

# THE THULLAL OF KERALA

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The day the Roman emperor Vespasian who was noted for his great miserliness died, an Atellan comedy—the tradition from which the *commedia dell'arte* evolved later—incorporated a scene which imitated the funeral. During the procession, the corpse sits up and asks how much this funeral is costing the state. “Ten million” is the answer. “Give me that money,” urges the corpse, “and you can throw me into the Tiber.”

Drama has played a great role in social cleansing, tragedy achieving catharsis by dealing with serious themes like crime, Karmic punishment and redemption, comedy exposing antisocial habits to ridicule. Greek tragedy which remembered the terrible transgressions of the Atridae and sought absolution from the guilt was a state ritual and poor citizens who could not afford the entrance charge were provided the money by the state. But in its own way, Greek comedy too discharged a similar function. In the *Clouds* of Aristophanes, there is a discussion between Just Argument and Unjust Argument in the course of which the latter establishes that dishonesty is the best way to success. When the former is not quite convinced, the latter points to the audience and asks him. “Now look about you! Which class among our friends here seems the most numerous?” The other gravely examines the audience and admits. “The blackguards have it by a large majority.”

The Thullal of Kerala is a form of comedy which seems to have emerged as a response to the stimulus of a social need for a type of performing art that could balance and complement developments in the tradition which focussed men's attention on ultimate concerns. In the sixteenth century, Ezhuthachan, the father-figure of Malayalam literature, had translated the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, preferring for the first the later *Adhyatma-Ramayana* which stressed the spiritual meanings far more than Valmiki's original and subtly modulating both epics to present a profoundly serious view of existence and man's moral imperatives. These two texts had provided material for a large number of narrative poems and plays in the Sanskrit tradition itself. This happened again when their translations became the

foundational classics of the vernacular languages in the formative phase of their evolution. But it was not always that the high regenerative aim was kept in mind. For instance, in the Kathakali plays that emerged, the dramatic Manichaean conflict between the forces of light and darkness that constitutes the history of mankind and the meaning of the *Mahabharata* gets blurred, interest gets shifted to the histrionic, musical and balletic problems of a very special kind of performing art. In spite of the fact that most of the plays end in the slaying of demons and demoniac men, the temper is like that of a heroic lay and there is a great tumult of alarms and excursions.

Perhaps the artistic tradition was disengaging itself from the didactic and affirming its autonomy which was a normal development with parallels elsewhere in the world. But in the process, a lot of preciousness and elitism also developed. The Kathakali libretto followed the literary conventions of the Sanskrit Kavya. The similes and metaphors were often very *recherché* and their heavy literalism was magnified excruciatingly by the elaborate expression in the gesture language. In the reaction to a metaphor like "elephant-gaited damsel" (*danti-gamini*), already a little ungainly and *recherché*, the mind, when it meets with it in poetry, abstracts only the impression of the slow, swinging gait. But the gestural mimesis leads before you the fantastic animal with trunk swinging, fan-like ears waving. Further, the conventional practice was that every verse was acted out twice. The overwhelming presence of the pachyderm conjured up by all this destroys any finesse the metaphor may have had initially. In addition to this, there is the further fact that the gestural language of Kathakali does not always have the transparency of the natural animated gesture that spontaneously and unconsciously underscores what is communicated in speech; it is often a cryptic code and the pleasure of decoding it need not be particularly an aesthetic delight, it can push an art form in the direction of preciousness.

But what must have most forcibly struck that irrepressible and extraordinary man, Kunchan Nambiar, when he appeared on the scene in the eighteenth century, was the fact that the heavy-weight performing art form was not specifically oriented towards social regeneration and there was no light-weight form either performing that function. This was what led to his creation of the Thullal. The modern age often claims itself to be the one which has developed communication as a distinct and major discipline, probing its many hidden problems, evolving suitable techniques. But we find that Nambiar has given very deliberate thought to the best strategies of communication.

Sanskritic acculturation had enormously enriched the vocabulary of Malayalam which was a Dravidian language, but it had inevitably created a widening gulf between the language of the masses and the exalted diction of the litterateurs. Nambiar first took a decision as to which class was to be

his audience and then chose the appropriate diction. He wanted to address all classes and groups: "the big shots, the elders, the aristocrats, the soldiers and common people, women and kids". The elite may delight in a highly Sanskritised texture. But,

*Orchestrate in thunder with polysyllabic Sanskrit  
And you will see the public stampeding at the exit.*

Therefore, he opted for a simple, racy diction. He had a gift for picturesque slang and hilarious neologisms which were as clear in their meanings as the new words coined by Wodehouse. He can also swear like a trooper on occasion. He prescribed for himself, and followed excellently well, these features for the most effective style of poetic narration.

