for Mizhavu starts first on a granite stone, then on a wooden board (*avanappalaka*) and subsequently graduates to a stump of wood covered with leather.

Apart from this, the Nambiar should also learn other jobs like making a *chutti*, *anikuttal*, *koppupani* (making/repairing items of costume), *aniyippikkal* (dressing up the actor), *mundupirikkal* (twisting the cloth—in *Nagananda*) etc., which are suitable to the individual situations and plays. A Chakyar also should know all these. However, in *Parakkum kuttu*, the Nambiar alone is taught to hold the string.

As accompaniments to Mizhavu, the instruments in use in Kūṭiyāṭṭam are idakka, timila, kuzhal and sankhu.

#### *The Special Responsibilities of a Nambiar*

The special tasks assigned to a Nambiar, apart from his regular activities, include: tightly twisting the cloth for representing the hanging of the heroine in *Nagananda*, 'holding the string' in 'Parakkum Kūttu' in *Nagananda*, warping the threads in 'Ozhukilankam' (The Act of Drowning). These scenes, unless done with care and precision, are fraught with danger. Secondly, just like a Chakyar who performs the Bharatavakya for a *Ramayanam*, Kūṭiyāṭṭam with twenty-one Acts, the Nambiar who recites Tamil for the entire length of the play also has some special privileges.

In some plays, the entire role of the Nandi Sutradhara and a part of the responsibilities of Sthapana Sutradhara are performed by the Nambiar himself. He also enacts certain dramatic roles, according to the demands of the occasion; however, in a proper Kūttu or Kūṭiyāṭṭam, none except the Chakyar, Nambiar and Nangiar are entitled to take a role or even enter the scene of action.

### *Tasks and Special Training for Nangiar*

In Kūṭiyāṭṭam, the Nangiar has two responsibilities: (1) to enact the female roles in the play; (2) to recite the *slokas* etc. sitting on the stage and control the rhythmic beats in the performance. The training for the first of these two tasks—the female roles—has already been described in detail. The second responsibility is to sit on the stage, which means to take a place on the stage with the arrival of the Sutradhara, keep up the rhythm with a pair of small cymbals (*talakkuttam*) in accordance with the drum beat, recite Akkitta, hum or sing Alama, Nirvahana *slokas* as well as Churnikas and *slokas* from the play. It is imperative for the Nangiar to sit on the stage until the Kūttu is over and the conclusion (*Kūttu mutikkal*) is performed. For special *attams*, more than one Nangiar sits on the stage, either together or by changing places.

Special training is essential for conducting the responsibilities while sitting on the stage. It goes like this: all the *talas* played on the Mizhavu should be learnt by playing on the cymbals; the songs like Akkitta, etc. should be learned thoroughly in accordance with their *talas*; *ragas* like Srikanthi, Tontu, Puraniru, etc. chanted by the Chakyar should be picked up by the Nangiar also by reciting and recapitulating them early in the morning.

Just like the Chakyars who are conversant with specific items like Parakkum Kūttu, the Nangiar has to learn the representation of hanging (*ketti njaluka*), drowning (*ozhukuka*), etc. Special training is given for these dangerous actions.

### *Method of Teaching Cholliyattam*

Just like conducting a performance in front of an audience, this training is also conducted integrating all elements of a play, including the drum recital of the Nambiar, the rhythmic modulation of the Nangiar, the recitation of *slokas*, and the enactment of the Chakyar. The purpose of this rehearsal is to train the student in several aspects of the enactment of a play, like *mudras*, *abhinaya*, expression of *rasa*, etc.

