

# DRUM DICTATES THE TUNE IN KOLAM OF SRI LANKA

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Sri Lanka is exceptionally rich in folklore but these folkloric survivals are not to be met at every turn. It is those who deliberately go in search of them who will come across age-old ritualistic and rural theatrical performances conducted with much solemnity and deep authenticity.

*Kōlam Naṭima*, popularly known as *Kōlam* is such a theatre-performance surviving in the littoral belt of the Southern and the Western Provinces of the island. It is a rural dance-drama of an operatic and balladic character having a central story content. Although its origin is shrouded in antiquity, existing manuscripts, eye-copies and the oral traditions preserved by dance masters, point to a fertility rite being the basis of *Kōlam*. All the manuscripts agree that the dance performance originated in the desire of a mythical queen to see a masked dance-drama. This desire is interpreted as a *dola-duka*, meaning a 'pregnancy craving.'

King *Mahā Samnāta*, the legendary primeval monarch of the world, eager to satisfy his queen's pregnancy desire invites various competitors to perform the masked dance. When none of them could fulfil the strange task the king enters his royal chambers in disgust and anger. The goddess who was keeping the king under her surveillance implores *Indra*, the god of gods to help the king. On his instructions the Divine Artisan known as *Viśva Karma* spreads masks in the royal park and leaves behind a book which gives details of the masked dance. The performance eventually cures the queen.

A *Kōlam* performance is therefore a rite, as it is really a re-enactment of an earlier performance known only to gods, kings and goddesses, while the story of the origins of *Kōlam* belongs to the realm of popular religious myth. Whatever the authenticity of this myth, it provides the skeletal thematic structure on which the performance is based.

The performance proper commences with a round of drumming as an

act of devotion (but more as an attempt at attracting the attention of the village audience who are kept busy in their homes!) and the recitation of stanzas as a homage to the Triple Gem and the Gods. This is done by an unmasked character (the only unmasked figure in the performance) in ordinary white dress who is seen reciting from a well-thumped manuscript containing the text of the play. He is known either as the *Kāriya-karavana Rāla* or the *Toraturu Kathākārāya* (the Master of Ceremonies almost akin to the *Sūtraçhāra* of the Sanskrit theatre or the *Kūttar* or *Bhāgavata* of the South Indian *Bhāgavata Mēla*).

He first sketches the origin of the *Kōlam* in verse and then sings out the description of each stock character who enters the arena (the *Sabaya*) executes a few dance steps and departs, to reenter later. In a regular *Kōlam* performance as enacted today human characters such as the *Sabhāpati* (akin to the *Sthōpaka* in the Sanskrit drama), the Drummer, his Wife and the Sons, the Laundryman, his Wife, the Mudaliyar and his Assistant, the Village Headman and his Scribe, the Soldiers, the Policemen, the Moormen, the Moneylenders, the Tamil Couple, the Kaffir Couple, the European Couple (fairly late addition to the *Kolam* repertoire), the Mythical figure *Surambavalli Somigunē* appear at this stage. Dances performed by these characters are mainly solo items although a couple of episodes are enacted which are however thematically linked to each other and to the main plot.

These dances are performed at stage One of the *Kōlam Naṭīma*. The King and his Queen, the Ministers and even two Ladies-in-Waiting enter the arena in order to view the masked dances. They wear gorgeous masks at times superimposed with tall and three-tiered crowns. Since these masks are very heavy they stay in full view of the audience only for a short while, and after their departure the rest of the dances take place as if they are enacted before the distinguished visitors. The dances that follow belong to three varieties of beings: the Demons, the Celestial beings (both male and female) and Animals such as the Lions, the Bear and the Bull. The performance has as its finale a dramatised version of a *Jātaka* tale or a popular story with a moral.

It appears that some episodes in *Kōlam* have degenerated to-day, specially after the introduction of Television, to the level of an opera bouffe or a sheer joie de vivre. But in order to fully comprehend the meaning of this rural theatre one has to examine the meaning of the *Kōlam* mask<sup>1</sup> in its dramatic context and also in the context of the traditional feudal society of Sri Lanka—how each episode draws rich layers and varying nuances of meaning from its social milieu.

