

# Kutiyattam

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In terms of international theatrical history, Kutiyattam, the Sanskrit theatre of Kerala, can perhaps well claim the greatest antiquity. Kutiyattam is a form of theatre that originated in an ancient past, dating back to about two millennia. One of the most remarkable traditions of world theatre, it draws on the on the plays of the eminent Sanskrit dramatists of India. In recent times, Kutiyattam has gained the attention of theatre people and scholars from all over the world. Recently, Kutiyattam has been declared as among the “Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity” by UNESCO. It is for the first time in the history of UNESCO that select art forms across the world have been given this recognition as part its effort to safeguard expressions of oral heritage and traditional culture which are in danger of disappearing due to the effects of globalisation.

While the performing tradition of Sanskrit plays have ceased to exist elsewhere in India, the continuation of an unbroken tradition of theatre surviving in Kerala, the southernmost tip of India is historically interesting. While there is a rich corpus of plays composed in Sanskrit written by dramatists like Asvaghosha, Bhasa, Sudraka, Kalidasa, Harsha, Bodhayana, Mahendravikramavarman and several others which have come down to us, there are no exact evidence or details regarding the staging of Sanskrit plays during the times they were written, except those reconstructed from history, references available from the Sanskrit plays themselves and from texts like Bharata’s *Natya Sastra*. The performance practice of Kutiyattam, though it broadly follows the abstract rules of aesthetics described in the *Natya Sastra*, has its own distinctive characteristics in terms of theatric conventions and method of acting. In the olden days, Kutiyattam was not accessible to anyone except people from the brahmin and other similar ‘higher’ castes, and until recently, it was restricted to the temple as sacred art. Another reason for the restrictive appeal of Kutiyattam is the highly complicated, long-drawn out acting method and theatric grammar which conveyed meaning only to the select few who are conversant with its codes and conventions. The differences of Kutiyattam from the practice described in the *Natya Sastra* are so marked that scholars tend to explain it away as an anomaly, at best as a regional adaptation/variation. What then are these special characteristics of this theatre form?

Kutiyattam is performed by a community of male actors called Chakyars and female performers called Nangiars, assisted by drummers called Nambiars, in theatre houses called Kuttampalams. Kutiyattam is an inclusive term that refers to more than one art form--apart from Kutiyattam, the mode of theatre in which the Chakyars and the Nangiars take part together, it also integrates Nangiarkoothu, the theatre exclusively performed by the Nangiars, and Prabandha koothu (or merely Chakyar koothu, as it is otherwise known), the verbal narrative drama of the Chakyars. The prefix “kuti” in Malayalam language primarily means “combined” or “together”, and “attam” means “acting”: therefore, the word “kutiyattam” means “combined acting.” Simply put, it is a theatre in which several characters come together on the stage. Apart from this primary meaning, perhaps there are several other layers of meaning embedded in the term “kuti”. It is a combination of elements drawn from the local Dravidian and the pan-Indian performance traditions. It integrates the histrionic aspect of the elaborate acting of the hero and the other main characters based on classical Sanskrit and the verbal narration of the Vidushaka, the comic character, in the regional language of Malayalam.

Temple theatres called Kuttambalams are permanent theatre structures attached to some of the major temples of Kerala. Considered as one of ‘*panchprasada*’, one of the five structures inside the temple complex, these were presumably constructed between the twelfth and the seventeenth centuries. There are Kuttambalams in the temples in Trissur, Guruvayoor, Irinjalakkuda, Kidangur, Thrippunithura, Chengannur and Harippad. During recent times, a new one was added in the premises of Kerala Kalamandalam, a major art institution devoted to classical arts in Kerala. The design of Kuttambalam is in keeping with the architectural heritage of Kerala.

## The Repertoire

The typology of the plays included in the Kutiyattam repertoire has the Vyayoga, Prakarana, Nataka and Prahasana which are listed among the ten forms of drama in Sanskrit texts on dramaturgy. Kutiyattam includes the plays of almost all the major playwrights in Sanskrit, including Bhasa, Harsha, Saktibhadra, Kulasekhara, Neelakantha, Bodhayana and Mahendravikramavarman. However, notable exceptions are Kalidasa and Bhavabhuti, whose plays are not traditionally part of its repertoire. This may be because Kutiyattam in its adaptation prefers a minimal text with more dramatic and less descriptive potential, and Kalidasa's language with its rich poetic nuances does not lend very easily to its choreographic treatment.

