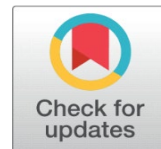# THOLPAVAKOOTHU: A STUDY ON THE PERFORMING ART OF SHADOW PUPPETRY IN KERALA

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ABSTRACT

Tholpavakoothu is a form of shadow puppetry which is the ancient art form found only in Kerala and it is a ritualistic worship for Goddess Devi. The main theme of tholpavakoothu is based on Kamba Ramayan and puppets which are chiseled out beautifully on the animal skin are used for the puppetry. Unlike other puppetry, it is the black shadow of puppets that forms on the white screen in the presence of oil lamps that portrays the tale of Ramayana.

The study is for the deeper understanding of the origin, style, forms, and themes of tholpavakoothu and also to find out the different influences of applied puppetry in tholpvakoothu.

This study uses a qualitative approach using interviews with the artists and performances. It has given a deeper understanding of the uniqueness of tholpavakoothu compared to other puppetry forms. This form basically emphasizes the concepts of mythology and how the form has taken a transition to contemporary issues to cater to all types of audiences.

Keywords: Tholpavakoothu, Koothumaadams, Aryankaavu, Kerala, Folk, Culture

1. INTRODUCTION

Shadow puppetry in Kerala (Tholpavakoothu)

Tholpavakoothu is believed to be the first theatre play in the world. Tholpavakoothu (shadow puppetry) is one of the prominent folk arts that has been performed in the areas of Palakkad, and Thrissur. Like every other folk art, the main theme of tholpavakoothu is also based on the mythology Ramayana which is written by the Kambar, a Tamilian poet. The story extends from the time when Rama is born to Rama's coronation. The ritualistic play is carried out in more than eighty-five temples of Bhagavathi or Kali. The play is divided into twenty-one parts depicting the story of Ramayan for twenty-one days. Determined by the traditions followed by the temple sometimes the performances can last 7,14,21,41 to 71 days. It is in the form of verses and it is known as Adal Pattu. The verses are recited in the languages of Tamil, Sanskrit, and Malayalam. Koothumadam is the stage where tholpavakoothu is conducted; people from any caste or religion are allowed to watch the play. The word tholpavakoothu means the play of the leather puppets. In the play, approximately around 160 puppets are used for the character representations from Kambar Ramayana. The character puppets will be in four different forms, they are sitting, walking, standing and fighting. The puppets are used to illustrate the different

scenes like the story of Rama and Sita, battle scenes and ceremonial parades. The person who is with the title Pulavar was only allowed to perform the tholpavakoothu. The term Pulavar means the scholar in Tamil. But there are only very few artists in Kerala who know how to perform this most auspicious art form.

History of Tholpavakoothu

In the eighteenth century, it is believed that Chinna Thampi Vadhyar was responsible for making the tholpavakoothu more famous in the ancient days. He had faced caste discrimination when he was rejected by the Brahmin community to learn Kambar Ramayan. He worked hard for his rights and he succeeded in not limiting the tholpavakoothu only to the high caste. Tholpavakoothu were not allowed to be conducted outside the temple premises at the early days until Krishnankutty Pulavar from Palakkad who fought for the rights of common people to witness the play. He performed for the first time outside the temple premises for the Kendra Sankeetha Academy in 1972. In 1978 it became widely known to the outer world.

Myth of Tholpavakoothu

The play is dedicated to the Goddess Bhagvathi, as it is believed that the goddess will be watching the play that is carried out in the temples. The entire story is dated back to the history when Lord Shiva has created goddess Bhadrakali out of Kalakooda (the poison at his throat) to kill demon named Darika. Bhadrakali succeeded in destroying the demon during the battle of Darika Vadham. But after the battle, she was so disappointed at the fact that she missed witnessing the triumph of Rama over Ravana. So, Lord Shiva gave her the blessing that the play will be carried out in Bhadrakali temples where she could watch the entire story of Ramayan from the birth of Rama, the battle between the Ravana and Rama's coronation after he returns back to Ayodhya. Thus, tholpavakoothu is performed in temples for pleasing goddess Bhadrakali in the different districts of Kerala. It is performed for twenty-one days in each temple to worship Bhadrakali. It is taken place in the months of January to March every year. Though it is an entertainment for the enthusiasts and the general public tholpavakoothu is defined as a religious offering by the devotees of Bhdrakali.