A fertile field of study lies in a comparison of this rural dance-drama with identifiable folk theatres specially in South India, Oceania and Burma. We notice that the term *Kōlam* is variously employed in the South Indian

group of languages—in *Kaṇṇaḍa* it means 'an ornament, decoration, form or figure', in *Tulu* it is 'a devil dance', in *Malayālam* a 'form or figure of masks and dresses'.<sup>2</sup> Ragini Devi refers to a *Kāli* cult known as *Kōlam Tullal* of Kerala in the following manner: "*Kōlam Tullal* is a ritualistic form of masked dance performed at *Kāli* temples in Travancore during the season of religious festivals from mid-March to mid-June."<sup>3</sup> Professor K. Sivathamby mentions how the term *Kōlam* is used in the Tamil epic *Cilappatikāram*: "It is interesting to note that *Ilanko* uses the word *Kōlam* when he describes the girl who impersonated the goddess in *Veṭṭuva vāri*: 'Peṇ aṇi kōlam peyanta piṇpāṭu.'"<sup>4</sup> M.D. Raghavan quotes Raja Raja Varma, Raja of Travancore in explaining the meaning of *Kōlam Tullal* when he says: "*Kōlam Tullal* is a devil dance in which a number of demons appear and perform their midnight revels before a fire-place. The actors wear masks made of the spathe of the areca palm (*pala*), cut in various shapes of demons and painted in black and red colours.... They are supposed to be the emissaries of the Goddess *Kāli*, come on earth to ward off evil spirits."<sup>5</sup>

This is therefore a fertile subject for a comparative study. It can only be said at this stage that Kolam of Sri Lanka is not necessarily a demon dance, nor is it a ceremony connected with a whole host of demons under the command of Goddess *Kāli* although the literal meaning of the term *Kōlam* in Sinhala is 'a mask.' A study of various South Indian forms, as well as comparative material from South-East Asia, such as the Javanese and the Balinese theatre, may help to locate possible regional parallels to the *Kōlam* tradition of Sri Lanka.

As Raghavan correctly points out, Kolam in Sri Lanka is a many-sided study.<sup>6</sup> In this paper attention is focussed mainly on the musical side in this dance-drama—more specifically the manner in which the drum rhythm becomes meaningful and functional in the context of the range of the dance.

In my preliminary remarks on *Kōlam* I pointed out how the performance involves dance, gesture, mime, song and dialogue. The dialogue is mainly in verse form, interspersed with occasional impromptu conversation. The actors wear masks and the sound that escapes through them is not conducive to protracted singing. But singing occupies a central position in the whole gamut of the performance.

Music in *Kōlam* is essentially drama music. It is sung in the open air to a very large audience spread far and wide in the dance arena and is therefore different from the chamber type of North Indian classical music. The *Kōlam* arena resembles a theatre in the round. It is prepared in front of a shed which is separated from the dancing area (*Sabaya*) by a sort of 'curtain' called the *Ves Atta* (lit. 'disguise curtain') which is really a temporary partition. The place of performance therefore opens on three sides. The audience is spread on these three sides, some fun-frolickers even perching on trees.

The first characteristic that strikes us is that the songs have to be sung in the open air to be heard by spectators staying very far behind and the instruments should be adaptable to the dewy weather which is normal during these all night performances. Needless to say therefore that the songs will have to be sung in a raised pitch to be heard by all these people.

One notices next, that the music in *Kōlam* is a happy blending of song and dance, melody and rhythm resulting in a marvelously rich theatre language regularised by a sort of 'unwritten grammar' based on the beat of the drum. The *yak beraya* (yak=demon, beraya=drum) is a cylindrical drum made of wood and the two ends are covered with well tended buffalo hide. The width at the perimeters is equal. When struck with both hands (no sticks are used) the drum is capable of producing a variety of rhythms, some very heavy and others in a lighter vein. These become meaningful and functional to the dance step. The dancers wear jingles which add colour to the dance. Sometimes an oboe-like wind instrument is used. This is called the *Horāṇawa* and it is somewhat like the *Nāgasaram* used by the South Indian musicians. The *Horāṇawa* contains seven or eight perforations called *hil* in Sinhala which are capable of producing different notes or *swaras*. Nevertheless all these notes are in the higher pitch category in keeping with the type of orchestration involved in *kōlam*. However this instrument is not used as often as in regular temple music of Sri Lanka. In temple music we notice three regular musical instruments—the two drums and the *Horāṇawa*. The drums are of two different shapes. That which is named the *Davula* is cylindrical in shape and does not taper at the ends. It is much shorter in length than the low-country demon drum which is usually 2 feet 3 inches in length and 2 feet 5 inches in circumference. The *Davula* is almost half this in length but the circumference is more. The *Tammaṭṭama* is the second type of drum used in temple music and consists of two circular halves struck with sticks while the *Davula* is struck with a stick on one eye and with the hand on the other eye. Both these drums are not employed by the demon dancers nor by the *Kōlam* troupes because of the fact that the sound effect does not produce the required mood and produce the pace for the dancers. There is another drum called the *Gaṭa Beraya* used by the dancers in the hilly regions but not by the traditional low-country or coastal dance masters. In the *Gaṭa Beraya* the ends taper while the centre of the drum is in the shape of a belly of a pot or bump.

