

The Traditional Puppet Theatre of Kerala

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Kerala occupies an important place on the cultural map of India with its numerous art forms, remarkable for their richness and variety. Among these puppetry holds a prominent place, with two well known modes of presentation: the shadow-puppet play, Tolpava Koothu, and the glove-puppet play, Pava Kathakali.

Tolpava Koothu is presented periodically at the Bhagavati or Bhadrakali temples of Palghat and neighbouring areas as part of the ritualistic worship of the goddess. *Tol* means leather, *pava* puppet, and *koothu* play. The theme of Tolpava Koothu is the story of the *Ramayana*. It is performed in a specially built playhouse called *koothu-madam* on the temple premises. The puppets are made of fine leather and their shadows are projected on a white screen.

Tolpava Koothu is usually performed during the annual *utsava* (festival) in Bhadrakali temples. It is believed that the goddess would be watching the performance right from the start and would be pleased by it. This belief is based on a legend which is current even today among Pavakoothu performers and devotees: Long ago there lived an *asura* (demon) named Darika who was a threat even to the gods and who became an intolerable menace to *rishis*. To kill this *asura*, Lord Shiva created the goddess Bhadrakali from the *kalakoota* poison in his throat. Bhadrakali killed Darika in a prolonged battle. It was while Bhadrakali was engaged in this battle that Rama fought Ravana and killed him. Thus Bhadrakali was unable to witness Rama's triumph over Ravana. She was unhappy because she had missed the event. That is why the story of the *Ramayana* is enacted via Tolpava Koothu in Bhadrakali temples. Tolpava Koothu is an ancient art, but we cannot date its origin with any precision. The performers usually belong to the Vellalachetti and Nair castes.

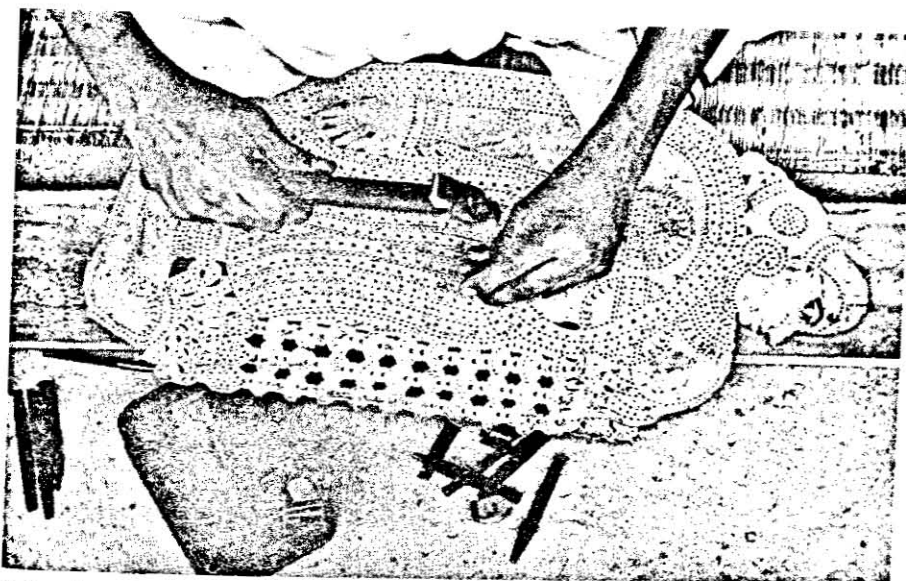
Tolpava Koothu deals with the *Ramayana* story from the birth of Rama to his coronation. The story is presented in 21 parts over 21 days. The script—partly in verse and partly in prose—is called *adal-patru*. *Adal* means acting and *patru* 'relating to'. The verse portion of the *adal-patru* is called *koothu-kavikal*. The *adal-patru* includes a large number of verses

from the *Kamba-Ramayana*, the *Ramayana* in Tamil by the epic poet Kamban. However, some of the verses of Kamban have been modified to suit the special needs of Tolpava Koothu. The puppeteers have also added their own verses wherever necessary to suit certain contexts. The verses added by the Tolpava Koothu performers are mostly in Tamil. There is a mixture of Tamil and Sanskrit in a few verses.