Applied puppetry

Applied theatre provides the base knowledge for applied puppetry. Applied puppetry has been based on social issues or to create awareness in the society. It can be of different types like education puppetry, community puppetry, and puppet therapy. It helps the audience to think a new way and cultivates the habit of criticism. The introduction of applied puppetry is to avoid the instrumentalizing of the puppets where it is used just as a tool to convey the story. Applied puppetry is used to create a collaboration and connection between the audience and participants. Thus, it creates an impact on the audience making them responsible for social issues.

Pulavar Community and its significance

The Pulavar is a Tamil word which means the Pandit. They are known to be scholars in the language of Tamil, Sanskrit, and Malayalam. The word Pulavar also means that 'the one who talks to God for the people'. They are from the community of *Shiva Vellalar, Muthalyar, Mannadiyar Pilley, Nayyanmar* and *Panicker*. An artist is known as a Pulavar and throughout their entire life, they will be called as a

Pulavar, not on the differentiation based on caste or religion. Each Pulavar will be trained to write and learn the verses used for the narration by heart. The students who are trained to be an artist have to undergo various stages like first they will be taken to the temples to see how it is performed. After the training of almost a year, they will be allowed inside the *koothumadam* during the play and six months training will be given to them about how to use the puppets on screen. Each artist requires a lot of patience, hard work and dedication to become a Pulavar. It will take a minimum of four years to become a Pulavar. Except for low caste people, anyone is allowed to become a Pulavar.

Materials used and how Tholpavakoothu is performed

In ancient days, tholpavakoothu had given importance to developing traditional, cultural and agricultural of that particular place. While making the puppets lot of things should be taken care of like how big or small the puppet should be, the colors that has to be used, the clothes, the sticks, and how to perform it on stage without revealing their hands to the audiences. In earlier days the puppets were made out of coconut leaves. Then skin of deer was used to make puppets. The deer is considered to be a sacred animal according to the various myths in Hindu scriptures and since Ramayan is a sacred story it was compulsory to use the skin of deer to make puppets. In earlier days, Kings who are from a *Kshatriya* family had the right to hunt the deer for food and they used the leftover skin for making puppets for tholpavakoothu. But it is illegal in present days so they use the skin of buffalo or goat for making the puppets. If we compare the different types of puppets made out of different skins the puppets from deerskin are very thick and more opaque. When the deerskin is used to perform on the stage the light doesn't pass through the puppets and makes it more authentic and unique. Most of the deerskin puppets are in the form of black and white color. Now the readymade skin of buffalo is been brought from the market, they process it at their own workshop and make the puppets out of it. The goatskin used for puppet making is brought from Hyderabad but it is very thin and it is used to make puppets that have colors. But because of the constant use, the color will fade away gradually. The puppets from acrylic cardboards are also used to make puppets, especially for the teaching purposes. They hire people from outside for making puppets except the ones used for Ramayan tales. Ramachandra Pulavar says "I still remember a boy of ten years old walking out of my show in Delhi because he was disappointed about the fact that the puppets were made out of animal skin and it is not a right thing to kill animals for making puppets. It was very hard to convince him or make him believe that we don't kill animals to make puppets".

There are different types of carvings that are used in the puppet making and they are *Veeralipatte* (it is used in the costumes of Kings like Rama, Ravana), *Nakshatrakothu* (the one used in Lakshman's puppet), *Nelmanikothu* (where both sides have been carved) and *Chandrakalaroopam* (it is been used to create the shape of moon). There are a lot of carvings used for making the jewellery etc. More than 120 puppets have been used for the play of Ramayan. The bamboo spill is attached to the puppets to create the movements by the artists and it is of the height of the puppet. It is placed to avoid wilting of the puppets to the sides by keeping it upright. The puppets can be divided into five and they are sitting puppets (only one hand is movable), standing puppets (only one hand is movable), walking puppets (movable legs), lying puppets and war puppets (movable legs and hands). The different types of puppets that have been used in the *Aryankavu* temple consist of puppets of Rama's pregnant mother Kausalya, father of Sita, Ravana's Mantri, Jadayu etc. The magic power is projected on the screen using the circle of Indreyam during the play.

The creation of the puppets of Rama and Ravana is depending upon the imagination and creativity of the troupe that conducts tholpavakoothu.