To understand this mode of training, the method of enactment (*Cholliyattam*) of a *sloka* is given below:

Mayi jīvati manuṣādavāptā  
vipadam me sahaṣā śucam jahātu  
avamardya patim harāmi Sītām  
turagan sūta javena codaya tvam

(*Ascharyachudamani*, Act III)

This *sloka* is enacted by Ravana. The actor, assuming the role of Ravana, commences on the third *tala*, turns to the front, surveys the audience, salutes in *kamalaparivartanam*, sits on the *pitha*, pays obeisance and surveys the audience, salutes in *kamalaparivartanam* and enacts Anukrama and Samkshepa (All this should be accompanied by the Nambiar playing on the drum). In the guise of Ravana, he puts the upper garment over the arm and acts Sita's *kesadipadam*. Its method of enactment: First show *kesadipadam*; then the hair, eyes, face, breast and feet are shown with gestures, facial expression and drum accompaniment; again *kesadipadam* in Triputatāla; then the effect of the showering of Kama's arrows (*kamasara*). Sitting on the *pitha* for a while in a fainting manner, and

reviving, as though thinking about Sita and longing for her, decides "to go and fetch Sita". After morning ablutions, prayer and food, goes to the royal court, sits on the throne. Decked up in jewellery like bangles, crown etc. and surveying himself in the mirror, he again expresses his love for Sita and shows: "Now let me go and bring Sita". Orders the driver: "Suta, bring the chariot, fast". Getting up from the *pitha*, removing the *pitha*, tying the upper garment to the waist, getting ready by wearing 'false-nails' (*poynakham*) and 'fastening belts on the waist and on the head' (*arayum talayum murukki*), saluting the sword Chandrhasa, throwing and brandishing it, he says: "Surpanakha, you go and mount the chariot." Turning to the right, looking to the left, shows "Surpanakha has climbed on the chariot." Holding the hand of the Suta, he mounts the chariot and enacts the movement of the chariot. Turns back, faces the stage again, and acts Sita's *panchanga* (description of five organs), and his suffering due to *kamasara* (Kama's arrows). Seeing Surpanakha standing nearby, he feels abashed and thinks: "She has seen my weakness. What a shame! Did anyone else see it?" He surveys the scene, and when he looks up, sees the gods jeering at him. Showing "Please forgive me," he orders the Suta to drive faster. Again, simulating the movement of the chariot, he turns back, comes forward near the lamp and repeats the *panchanga* of Sita, *kamasara* and shyness at seeing Surpanakha. Seeing the Devas laugh at him, he says: "Devas, I will take revenge on you for this", and orders the Suta to drive faster. "Why? I am very troubled because my sister's ears and nose were chopped off (by Lakshmana). Let it be; why "my sister?" No one refers to her as the sister of either Kumbhakarna or Vibhishana — everyone calls her 'Surpanakha, the sister of Ravana.' That is why I said she is "my sister". While I — this huge brother of Surpanakha—am still alive, she had to suffer this insult from a mere human being. What a shame! If it were done by Indra, the lord of the Devas, or one of the Devas, or at least by a monarch of the earth, it is still bearable. Here it is done by none of them, but by a mere mortal, sitting in a forest area, suffering wind, rains, snow and sun: flashing a beard, observing religious penances and fed on fruits and tubers. If she were actually killed by him, still it would have been alright. This must have been committed merely to incite my wrath. I am promptly going there, to kill Rama and abduct Sita. How is that? "I get ready by fastening my head and waist, wield my sword Chandrhasa, go to Rama and challenge him to fight me. At that time, Rama gets ready by fastening his head and waist, strings his bow and armed with arrows, comes to fight. Thinking, 'to kill this insignificant man, why do I need a weapon? I put my sword down, go to Rama and strangle his throat. Going to Sita (adopting the basic stance, and in *Muddha raga*) "O lovely Sita, don't feel sad, thinking of that worthless Rama. Come with me and live happily in Lanka, enjoying great pleasures. What wishes do you have in your mind? I will fulfil all of them." (Discarding the note of *Muddhan*) Looking closely at Sita, "Why are you silent, even after hearing all my cajoling words? If so, just watch now. I am going to drag you by the hair." While doing so, she will discard her grief. Therefore drive the horses. Don't go slow; drive faster and faster. Why? Because all the people should hear. 'Listen, Ravana has abducted Sita. What is the reason? Because his sister Surpanakha was insulted by (Lakshmana) chopping off her ears and nose.' In this manner, all the people in the world should get to know that Ravana abducted Sita and took her away by force, because Surpanakha's ears and nose

were cut off. Therefore, drive the horses faster. “Showing this much, the *sloka* mayi jivati manushadavapta . . .” is recited.

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