*Speak in verses with a limpid style  
With words that peal out a ringing sense  
And rhymes that keep up a lively beat.*

His verse has the momentum of flood-waters and he can deliver hammer-blows with his internal rhymes and alliterations with a smashing impact that makes the best lines in Dryden's *Mac Flecknoe* seem weak and lacking in punch.

The relations between the artist, especially of the innovative kind, and the critic have always been problematic and unsympathetic criticism has often done harm to sensitive creative spirits. But if one is of Rabelaisian robustness, there is no problem at all. Nambiar said he would welcome criticism from the discerning.

*But there is a bunch of types with bulging eyes  
Eager to spot every minor flaw.  
If the morons come out with abusive comment  
Be it known to all and sundry  
I'll break every bone in their body.*

After thus solving the difficult problem of the relation between writer and critics to his entire satisfaction if not to theirs, Nambiar moves to this innovative creation. He knows that the times have changed; if you start sermonising, "people will start planning a smooth getaway". Humour is the only thing that will make them stay. So Nambiar proceeded to retell—in a verse narrative sung and danced by a single actor—the same Puranic material as the Kathakali plays, but stressing the comic instead of the heroic, and above all using a vast, breezy, deliberate anachronism through which he could transport the Kerala milieu and society of his time to the locale and epoch of the Puranic tales he narrated.

It is significant that in creating the Thullal form, Nambiar not only rejected the Kathakali model with its curious blend of heroic styling and preciousness, but sought cues in the dances of the Pulayas and Pariahs, considered the lowest of the lowest in the social stratification. In the adoption of these traditions, much more was involved than an alert perception that their popularity and vitality would help immensely in the immediate acceptance of the new performing art form. For the assimilation was not only a reflection but a reflex of Nambiar's democratic and humanistic sympathies. The opening of the play, *Pulindi-Moksham*, is turbulent. When the Pariah, who is supposed to be the raconteur-dancer, makes his appearance, angry shouts are heard from the audience (in a transient, play-within-the-play type of strategy).

*Who the hell are you, beef-eating Pariah  
To dish out lofty thoughts?*

But the dancer-raconteur stands his ground and answers that there is absolutely no difference between the Pariah and the Brahmin as the indwelling spirit of both is Brahman (God).

The Thullal has a full-fledged libretto, a tale narrated in verse like the Kathakali and - again like it - of great literary merit on its own. But while the Kathakali has as many actors as characters, the Thullal has only one actor. Thus the Thullal is like the Sanskrit Bhana. Again, unlike as in Kathakali, the actor sings his lines. One contributing factor of the preciousness of the Kathakali is the separation of the actor and the singer who later becomes the articulate utterer of the actual lines of dialogue. Determined to eliminate all hurdles to the swiftest communication, Nambiar eliminates this complication. He uses the gesture-language, but vestigially and transparently, not with the often cryptic coded reference of the Kathakali, so that his mimetic narration gains in speed and benefits by rapid communication. The full painting of the face is retained as in Kathakali since it steps up the visibility of the mercurial, changing facial expressions. Costume is picturesque. The actor is supported by a singer who repeats his lines, a drummer and a cymbalist. The narration is accompanied by dancing.

With his breezy and hilarious anachronism, Nambiar could freely comment on the undesirable features of contemporary society and the antisocial behaviour of various groups. During his time, pepper-growers were compelled to turn over their entire crop to the state which sold it in bulk at a low price to the English under duress. In a play on the *Ramayana* story, Ravana passes the same order in the lands he conquers. During the earlier period of Nambiar's life, Kerala was divided into numerous small principalities and even after their vigorous mopping up by Marthanda Varma of Travancore, quite a few of them continued to exist. Their growing insecurity provoked these petty princes to consolidate their authority in the tiny areas

they ruled by the most autocratic and repressive measures. In one play, Indra tells Nala that his wealth has been built up by honest ways, not amassed by these familiar means.

*Taxing and fining, openly plundering,  
Raiding the market and confiscating goods,  
Trumping up charges and accepting bribes.*

Their sacerdotal status had raised the Namputiri Brahmins to the highest social status and they used it to capture the apical position in the feudal economic structure. Owning large estates, having little work to do, they seem to have sedulously evolved these ideals.

*To sup well and sleep well  
To spend time in small talk  
To mock all men  
All make all women.*

But it is the Nairs, the community which ranked next to the Namputiris, who had to bear the brunt of Nambiar's most uproarious mockery and during this phase of history they deserved the trouncing. Trained only for fighting, they had a prosperous time during the period of the numerous, feuding principalities. But when Marthanda Varma consolidated the land and established a standing army, freelance soldiering found no takers. Disdaining honest work and humble occupations, they developed the habit of chewing the cud of the heroic past as a defence mechanism against the reality of increasing penury. Nambiar becomes Rabelaisian in the episodes he contrives to ridicule them. Duryodhana orders general mobilisation. But one of these Nairs does not want to go the front. What is the snag? He has pawned his gun at the toddy-shop, how can he go without a weapon? Someone offers to lend him a gun. But that does not help. If he fell in the field, the enemy would walk away with the gun and the toddy-shop man, the person who lent the gun and a whole crowd of creditors would besiege his house and harass his survivors. But the man assures the audience that he comes from a family of heroes.