A striking feature of Kutiyattam is that it treats single Acts from Sanskrit plays as full-fledged plays. It bases its performance not on the full text of a Sanskrit play, but on the individual acts from Sanskrit plays. These acts in their treatment become full-fledged plays complete in themselves, with their own names and performance score, stretching for several days to complete stage enactment. For example, 'Mantrankam' is the third act of Bhasa's *Pratijnayaugandharayana* and 'Anguliyankam' is the sixth act of Saktibhadra's *Ascharyachudamani*. One of the most popular plays on the Kutiyattam stage noted for its aesthetic appeal and histrionic potential is Saktibhadra's *Aschryachudamani* in seven Acts. Acts like Surpanakhanka, Asokavanikanka and Anguliyanka are still favourites with the audience. Bhasa's plays have also survived down the centuries in the live performance of Kutiyattam. At a time when Bhasa's plays were not available to the rest of the world, the Chakyars had them in their possession, though they were known by the individual Acts of the plays, rather than in their full form as complete plays. The retrieval of Bhasa's plays by Ganapati Sastri in 1912 from Kerala and the popularity of the plays on the Kerala stage has made some scholars even to surmise that Bhasa belonged to Kerala! It is surprising that some other great playwrights like Kalidasa and Bhavabhuti do not appear in Kutiyattam. The brevity of the dialogue, open-ended language and the scope for the actor to an elaborate presentation may be the reason for Bhasa's popularity in Kutiyattam, as against the elegant poetic richness of Kalidasa. Even *Mrcchakatika* and *Ratnavali*, which were popular elsewhere in the country, do not belong to the Kutiyattam repertoire, perhaps more or less for the same reasons. *Mattavilasa* has now become confined to the status of a ritual, a votive offering to the deity, with only the ritualistic portions in current use. There are evidences of the enactment of the one-act plays of *Dutavakya* and *Dutaghatotkacha* till recent times in temples.

The play in Kutiyattam provides only the bare minimal text for the actor, to elaborate into multiple meanings and imaginative improvisation. The text is only 'pre-text', and the production of the play depends on the 'sub-text' provided by the stage manual. The performance of Kutiyattam was codified in ancient times through elaborate manuals of performance called Attaprakarams and Kramadeepikas, which have been preserved in Chakyar families and handed down from generation to generation through a master-disciple tradition. The theatric action in Kutiyattam is based on these choreographic texts which detail every nuance of action and interpretation of the text--in fact, they are the real performance texts in Kutiyattam. These stage manuals, of uncertain dates and in all probability belonging to divergent periods in history, were jealously guarded by the Chakyar community and kept as secret documents until recently. These manuals contain all the logistic, organisational and theatric aspects of Kutiyattam, and it is from these documents that one can reconstruct the history and method of acting of Kutiyattam in the olden days. While Kramadeepika is an account of practical matters such as stage organisation, stage production, use of costumes and payment to the artists, an Attaprakaram vividly describes the method of action, movement, recitative mode, gesture, elaboration and every other detail of performance.

## Theatre Grammar

Kutiyattam is the art of elaboration of action through extending the performance score to unbelievable heights of imaginative fancy. In this method of action, the poetic quality of a Sanskrit play with multiple layers of meaning, figures of speech, oblique or obscure expression and implied meaning get their full

play. Situations of poetic richness and dramatic potential are elaborated in Kutiyattam to unravel the multiple layers of meaning embedded in the text of the play. The poetry of the text slows down the pace of action, and this is why the action takes a slow tempo in Kutiyattam.. The focus of a Kutiyattam play is to enlarge a movement, an idea and an emotion, by exploring the full potential of the situation and bringing its *rasa* to a full ripeness.

The extension of the performance text in Kutiyattam is so elaborate that a play (that is, the Act from a Sanskrit play), depending on the need of the occasion, can stretch upto forty nights or more to complete the action. Anguliyankam, the sixth Act of Ascharyachudamani, with Hanuman as the only character on the stage takes about forty-one days to complete its stage enactment. The context of the performance is Hanuman's crossing of the ocean and discovery of Sita in the Asoka Garden in Lanka. It takes place in the form of Hanuman's reporting to Sita on the events that happened in Rama's life from his parting with her, to Hanuman's crossing the ocean to find her. In the process, Hanuman describes several related incidents, like Ravana's conquest of Svarga, the descent of the divine river Ganga to the earth and the birth of Hanuman himself. The performance text, replete with interpolated verses from other sources and from the previous Acts of the play itself, becomes the real play-text, providing the actor with immense possibilities of displaying his histrionic talent. Another instance of elaborate depiction of verbal skills is 'Mantrankam', the third Act of Bhasa's *Pratijnayaugandharayana*. A speech-oriented play with the Vidushaka as the only character on the stage, with detailed narration of the story and potential to outsource related material from a wide variety of other texts, Mantrankam takes about forty nights to complete its narration. Another instance of elaborate presentation of a play in Kutiyattam is the performance of the Ramayana. The entire story of the Ramayana by integrating the three plays-- Saktibhadra's *Ascharyachudamani*, Bhasa's *Pratimanataka* and *Abhishekanataka*--was in the repertoire of the Kutiyattam artist. This cycle of plays, confined to the temples of Kerala, had twenty-one Acts and took a full year in its enactment, perhaps one of the longest performances in the history of world theatre!