None of these drums except the *Yak Beraya* could provide the necessary climate for a *Kolam* performance.

Characters in *Kōlam* belong to a variety of categories—both human and superhuman. Then, there are the animal figures and mythical symbolisms. These characters are used in a combination of dances and dance episodes. The dances are solo in nature while the episodes involve a group of characters drawn from the social milieu which gave birth to *Kōlam*. The

impact of the dramatic episodes is tremendously heightened by the beat of the drum.

For instance, there is a vivid scene known as the *Mudali Kōlama* (the *Kōlam* episode involving the Mudaliyar, his Assistant, the Laundryman and his Wife.) The choice of drum rhythm depends on the nature of the character—his age, physical features, his position in society etc. For instance the Mudaliyar (referred to as the *Mudali* in popular parlance) is a proud and haughty government official. He comes from the ruling class and belongs to a high caste. He submits only to the King, or, during the colonial times to the Government Agent. He was the personification of pride and aloofness, adopting the air of a know-all. Now, in the carving of the mask which the Mudaliyar wore, the artist has been able to bring together the pride, the haughtiness and other caricaturable qualities associated with the Mudaliyar. He wears a curved comb on his head. The face is pink, shaded with yellow. The lips are red. The side-burns are prominently displayed. He wears a cloth trimmed with lace and ribbons, embroidered around the hem with silver; and a coat or tunic of the type worn by the Mudaliyars of the Government Agent's office (the *Kachcheri*). A gilded sword hangs at his side. The music should be in consonance with this character type.

He cannot dance. But his walk has to be stylised. He cannot sing. But his gait should be explained by means of verses. He cannot run. He should walk in measured steps. All actions he executes, for instance, the tilting of the head, the sideways glance, the wiping of the face—all this has to be performed on the drum beat. In fact the beat played for the Mudaliyar is known by his name, as the *Mudali Padaya* (*Mudali*-Mudaliyar; *Padaya*-rhythm). In other words the drum speaks for the Mudaliyar when he walks:

“Rring-ga-ti-ga-ta-gum/Ga-ta-gum  
Guṇḍa-ga-ti-ga-ta-gum/Ga-ta-Gum”

Rhythm changes according to (1) the intensity of characterisation, (2) the stylised or idealised naturalism of the character, (3) the type of mood depicted and (4) the caricaturable quality in relation to the episode. Unlike the Mudaliyar where his pompousness and essential pride are ridiculed, the Policemen are treated with a certain whimsicality. They are depicted as being addicted to liquor and moving about in a very light hearted fashion. The drum beat eventually is based on a lively dance tune of the *Baila* type:

The rhythm starts with a slow marching beat, “*Gu-guṇḍa-gataku-domm*”, when the Policemen wearing masks and carrying wooden guns execute a slow marching walk in a circle. When the first beat is over they pose for a while and this pose is called an *Iraṭṭiya*. They now engage themselves in humorous conversation and clever backchat whereupon the drummers strike a different tune, now a lively dance beat “*Gattan-kirikiṭa-dom*”.

*Gundan-kirikiṭa-dom!* and the Policemen keep their guns on a side of the arena and dance merrily clapping to the beat of the drum.

Thus we notice that the dance depicting characters in *Kōlam* consists of two distinct parts—the *Gaman padaya*, meaning, the walking or marching step and the *Naṭum Padaya*, meaning, the dance step.