The *adal-patru* scripts—on palm leaf—with the verses and story of the *Ramayana* are carefully preserved in the homes of the puppeteers. To illustrate and interpret the meaning of the verses, the performers of Tolpava Koothu have from time to time added stories, episodes, explanations and dialogues. These, of course, are not included in the palm-leaf scripts. They are orally transmitted by the teacher to the student. In the explanations and interpretations, each performer demonstrates his originality, depending on his gifts and knowledge. The explanations of the verses and the dialogue are in an amalgam of Tamil and Malayalam.

There is much difference of opinion among scholars regarding the period in which Kamban lived. Some scholars place him in the ninth century, while others are of the opinion that he lived in the 13th century. Kamban's *Ramayana* consists of six *kandas*: *Balakanda*, *Ayodhyakanda*, *Aranyakanda*, *Kishkindhakanda*, *Sundarakanda* and *Yuddhakanda*. There is evidence that even before the *Kamba-Ramayana* came to Kerala, the *Ramayana* story used to be presented through Tolpava Koothu in the Bhadrakali temples. This leads us to infer that there existed a *Ramayana* specially written for Tolpava Koothu. But with the coming of the *Kamba-Ramayana*, its influence became so strong that the original was altered and interpolated with verses from the classic.

Several scholars believe that the influence of the *Kamba-Ramayana* on Tolpava Koothu began about 350 years ago. At Puthur in Palghat lived a scholar named Chinna Tampi Vadhyar belonging to the Vellalchetti caste. It is believed that Chinna Tampi Vadhyar was the first to incorporate verses from the *Kamba-Ramayana* into the existing *adal-patru*. The story is that one day Chinna Tampi Vadhyar, who was deeply learned in the *Ramayana*, went to a neighbouring Brahmin's house to listen to a recitation of the *Ramayana*. But he was not admitted into the assembly of Brahmins because he belonged to a lower caste. Humiliated, Chinna Tampi decided to make the *Ramayana* accessible to people of all castes through Kamban's version and the medium of Tolpava Koothu. He thus changed the existing *adal-patru* by incorporating verses from the *Kamba-Ramayana*. Chinna Tampi was responsible for a great increase in the popularity of Tolpava Koothu. Kunchan Nambiar, one of the great Malayalam poets of the 18th century, has referred to Tolpava Koothu with veneration in his *tullal* poem



Perforation of a finished figure.

Ghoshayatra. This indicates the popularity and esteem of Tolpava Koothu in the 18th century.

During the performance the puppeteers offer explanations and interpretations of the verses as required by the context. Sometimes this commentary on a verse or a couplet lasts for hours. Furthermore, the puppeteer, when he relates a story, tends to digress, and introduces topics of interest to the audience. For instance, in the first day's play there is a description of the 'medical attention' received by the queens of Dasharatha during their pregnancy. Here the puppeteer himself becomes an *ayurvedic* practitioner, offering detailed instructions to be followed right from conception to confinement. Similarly, the sixth day's story describes Anasuya, the wife of Atri Maharshi, relating to Sita the qualities of a chaste wife. Here the puppeteer reaches poetic heights as he describes the ideals of Indian womanhood. *Ayurveda*, astrology, temple architecture and allied topics are all subjects of digression during a performance.

The recitation of verses and delivery of prose dialogue follow a special style and tone. Though there are no set *ragas* for the singing of verses, the tone is modified to suit the context and the character. While one performer recites a verse the others produce an open-throated drone to create a musical effect.

Deerskin is used to make the puppets—it is believed that it has sacred properties. When the skin has been cleaned and dried, the outline of the puppet is drawn on it. The next step is chiselling the outline. It is the dark shadows of the puppets that would fall on the screen and so the natural thickness of deerskin is retained. The cutting has to be careful to ensure that the shapes, facial expressions, and decorations of the puppets are accurately

reproduced in the shadows. Tiny holes punched in the leather serve a graphic purpose, providing the details of costume and ornament. About a dozen chisels of different shapes and sizes are used for this delicate job.