To create the special effects during the war scene *agarbhathi's* powder or *telli* powder is splashed on flames of the oil lamp to create the effect of the blaze on screen. Also, fire torches are also used for the special scenes. It is done by the expert from behind the screen where the artists are performing. The efficiency of the artist is appreciated when he is able to create the movements of the puppets without making their hands visible to the audience on the other side especially during the scene where the arrow is shot during the Rama Ravana battle. The space between the screen and the oil lamp stand is very less and yet the artists try to manage everything without creating a mess by getting burned.

Unique characteristics of Tholpavakoothu

Tholpavakoothu is very unique from other shadow puppetry because the yellow light background can only be seen in tholpavakoothu in Kerala. The reason behind it is due to the traditional oil lamps used for the play. It stands out from other art forms because it is played mainly in Devi's temples for decades. They have a proper platform which is consistent that is in the various temples and every year, first five months is dedicated to Kamba Ramayan only. The longest duration of puppetry is conducted in the Aryankavu temple in Palakkad which is from the month of January to May. It is conducted for 7, 14, 21, 41, 71 days in the above-mentioned months. It is performed usually for 21 days depicting the story of Rama from his birth to his coronation after the battle with Ravana. Each performance is ten hours long and will start from 10 pm in the night and will last up to 6 am in the morning. Sometimes the total number of days spent on the performance can go up to 41 days depending on the financial base of each temple that sponsors the program. But in other states like Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh puppetry is conducted in the streets because they don't have a proper stage to perform. In Rajasthan, the string puppetry is more famous and it can be performed in daylight because of the colorful appearance of the puppets. Anyone who is new to the puppetry field can perform the string puppetry for performing the movie scenes and songs. But apart from string puppetry shadow puppetry cannot be performed during daylight and it can only be played at dim light. It requires a lifetime effort and skills to perform it and the theme is unique from another puppetry that exists in the world. Shadow puppetry is also found in the states of Karnataka, Orissa, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu but it prevails in Kerala.

Influence of Applied puppetry over Tholpavakoothu

The influence of applied puppetry is more prevail in the current scenario where the social issues are given more importance than mythology in tholpavakoothu. Ramachandra Pulavar says that it doesn't matter tholpavakoothu has its own temperament characteristics which are left unchanged by the new trends. Mythology still has its importance in tholpavakoothu and it will not be relinquished. Tholpavakoothu will always remain something that portrays the legend of Kerala. The contemporary theme will be more relevant depending on social situations existing at that current time period. It is moreover like it may come and go whereas the typical religious customs they follow will not be affected by it. For example, during the time of festivals like Onam, the story of Mahabali is portrayed through tholpavakoothu. They also perform the stories of Panchatantra, Shakespeare's play, story of Gandhi, the story of Jesus Christ, social awareness campaigns through tholpavakoothu. The theme will be based on the time and place where it is

performed. But the theme of Ramayan is the core center for the outcome of all the new ideas that have been used in tholpavakoothu.

Ramachandra Pulavar shares his experience about his decision to involve social issues in it. He says "when we went to Jerusalem in the year of 2007 for Andhardeshya Vyaparamela I was also accompanied by my son Rajeev Pulavar. We had made the puppets of Jesus Christ to sell in Jerusalem since the country has its mythological basis related to the story of Jesus Christ but we were unable to make enough sales there. That's when I got influenced to broaden our art form to the international level by introducing the medium for communication of tholpavakoothu to be in English which is widely accepted by the world. Then we started taking up the stories related to the interest of the audiences in those particular areas". If they depend only on performing it in the temples, they won't be able to get that publicity and people won't come to know about it. Through creating social awareness campaigns tholpavakoothut will reinstate in the minds of the people and will be able to create income through this. It is also not sure that how long they can perform it in the temples as we live in a situation where people fight with each other in the name of religion. The artist will be able to make good income only for four months in a year and rest of the eight months they have to find a different way to generate income for their needs. Since there is a great decline in the agriculture industry, they had to give up in that area also. When they were not getting enough attention from the people, they started performing outside the temple premises and even the children of the artists left the field of puppetry since it was declining. But it was after introducing the contemporary themes in tholpavakoothu, it started gaining that importance again in the public especially in educational and cultural areas. Usage of applied puppetry would help the artists to develop dialogues and creative space among the audience where they can draw the close attention of the people towards tholpavakoothu. Through the introduction of social issues in puppetry, it can help to create ethical and flexible manner in the people. People these days are all busy and preoccupied with their work life so they will not have the patience to listen or sit through something which is quite unfamiliar to them. By adopting new methods and themes in tholpavakoothu it will create interest in people where they can connect to the performance. Rahul Pulavar says that they also used to do road safety awareness campaigns where they use a projector to create background through slides for the play and the live puppets will be used for the puppetry. It will moreover look like an animation movie. The usage of applied puppetry will help to avoid instrumentalism of the puppet. The puppets will no longer be just a tool used for the performance rather it would be a medium to determine the evaluable truth through observation in the minds of the people. Thus, choosing a contemporary issue will help the audience to take actions against the issues or to work for the betterment of the society. We live in an era where science has created very adamant believes in people about the uncertain in religious belief, therefore, holding only to the myth as the theme for the puppetry will lead to losing its charisma.

