

**SAFEGUARDING THE PINNAL KOLATTAM**  
**- A RARE INDIAN CULTURAL HERITAGE FOLK ART FORM**

First Report

DR.N.JAYAVIDHYA

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Title :

**SAFEGUARDING THE PINNAL KOLATTAM - A RARE INDIAN CULTURAL HERITAGE FOLK ART FORM**

Period of the Project : 01-04-2015 to 31-03-2016

**Objectives of the Project :**

The objective of this project is to safeguard the aspects of the folk arts *Pinnal Kolattam* which has lost his ancient glory and significance now a days in Tamil Nadu. It is also important to spread knowledge of this art among people and bring light the inherent in the mode of celebration of this festival.

**4) Implementation and progress of the Project:**

This Project mainly focuses on the documentation of *Pinnal Kolattam* in Temple rituals and other rituals. As the project has begun in the month of April 2015 and the festival of Pinnal Kolttam was on Aadi month and Aipasi month after Diwali. However, from the month of April 2015, I am collecting relevant research materials with regard to *Pinnal Kolattam*. I visited many temples. I have collected research datas from Saraswathi Mahal library. I visited many places where *Pinnal kolattam* have been played. And also I met few artists belongs to this art.

*Pinnal kolattam* is performed during the following months and rituals. *Pinnal Kolattam* Played at the following temples, schools, public functions and also weddings have to be documented for this project:

1. In the Tamil Month Adi Tuesdays and Fridays In Trivandrum. (July-August)
2. Onam Festival Time -in Kochi, Edapally. (sep)
3. Navarathri Festivals -Tamilnadu (Sep-Oct)

4. After ten days from Diwali Festival -Vellore,Tamilnadu (Oct)
5. Harvesting Period (Oct-Nov)
6. Pongal festival in Villages-Jan
7. Sivarathri Festival (March)
8. Tamil New Year (April)
9. Acharyas Nakshtra Festivals
10. Weddings
11. In few villages mens are performed this *Pinnal Kolattam* in death also.

## **Introduction**

India is a land of diverse cultures and traditions. Each region of the country has a unique culture which is also prominently visible in its various art forms. Almost all the regions of the country have their specific folk music and dance, which proves to be a wonderful way of expression of their community and its traditions. Though these folk dances are not as complex as the classical dance forms, they are very beautiful because of the essence of rawness in them. Be it the Karakam , Kavadi, *Kolattam* of Tamil Nadu, Bihu of Assam, Dol-Cholom of Manipur, Hikal of Himachal Pradesh or Chhau of Bihar, each of the Indian folk dance forms comes across as a reflection of the deep sited beliefs and traditions of a particular culture.

The folk dances of any community are performed on almost every special occasion and festival, to express elation and joy. These dances are also considered to be auspicious by many of the tribal communities in the country. Many folk dances are dedicated to the presiding deity of the specific community. The most interesting part of a folk dance is the attire required for its performance. Every folk dance has its own specific costume and jewellery, which differs from dance to dance. They are, in general, very bright and colourful, with traditional jewelleryes that

give a folk touch to the performance. These dances are not only the exclusive art of a particular community but also an asset of India's cultural heritage.

## **Mythology**

Folk lore is attached to all religious rituals and so it is with *Kolattam*. As the story goes, an *asura* or demon called *Basavasura* had become very powerful and went around troubling everyone in his way. No one could control him and all were afraid of his strength and evil ways. It was the harvest season and the women of the village were performing *Kolattam* when suddenly *Basavasura* in the guise of a bull came rampaging. The women showed pluck and courage and did not run away but continued to perform the *Kolattam* in a large circle with *Basavasura* in the center. The demon was so taken up by the rhythmic music and the synchronized movements of the women that he stood there dumbfounded. Soon he realized that he was making a mistake by using his strength in a destructive manner and gave up his evil ways.

*Kolattam* Jothrai or *Kolattam* festival is celebrated to commemorate this instance when a devil was humanized by courage along with gentle music and dance. Another variation of the *Kolattam* dance genre is called *Pashu Kolattam*. It is a *Kolattam* dance form dedicated to *Kamadhenu* the Holy Cow or the mythological cow that signifies prosperity and abundance. As the participants in a *Kolattam* or *Pinnal Kolattam* performance are a large group of women, the dancers as well as the by-standers are greatly entertained by the music, dance and festivity of the occasion and the performance continues all night amidst loud cheering by the crowd of spectators. In North India it is known as *Kop veni*.