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Permanent stages for puppet shows are found in the compounds of various temples. There are in all 63 *koothu-madams* in Palghat and its suburbs. It is said that formerly playhouses existed in at least a hundred temples. These playhouses, or *koothu-madams*, are so positioned that they face the image of the goddess in the temples as it is believed she watches the performance. The dimensions of various *koothu-madams*—which are raised well above ground level, covered on three sides, and provided with a roof—show some minor variations. The dimensions of the playhouse at Kavalappara's Aryankavu temple, which is regarded as the model by puppeteers, are 11 metres 43 centimetres in length, 3 metres 81 centimetres in width, and 1 metre 53 centimetres in height.

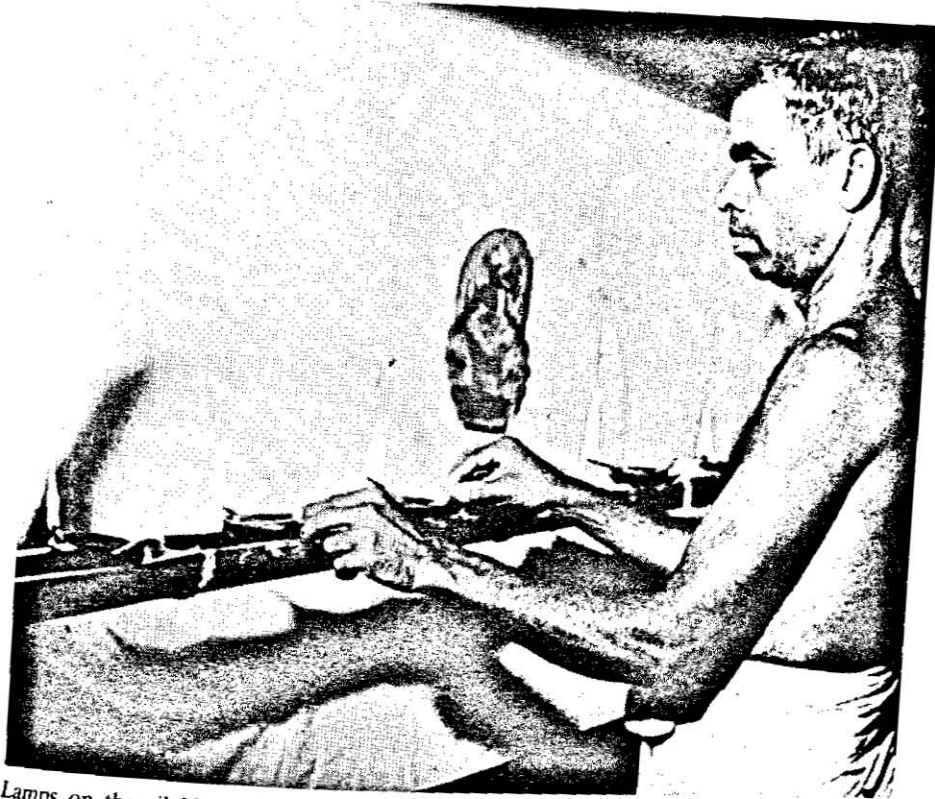
The front of the stage has a curtain of thin white cloth called *ayapudava*. The lower half of this curtain is covered with black cloth to represent *patala* or the nether world, while the white area stands for the sky and heaven. A long and narrow wooden plank is fixed at a height of 1 metre 30 centimetres behind the curtain and some distance away from it. This plank covers the whole length of the stage. The lights needed for the shadow play are placed on this plank, which is called *vilakku-madam*.

Dehusked coconuts broken into equal halves serve as lamps. These lamps are placed equally spaced in a row on the *vilakku-madam*. Coconut oil is poured into them and thick, flattened cotton wicks placed inside. Usually 21 lamps are used in a show. Special lighting effects are created by throwing *telli* powder (made by drying and pounding the gum of a tree found in Kerala) on the flames of the lamps which then begin to blaze. Torches are also lit in some scenes.

The front of the *koothu-madam* is usually decorated with tender coconut leaves and flower garlands. During the presentation of important scenes, flower garlands also decorate the area behind the curtain. The stage manager (*mada-pulavar*) supervises the stage arrangements.