## The Theatre of the Actor

Kutiyattam, Nangiar Koothu and Prabandha Koothu are primarily the theatre of the actor in the sense that she/he has the freedom to creatively interpret the role in the play. In Prabandha Koothu, theatric communication depends on the verbal skill (*vachikabhinaya*) of the actor; the actor in the guise of the Vidushaka holds the stage for days together by narrating stories, anecdotes, interpreting events, making fun of the audience and the characters and above all, imparting information on a wide range of topics through the medium of humour. In Kutiyattam and Nangiar Koothu, the theatric communication happens primarily with the aid of body kinetics (*angikabhinaya*), assisted by orchestral support. The kinetic patterns in Kutiyattam involve dance movements, a codified language of gestures and highly refined pattern of facial expressions. While the movements of the body and the hand gestures are highly codified, the face, with its delicately wrought eye, cheek, brow and lip movements and the elasticity of all its muscles, is the main field of action in the theatric communication of Kutiyattam. The actor in Kutiyattam has perfected the art of facial expression to reach unimaginable heights. The movements of the face with its eyes, eyebrows, cheeks and lips are so subtly worked out that it can convey any emotion to the spectator. Of vital significance is the stylised acting through *netrabhinaya*, the *abhinaya* through the eyes. Perhaps the eyes are the most important element in theatric action in Kutiyattam, for their movements and power of expression are so refined, pervasive and wide-ranging that they can portray any situation, activity, thought or feeling in this theatre. A "good" actor has the back-up of a life time of dedicated pursuit to the art, the capacity to draw upon this proficiency/experience at will and the special gift to go beyond it when the situation demands. Rather than a mere performer of the role assigned to him/her, the actor has the status of a *vyakhata*, an interpreter who unravels the layers of meaning accrued in the text of the play. For explicating an idea to its fullest capacity, the actor slows down the pace of acting through using different devices. Acting involves not a straightforward enactment, but a circumlocution and deliberate extension of the action, with multiple tellings, going back and forth in time sequence, giving different (sometimes contrary) interpretations, indulging in long digressions and recreating stories that are not part

of the main story, repeating the narration in different acting modes, visualising different situations, so on. This method of convoluted acting is perhaps in keeping with the Indian oral tradition of cyclical narration, where events are narrated not in a linear manner, but through a process of branching and sub-branching out (in the manner of “*sakhachankramanam*”) into different other events, without affecting the core of the main branch of the narrative. Given the barest outline of the text and the guidelines given by the performance text, the actor can approach the action in his/her own manner. She/he draws upon each nuance, each line of the text, each situation to explore its full potential through the power of imagination and amplify action through skillful improvisation during high points of drama.

Theatric improvisation is effected through several methods in Kutiyattam--its rituals and conventions, stylisation in speech and movement, use of orchestra to enhance histrionic action, multi-layering of the text with detailed references from other sources, non-linear sequencing of dramatic action and the deliberate amplification of events and sequences through the theatric technique called “*pakarnnattam*” (the actor assuming the role of another or more than one character consecutively and/or shifting roles without any change in costume). Pakarnnattam is a unique device perfected in Kutiyattam, which gives immense scope for the actor to call upon his histrionic and imaginative faculties. The actor during the course of his acting *steps out* of her/his role and through the stream-of consciousness of the protagonist assumes the roles of all the other characters imagined by that person and elaborates the context/scene according to his/her skill and imagination. There are no set limits for the actor, and the action can be stretched to any limits, provided the sense of immediacy is sustained for the audience. The actor has no dramatic empathy with the role/roles presented, for it is only a ‘performance’, with the actor *narrating* the events and *projecting* the roles played on the stage. Drama here assumes an unparalleled elasticity, and acting establishes the illusory nature of play--drama is pretense; to see it is to recognise and accept the pretense. The action is not addressed to dramatic credibility or logical reason, but to a world of fantasy and metatheatrical imagination.