Any attempt at reducing the range of the dance and the range of the drum-beat purely to satisfy modern choreographers will definitely harm the intended character portrayal. It must be noted always that in *Kōlam* the drum rhythm and the dance are happily wedded to each other. One cannot exist apart from the other. Actions will have to be mimed to the beat of the drum. The satiric expressiveness and the range of the mask are always heightened by this sort of teasing form of the dance. The drum rhythms therefore reveal a primary energy capable of expressing a variety of moods, gaits and physical movements.

The verses in *Kolam* are recited according to the beat of the drum. These verses therefore become songs of action and not mere graphic representations. As such one need not reduce the verses to specific notational scales stating that they comprise of such and such a number of *swaras* or *mātarās* (syllabic instants).

There are of course different styles of singing. The most common style is called the *Kavi* which is a kind of composition very popular with Sinhala poets both classical and folk. *Kavi* in Sanskrit language refers to a poet or singer or bard and *Kāvya* means a poem. So in *Kōlam* we notice *Kāvya*s. In classical Sinhala verse books too we notice *Kāvya*s. A *Kavi* in the Sinhala literary tradition is two-fold: *Gī* and *Sivupada*. *Gī* verse contains four lines of unequal length (lines of irregular length with hardly any cadence at the end of each line). *Sivupada* are verses of regular length and consist of four lines. But we do not see a strict adherence to this type of metrical exigencies in *Kōlam*, for *Kōlam* songs are essentially meant for singing, and singing is dictated to by the beat of the drum. For the *Kōlam* artist, the verse is a part of the drum beat or shall we say a corollary to the drum beat.

In order to understand this aspect better let us compare two verses, one in the *Gī* metre taken from a classical poem called the *Saḷalihinī Sandēśaya* and the other from a *Kōlam* verse sung as an introduction to the entry of a character and referred to as the *Potē Kaviya*.

*Saḷalihinī Sandēśaya:*

"Sārada sulakaḷakuru	=	— — — — —	=	9
Miyuru tepalen raṇḍanā	=	— — — — —	=	11
Rajakuḷa rahasa māṭiniya	=	— — — — —	=	11
Siyanihi sāḷalihinīsaṇḍa."	7	— — — — —	=	11

This is the commonest metre used in the narrative verses in the classical Sinhala tradition. There are 42 syllabic instants—9 in the first line and 11 each in the rest of the lines. This type of exercise becomes meaningless in our folk poetry to which Kolam belongs. The following is a verse of the *Potē Kavi* variety from Kolam:

“Paṇiṇiḍa karavaṇā	=	— — — — —	— — — — —	∩	=	9
Lesāṭa sabayaṭa eminā	=	— — — — —	— — — — —	— — — — —	∩	= 11
Bastainak rāgenā	=	∩ — ∩	— — ∩			= 9
Enḍa sarasī sābaya siṭinā.”	=	∩ — — — —	∩ — — — — —	∩	=	14

Graphically we notice 43 *mātrās* or syllabic instants—9 in the first line, 11 in the second, 9 again in the third line and 14 in the final line. But what happens in singing? These *mātrās* expand into many more. It may perhaps count upto as much as 51 syllabic instants. These verses are primarily meant to be intoned or *sung* in recitation. As Christopher Reynolds says: “Though we may think of this process as ‘singing’, the word ‘sing’ in Sinhalese implies something much more florid, and the intonation process is described in Sinhalese as simply ‘saying verses’.”<sup>8</sup> (“Sing” in *Sinhala-gāyanā karaṇavā* or *gayanaṇā*; saying verses-*kavi kiyanava*).

This is the beauty in the recitation we notice in *Kōlam*. This intonation gives it its individuality. Any attempt at reducing this length to a regular metrical pattern will not only kill its soul but make it out of ‘tune’ with the dance step. While “singing” the dancer’s step and the drum rhythm are closely followed by the reciter. He drags even short syllables called *laghu mātrā*. This is a characteristic in all recitations in the rituals of Sri Lanka. The end of the line is always dragged and is sung in consonance with the pulsating drum beat.