The two main accompanying instruments for *Tolpava Koothu* are the drum *Ezhupara* (which has a jackwood body and faces of calfskin) and bell-metal cymbals. To enhance dramatic effect, the *Chenda*, *Maddalam*, gong, pipe and conch are also played on special occasions.

The puppeteers add special *vaitharis* (rhythmic syllables) and sound effects when they are presenting battle scenes or when the dialogue of



Lamps on the vilakku-madam at the start of a show.

combatants is being delivered. For example, during the fight between Bali and Sugriva, the two combatants clench their teeth, uproot trees and fling them at each other, or pick up rocks and hurl them. When this is happening appropriate *vaitharis* and interjections are uttered in keeping with the rhythm.

As mentioned earlier, Tolpava Koothu performances are conducted as part of the annual festival in temples. Sometimes devotees pay for the presentation in fulfilment of religious vows. In many temples there is a shadow show on every single day of the *utsava*. Though it takes 21 days to present the *Ramayana* story in full, abridged versions are presented in 14 or even seven days.

On the evening of the performance *pujas* and offerings are made to the goddess a little after sunset. Then a *tookku-vilakku* (a bronze lamp hung on a chain) is lighted from the oil lamp burning in front of the goddess and

brought to the *koothu-madam*. It is hung in front of the *koothu-madam* to the accompaniment of instrumental music. The next step is the hanging of the curtain. This ritual is called *koora-iduka* (*koora* means curtain and *iduka* placing or setting). Then the stage is decorated.

By about nine o'clock at night a large crowd gathers in the compound of the temple to witness the show. The *velichapadu* (the oracle of the goddess who blesses the gathering on her behalf and who communicates her orders to them), wearing a red silk scarf round his waist and holding a sword in his hand, encircles the temple thrice. Then he comes to the *koothu-madam* and blesses the performers.

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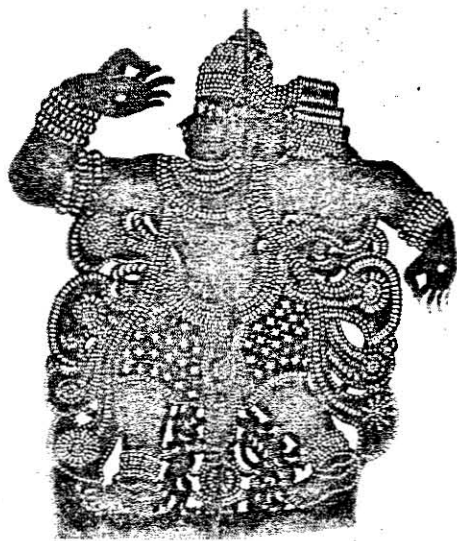
The villagers call the puppeteers *pulavar* (scholar). They respect a puppeteer not just for his art; they also seek his advice on their problems. When a Tolpava Koothu troupe arrives for a performance in a temple, some of the well-to-do families in the neighbourhood play host to the puppeteers. In some temples, prominent families undertake the responsibility of sponsoring the show on different days. The artistes are the guests of the family till dusk, when they proceed to the temple in a ceremonial procession.

A long period of training goes into the making of a good Tolpava Koothu

Ravana—an old puppet.



Rama



performer. When he is no more than seven years old he begins reciting the verses, learning them by heart, and imbibing the art of making and manipulating puppets. For some families Tolpava Koothu is a traditional heritage. The well-known Koonathara family can boast of four generations of Koothu artistes. Its members (Tampi Pulavar, Ila Pulavar, Muthappa Pulavar and Lakshmana Pulavar) are names to reckon with in the field. The present head of the family is Krishnan Kutty Pulavar. In Mathur, Kuthannur, Pudukkottai and Kayilias there were families accomplished in Tolpava Koothu for generations. The present generation in these families, however, has no interest in the art.