According to Christopher Tyler (Director, Smith- Kettlewell Brain Imaging Center), art triggers the human intuitive ability to analyze and to express. It will also act as a key role in aesthetic appreciation through embodied cognition and will also help us to picture ourselves as a part of the scene. Therefor clinging on to social issues will be more impactful in the people. Over the years the level of corruption had elevated and through tholpavakoothu campaigns sometimes they are able to create that intensity of the issue in the minds of the people and will also tempt to act for the benefit for the people, for example, anti-human trafficking, HIV awareness campaigns etc. The usage of Panchatantra stories in tholpavakoothu to perform in

educational institutions would in turn help in attracting the young hearts and thus helping to inform new generations about the traditional and cultural side of Kerala wherein most of the families the kids donâ€™t know the significance of their motherland. Even the themes based on the festival season will be a grant treat for the people to witness the myth behind each festival through the visual medium of tholpavakoothu.

Art form in decline

The foreigners being the only agent for creating publicity among people but it is not given much importance in India especially in Kerala. They have to undergo a lot of financial crises during their off seasons where they have to depend on the private program committees. Tholpavakoothu artists get paid very less compared to other cultural art forms like Kathakali, Mohiniyattam etc. The government does not help them by providing funding for their expenses and there is very less awareness about the different schemes by the government is made available to the artists. Tholpavakoothu artists are very limited in number and they are worried about the existence of art form in the future. They don't have enough platforms to perform tholpavakoothu these days in Kerala. The theatre they have is very congested and they don't have a museum to secure all the materials that are the evidence of history. The artists who belong to a poor family have to undergo a lot of mental stress due to the shortage of money. The changes that happened over years influenced puppetry in many ways where they don't have enough audiences for watching the Kamba Ramayana at temples.

They started focusing on themes of tholpavakoothu based on contemporary issues to create more awareness among the people. They are also active in all the social media to create publicity among the people. They also conduct various workshops under CCRT to teach tholpavakoothu to students and teachers. Various workshops are conducted in different educational institutions to generate interest in young hearts. They also participate in social awareness campaigns to create the connection between the audiences. They are trying to enlarge their theatre to accommodate more audiences and they are also planning to start a museum which would be helpful to create awareness among the people. The artists are also trying to make tholpavakoothu as a part of the curriculum for cultural studies. They are trying to collaborate with different associations, tourism department etc to reinstate their image in the minds of the people. They are also publishing lots of books on tholpavakoothu for the audiences. By focusing on multi languages as a mode of communication for the narration of the performance will also benefit in attracting more audiences.
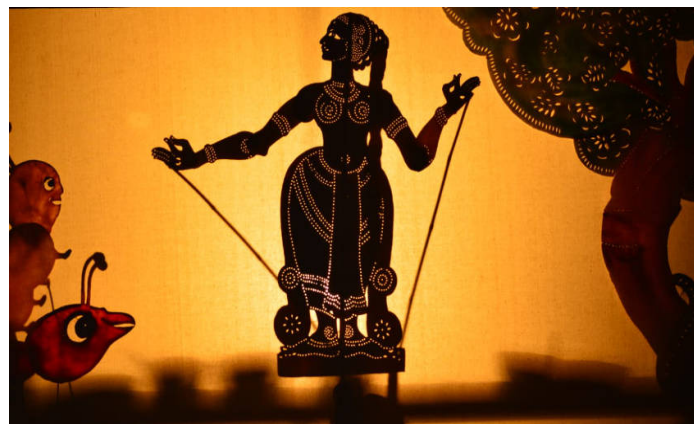
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