*Of my elder brother  
Didn't you hear the tale of valour?  
He seized the fort and did slay eight  
Before he fell in the fight.*

The actor renders this sequence with superb bravado, but immediately changes back to the role of the raconteur for a devastating aside to the audience.



*above: Parayan Thullal*



*left: Ottan Thullal*



*above: Seetankan Thullal*



*right: Ottan Thullal*

*I heard different; the guy was scared dead.  
 Fleeing for life when the guns threw lead  
 He stopped a bullet with the back of his head.*

This incessant change of roles is the essence of the aesthetics of this form and we shall return to it.

Nambiar attacked the traders who would offer credit, but charged eighteen for stuff costing eight and would become a squatter in your house if the money and the heavy interest were not paid in time. He did not spare even those whose lapse was no greater than lacking social manners. The procedure of some people at the public bathing places, of which old Kerala had plenty, horrified him.

*When they bathe they must soak  
 Even their eyeballs in oil  
 And pour it down their ear and nose  
 And make a greasy mess of the whole damn place.*

The Brahmins had free meals in the temples and refectories maintained by the rulers. The eating habits of some of them were appalling.

*Rice and curd and plantain fruit  
 Are mashed into a pulpy mess.  
 With this stuff they stoke themselves  
 In a squelchy, slimy, ghastly way.*

The prestigious recognition Kathakali has gained outside Kerala has unfortunately kept in the shadow this remarkable form. It is true that, for the full appreciation of a Thullal play, one must be able to follow the libretto. But this is true of Kathakali too and I have always been uneasy about the evaluations of the latter by critics who were very clearly unable to follow the text. Be it as it may, it is time that we noticed the very subtle aesthetic action of the Thullal form. Conceding that sympathetic characters come relatively nearer to us, the heroic styling of Kathakali always maintains an irreducible minimum distance from the spectator; and the deliberate and extended nature of its histrionic and mimetic procedures tends to make it a presentation rather than a representation. But, in the Thullal, representation becomes as vibrantly vivid as reality, the spectator is drawn right into the vortex of the boisterous episodic stream, tossed about and sometimes thrown out, though all this is ultimately for his own good. This is basically managed by the continuous interchange in the same dancer-narrator of the roles of the actor and the raconteur. In one moment, the actor is depicting the comic antics of a vain fop with a complete identification. The delicious attitudinising involves the spectator too through empathy and he too mentally struts and attitudinises, precisely because no man is wholly free from vanity



and vanity depends upon the failure of critical self-awareness. But a shock-treatment immediately restores the spectator to sanity. For in the next moment the actor melts back into the role of the raconteur, who sheds the self-oblivion of the earlier sequence of pure mimesis, becomes devastatingly ironical and indulges in an inimitable gesture which means. "There you are! That is the sort of clown who set himself up as a rival to Krishna for the hand of Rukmini." The gesture is the ultimate in ridicule and the annihilation is complete. For it not only ridicules the comic egoist seen as the wholly other, but also brings to light and destroys the foolish fantasies and self-image hugged by everyone deep within himself, thus achieving an astonishingly effective catharsis through a wholesome technique which leaves no bruises behind. The narrative thus emerges with a continuously shifting focus, the camera now quite close, penetrating into the interior world of men's fantasies and day-dreams, now remote, seeing things with saner objectivity, correcting vanity with raillery and deeper fixations with a cathartic, caricaturist distortion.

Nambiar believed in the golden mean. "The world wallows in quarrels over wealth and wench", he wrote in a tabloid condensation of the readings by Adam Smith and Freud of human motivation. The solution was not ascetic self-denial; but excessive libido and avarice should be avoided. Similarly, if he wrote that "when wealth gets growing, virtue starts waning", he also pointed out that "only he who has enough to eat at home will ever be invited to eat at the neighbour's." Everyone should work hard for a decent livelihood and this social habit of self-reliant industry will bring in its wake a sense of responsibility. There will be far fewer of these "drunkards and dope addicts, the bums who, every time you see them, make you itch to give them a kick you know where".

For Nambiar, the basic programme for civilizing the primate into man is the tempering and socialisation of his fundamental drives - the acquisitive and the libidinal. And with his enormous energy he was able to drive it through as a crash programme. He hoped that other graces of culture would follow: the bright curiosity of the intellect which leads to science and the fertile sensitivity of the heart which creates the arts; "the gift for an overflowing joy when a good poem is overheard." But first things first. God knows it is a man-size job in itself; but thank God you can chortle when you work and, what is more incredible, make people chortle when you work on them the exquisite third degree of ridicule.

The sanity of this earthy man was also reaching skyward, in its own fashion.

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