In the early days, there were eighteen families who were employed in the profession of Kutiyattam, but now the number is dwindled to five, and only a few have taken to this art in a professional manner. Acting rights in different temples were assigned to different Chakyar families where performances took place through an annual calendar. The performers regarded the art both as ritual duty and as a sacred treasure offering. The professional artistic activity of the Chakyars and Nangiars were organised in such a way that it fitted well with the tradition of temple worship; for the actors, the attachment to the temple took care of their livelihood expenses, leaving them leisure to devote their time to the honing of their histrionic skills and passing them on to their next generation. The temple through generous gifts of land and stipend for individual performances supported them. However, with the crumbling of the feudal order and the freedom from the rigidity of the temple complex, Kutiyattam became accessible to a wider world and motivated people from other castes also started training themselves for it.

### **The Role of the Spectator**

The degree of formalism that characterises the classical theatre of Kutiyattam is more than any other art in Kerala. Kutiyattam appeals to people who have prerequisite knowledge. The interest of these spectators in watching a play is not to unravel the story or the unfolding of the action, for she/he is familiar with the story, the poetic text, the course of action and even the performance score. The experienced spectator is a willing participant of the action, for the creation of this world of make-believe is a collaborative activity between the actor and the spectator. The ideal spectators of Kutiyattam are cultivated theatregoers who usually occupy the front rows, concentrating on each nuance and expression on the face of the actor. The spectator is a creative participant who imaginatively identifies with the action. The play does not call for total empathy from the spectator, for he/she is aware that what is presented is the representation of imagined action. (Perhaps this absence of empathy may be likened to Bertolt Brecht’s Alienation Effect in his concept of Epic Theatre). The critical distance is in any case inevitable in this play, where the actor takes on different roles while retaining the guise of only a single character. The

success of a Kutiyattam performance is in the creation of reciprocity between the actor and spectator.

The high level of awareness expected from the spectator in Kutiyattam is perhaps the reason why it had a limited appreciation base at all times. However, in the olden days, a balance was maintained in this erudite art by introducing more popular elements, like the importance given to the Vidushaka, the comic character in drama. Unlike the other characters in the play who base their histrionic action on the Sanskrit passage from the text of the play, the Vidushaka has his own Prakrit speech, and the freedom to speak in the regional language Malayalam. He also has the sanction to indulge in verbal speech throughout. By his witticisms, jibes at the hero and the audience, he evokes laughter on the stage, and he subjects himself, the characters in the story and the world around him to ridicule. This makes him a popular stock figure on the Kutiyattam stage, having access to all kinds of spectators.

Kutiyattam, being a ritualistic and orthodox art stubbornly resisted change and opening up till recently until Painkulam Rama Chakyar, the master performer belonging to the Koypa family, took the initiative to perform outside the temple in 1949. However, the starting of a Kutiyattam school in Kalamandalam had to wait till 1965. The school broke the age-old practice and admitted students from outside the Chakyar community also. Though this innovation met with heavy opposition from conservative sections and from the Chakyar community itself, it proved that change from an ingrained culture built around habit and tradition was inevitable even in a traditional art form like Kutiyattam. After this, two more schools, Margi and Ammannur Gurukulam have been able to produce a new generation of artists and teachers in Kutiyattam, ensuring the sustenance and continuation of the tradition. These schools are now well established as representing three "schools" (*sampradaya*) of Kutiyattam and have opened up new possibilities for its training and performance.

Patronage in the present age comes mainly from the Government and its agencies like the Sangeet Natak Akademi. The introduction of the school model for training in classical arts like Kathakali and Kutiyattam revolutionised the traditional mode of Gurukula Sampradaya. For a wider dissemination of the complicated theatre grammar of Kutiyattam lecture-demonstrations are becoming common. International Centre for Kutiyattam, based in Thrissur and Spicmacay, have taken Kutiyattam to schools and colleges across Kerala and other places in the country. The unique theatre language of classical theatre in Kerala has caught the attention of scholars and theatre people from all over the world. The first trip abroad for Kutiyattam was in 1980, headed by Painkulam Rama Chakyar with a group of thirteen artists from Kalamandalam. Now there are frequent trips sponsored for these arts sponsored by other similar institutions, universities across the world. In recent times, cross-cultural studies have revitalised interest in classical theatres like Kutiyattam. For example, John Russell Brown, describing his recent encounter with a Kutiyattam performance in his *New Sites for Shakespeare* says: "Unexpectedly I learnt about a part of the spectrum of theatre's possibilities that I had previously not known to exist and, increasingly, I began to that I had stumbled upon the key that would unlock some secret about Shakespeare's exceptional achievements." For him, the freedom of the actor to be what he chooses and the audience to imaginatively follow her/him through the fantasy land of theatre began to "challenge earlier ideas of Shakespeare's stagecraft and the almost unchanging background of Shakespearian theatre."