This state of affairs justifiably gave rise to the fear that Pavakoothu was on the decline. Fortunately, during the past few decades, fresh life has been infused in the art. The National Shadow Theatre Festival, organized by Sangeet Natak Akademi at Bangalore in 1978, helped attract national attention towards Tolpava Koothu. As a result Koothu was chosen for presentation at the International Festival of the Puppet Theatres of Asian Countries held in the Soviet Union in 1979. In August 1987, a Tolpava Koothu troupe led by Krishnan Kutty Pulavar presented performances in the festival 'Indian Manifestation In Sweden'. After the performances in Sweden, the troupe participated in an international puppet festival in Greece conducted by Michael Meschke.

Today there are about 30 practising Koothu performers in Kerala. The

Pava Kathakali



art, which was once confined to the temple, now enjoys a wider audience in Kerala and elsewhere in the country.

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Pava Kathakali, the glove-puppet play, came into vogue and gained popularity in Kerala several centuries ago through the influence of classical Kathakali. It incorporates Kathakali techniques and the puppets are designed on the Kathakali model. *Pava* means puppet and *kathakali* enactment of a story.

Evidence proves that, even before the advent of Kathakali, the glove-puppet play was popular in the villages of Palghat district. In the home of a Pava Kathakali performer of Paruthippully, the present writer discovered a puppet which is at least 400 years old. Significantly, this puppet, carved beautifully in wood, bears no resemblance to Kathakali figures, which decisively shows that the glove-puppet play must have existed in Palghat long before the advent of Kathakali. The coiffure of this puppet and the ornaments worn on the hair are remarkably different from those found in the ancient sculptures of Kerala. Its ears are elongated like those in the images of the Buddha. But another puppet of the 18th century which this writer discovered is modelled closely on Kathakali. It resembles the *pacha* character of Kathakali, differing only in that it does not have a *chutti* (decorative white border) on the face.

From the very beginning, Pava Kathakali was meant chiefly for the benefit and amusement of children. When the puppeteers went from house to house to perform, or when they performed at public festivals, the spectators were mostly children. These performances before children made them familiar with the stories of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. An interest in the traditional arts, and a capacity to appreciate them, was developed.

The height of a Pava Kathakali puppet varies from one to two feet. The head and arms are carved delicately in wood and joined to the bag-like cloth body. The puppets are painted and decorated with pieces of gilded tin, the hard carapaces of big bees, corals, peacock feathers, etc. The manipulator inserts his hand in the bag-like body of the puppet and moves its hands and head with his fingers. The hands are manipulated with the thumb and middle finger and the head with the index finger.

The Pava Kathakali artistes (called Andi Pandaram) belong to a few professional families originally of Paruthippully village in Palghat district. They speak a mixture of Telugu and Malayalam at home, which suggests that their ancestors migrated to Palghat from Andhra Pradesh. It is believed

that the immigrants belonged to the Veera Guru Shaiva community. They now live scattered in some 30 villages around Palghat. In each village there are about a hundred Andi Pandaram families, of which only three or four now practise the art of Pava Kathakali. None of the other families of Paruthippully and the other villages are known to have ever practised or performed the art.

For a performance of Pava Kathakali no specially built stage, platform, or equipment is necessary. It is usually presented in homes. The musical instruments are the same as those for Kathakali—Chenda, Chengila, Ilathalam, Shankha, etc. At least six artistes are required for a proper performance.

In 1981, serious work was undertaken to revive this dying art. The present writer was entrusted with the task of making a detailed study of the condition of Pava Kathakali in its native village of Paruthippully. To my dismay, I learnt that there were only three surviving practitioners who knew some of the techniques of the art, and even they were incapable of presenting a play fully.

We collected as many old puppets as were available and all possible information about the art. We then selected six villagers and for two years gave them intensive training in music, manipulation of puppets, and puppet-making. Sangeet Natak Akademi granted scholarships to these trainees. When the training was over, the puppeteers presented the play *Kalyana Saugandhikam* in its full form. The Department of Culture, Government of India, offered some financial aid for the revival of Pava Kathakali. With this assistance a number of new puppets were made and the plays *Uttaraswayamvaram*, *Duryodhanavadham*, and *Dakshayagam* were composed. In May 1984, Pava Kathakali was presented at the XIth International Puppet Theatre Festival in Poland, in 1986 at the Puppet Carnival at Iida in Japan, and in 1987 at several international festivals in Europe. □