Folk art lives in the villages of India and is connected by a common thread of religion and mythology.

## Description of Kolattam Dance

The *Kolattam* dance form is another folk dance performed in the villages of Tamil Nadu during the harvesting festival after completion of harvesting. It is a group dance performed by women of all age groups and combines rhythmic movement with music and song. The large group forms two huge concentric circles. The women in the circles face each other and thus dance in pairs. Sticks are held in both the hands and are struck on the partners sticks thus producing a beat. The songs and the beat of the sticks and the lively movements create a festive atmosphere that is enjoyed by all.

The clay idol of *Basava* the bull is the center of the circles and every day from new moon day of Karthika (Oct-Nov) to the full moon day of the same month, this dance is performed. At the end of the festival which lasts for 15 days the clay idol of *Basava* is carried in a procession and immersed in the river.

Other names of *Pinnal kolattam*.

1. *Pinnal kolattam* In Tamilnadu
2. Kurunthadi silambu in Tamil
3. Jada *Kolattam* in Andhra & Karnataka
4. Pinnal Thiruvathira in Kerala
5. Kop veni in North.
6. Vasantha Attam

II. Types of *Pinnal kolattam*.

There are three types of *Pinnal kolattam* .

1. Using colour Ropes with Beating the Sticks

2. Using colour Sarees Cloth with beating the stick

3. Using colour Ropes with beating the hands.

And also another few types

One is bharathanatyam based and another one is folk based.

## **PHILOSOPHY OF PINNAL KOLATAM**

FIXED POINT AT THE TOP          GOD - THE ALMIGHTY

THE END OF THE ROPE AT THE TOP - PARAMATHMA

ROPE - LOVE AND AFFECTION (KARMA)

THE OTHER END OF THE ROPE - JEEVATHMA

PERFORMERS - WE

Life is filled with Karma. It's a creation of god. That is why the rope is tied up at the top (God) which is fixed and at the bottom (the performer) which is moving. We have little Karma in our early childhood and hence we have direct contact with the God only i.e. before starting the performance. That is the reason why child is same as God. When we entangle with Karma i.e. the performer starts Pinnal Kollatam, we have to face so many problems because of twisting of various Karmas - ropes and we depend upon one another, there starts sacrifice. In that situation we cannot see GOD since there is no direct contact because of entangled Karma. See how the ropes are twisted! In that case also GOD is with us because He is fixed at the top end. Since we are performing Karma we run into problems. If it is a calculated one, we will not fall down because He is the creator and also it is His Will. If the Karma is within the limit of not affecting others (co performers) and within the potency of the rope being limited Karma,

God will help up because He is holding one of the ropes tightly. If any one of the above elements is absent, the performer may fall down or rope will cut off and thus God will not come to rescue us as there will be no contact between GOD and us.

When we are entangled with some many problems and could not liberate ourselves from them, we realize and pray God wholeheartedly and then our focus is only towards God. In such case, we curtail all our Karma one by one as the ropes releases when untwisted.

”Kollatam – Untwisting”. We finally realize GOD and there is one to one contact, “Paramathma and Jeevathma”. For both the situation GOD is with us. If we have limited Karma, we could realize God soon and vice versa. God is nowhere but within us.

PS: Kole (Attam) shows that we should keep stick on more Karmas to enter into. Kolaattam, deriving from Kol (a stick) and Attam (game) is an ancient rural art. A Kanchipuram it is referred to as 'Cheivaikiyar Kolattam', reflecting its antiquity. It is danced by women, equipped with two sticks, knocking against each other to produce a rhythmic sound. Pinnal Kolaattam is executed with ropes that are attached to a tall pole and that women hold in their hands. In rhythm, women jump over the ropes of each other's, forming intricate patterns resembling lace. The strings are colorful, making it even more attractive lace. The women then unravel this lace by performing the opposite hand. The show runs for ten days, from the night of the new moon Amavasi or until the end of Deepavali (festival of light).