Now we come to the second type called the *Sivupada*. These are the longer-in-length verses. The following verse is taken from the *Hansa Sandēśaya*, another classical verse book:

“Pāseyi nibaṇḍa suvaṇḍāl ketvat ava	ṭa
Aseyi lamā vasupāṭiyan haṇḍa dura	ṭa
Diseyi vehera ehi sura vimanak lesa	ṭa
Raseyi amārasamaya ē vehera du	ṭa

Each *pāda* or line in this verse ends in a complete cadence (as in the binary structure of the harpischord of Francois Couperin). In its graphic form there are 17 syllabic instants to a line—in all 68. This is the usual metrical pattern in the normal *Sandēśa* (Message) poem in Sinhala. But in recitation these lines enlarge and the *mātrās* increase.

Let us examine a *Sivupada* variety of Kolam verse.

"Aiyō himiṭa mē ada mak vunā	dō (like <i>doh</i> )
leyiyō avili gini mage nivanu kavuru	dō
Meviyō dukaṭa patvune mona pavak	dō
Deviyō nobalanne api makkaralā	dō

Graphically there are 76 syllabic instants—18 for the first and the third lines and 20 each for the second and the fourth. But while reciting the number increases.

In singing therefore, one has to take into account three factors:

1. Length of the foot-work. Where the dancer stops there stops the drum or there pauses the drummer with a slight tap on the drum with the fingers while the reciter has to either keep on adding a few dronal voices such as *āṅg*, *āṅg* or *ṅā ṅā*.
2. The miming of different actions by the dancer basing on the appropriate drum beat.
3. The total length of the dance.

Let us once again examine the dance step of the Mudaliyar in combination with the drum beat:

Graphically the first two lines of the descriptive verse pertaining to the Mudaliyar are as follows:

"Miṇi visirī paṭa kaga ura daraminn ē  
Siruraṭa diḷi paṭa piḷi rāḷi rāḷi (lela) denn ē

I shall reduce this to a recitative form using as far as possible the dronal syllables added by the reciter in keeping with the beat of the drum:

The drum beat commences:

"*Rring gat gata gum*

New, the recitation commences:

"Minī vi/sī/rī/paṭa/ka/ga/u/ra/a/a/ daramī nnē ē Si

Drum: *Ga ta gum Rring gat gata gum*.....(This beat continues) *Rring*..

"Ru ra/ṭa/diḷi/paṭa a piḷi/rāḷi ī/rāḷi dennē/ēē."



Drum.....(regular beat pattern continues...) *Gatgatagum*  
*Rring-gatgata-gum.*

You would notice how the first syllable in the second line is intoned in combination with the last syllable of the first line. That is due to the requirement of the drum beat; and the need to facilitate miming of action by the dancer. Every action of the dancer impersonating the Mudaliyar, his measured steps, the way in which he surveys the audience as if he happens to be 'preening' on the top of the *Kailāsakūṭa* (and surveying his subjects down below), the swaying of his head and the fanning of his face with the tiny handkerchief—all these actions are executed to the beat of the drum and the descriptive verse has to be recited in close association with this drum beat. That is why the first syllable in the second line is taken with the last syllable of the first line.

In *Kōlam* we notice four types of such verses (some writers prefer to use the term *song* to identify these stanzas), namely, the *Potē Kavi* (Narrative verses sung from the script) of the shorter-in-length type, the *Potē Kavi* of the longer-in-length type; the *Targa Kavi* or the verse dialogue, for instance the "*Rājaguru Baraṇas Rājuṭa Kaviya* (The Chaplain's verse to the King); the *Vilāpa Kavi* (Lamentations.)

The narrative verses are sung by the *Kāriya-karavaṇa-rala* or the Narrator as introductory verses or as descriptive verses. While the shorter-in-length narrative verses are sung, the drummer merely gives a slight tap on the eye of the drum; the longer-in-length narrative verses are worked on a full range drum beat. The dialogue verses are really duets sung by the actors while they themselves resort to mime. The *Vilāpa* are the wailing songs more often sung at the death of a character—mostly by the queens who have lost their husbands as in the tales *Maname Kathāva* and the *Sāṇḍa-kiṇḍuru Kathāva*.

A handful of Sri Lankan composers of music turn to the folk music idiom for inspiration. Some of them have created their own melodies based on Kolam recitations. They manage to retain the popular tune and the generic rhythmic scheme of the original folk song. This is despite the apathy of a public who refuse to be weaned away from cheap musical scores.

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