## INTERVIEWS

SMT.JAYALAKSHMI ESHWAR

FOUNDER

ABHINAYA-CENTRE OF DANCE

NEW DELHI

An Internationally acclaimed Bharatanatyam exponent of par-excellence, an excellent Performer, Choreographer, Teacher and an Author with an experience of more than 5 decades of dance being a leading Bharatanatyam dancer of her generation. Her glorious career has seen her transmit her education in performing Arts at "Kalkshetra" Chennai– the pioneering college of fine arts envisioned by Smt. Rukmini Devi Arundale, who has been a guiding vision for Jayalakshmi. Had her Arangetram at Kalkshetra on her convocation day 1st Dec 1970 under the able guidance of Smt.Rukmini Devi Arundale.

Jayalakshmi strikes a perfect blend of tradition and contemporary interpretation, without obscuring the aesthetics of the classical idiom. She has a vast range and depth of productions, having performed in Solo, group and collaborative formats extensively in India and abroad. She is the Head of the Bharatanatyam Department at the Triveni Kala Sangam, New Delhi, apart from having her own dance group Abhinayaa. She has also enacted as the Tanjore Dancer in the National Award Winning classical Kannada film "Hamsa Geethe" of G.V.Iyer.

Innovative Choreographic Compositions ranging from ancient vedic to modern concepts for both solo and thematic group presentations like:-Nadopasana, Nritya Rupam, Tat Tvam Asi, Bharatam, Mystical Seven, Panchali Sabadam of Subramaniya Bharatiyar, a combination between Bharatanatyam and Hatha - Yoga, "Varuna" the savior of Water, Kalashruthi(Sounds of Time), Antariksha Sanchar (Evolution of Flights), "Awakening"-a work combining classical dance, music and electronic arts, the fairy Tale-"SnowWhite" (Himshweta) in Hindi for children etc have won her great acclaim both in India and abroad.



She has been conducting National & International workshops on Bharatanatyam and choreographed and directed many thematic dance productions both India & Abroad. She has taught hundreds of students over the years in India and abroad and many have completed their Arangetram (Graduation) and are well established dancers having their own dance centres.

Her internationally acclaimed contribution to Bharatanatyam is her three instructional books- “Bharatanatyam How To”, “Hastha Prayogaah” on the vocabulary of Hand Gestures & “Paadhahedhah’- on the vocabulary of feet movements in dance. All the books are complete with multimedia support material of audio and video DVDs. Her creativity also extended in releasing an unique educational “Card Game” for young and old.

Residing in New-Delhi, India, she continues to perform both solo as well as group productions apart from teaching. Actively engaged and leading all her projects on all fronts whether its imagining narratives, choreographing movements, building sound compositions or designing costume and décor, Jayalakshmi creates productions that are wholesome, educational and spiritual for audiences. Her belief is that dance is a language that everyone should have access to and enjoy as a means of communicating with others as well as knowledge based and learning about oneself and the very existence of Life and it is this belief that imparts a sense of wonder and engagement for audiences with her Dance.

-----INTERVIEW WITH HER ON 20-04-2015.IN NEW DELHI

## PANDHANALLUR RATHNA.SUBRMANIAM

He is a disciple Sri.K.P.Kittappa Pillai and Pandanallur M.Gopalakrishnan pillai. 48yrs old. He started his dance training under his age of 20. He studied music in chidambaram Annamalai University.

He describes the *Pinnal kolattam*. He taught *Pinnal kolattam* also in pandanallur type. Now he is working in chettinadu vidyasram as a dance master. Apart from this he is running a dance school in Pandanallur bani. (Style). In olden days *Pinnal kolattam* is performed in the Sedil Oonjal time”. And also in wedding Nalangu. He recite the *Pinnal kolattam* song “pandanallur pasupathiyar chapparaththu mele saranjaramai mele”

Interview with him on 24th may 2015 in Chennai

## JAYALAKSHMI VENUGOPAL -CHENNAI

Smt.Jayalakshmi Venugopal 85 years old lives in chennai Nanganallur.teaching *Pinnal kolattam* for women.

Her enthusiasm is infectious and she spreads cheer and joy around. For the women in the kolattam coterie in Chennai, Jayalakshmi Venugopal is the icon who makes women even after 70 dance to her tunes. Born in an aristocratic family in Naduvakkari, a lush village in the fertile Cauvery delta, Jayalakshmi was passionate about acquiring knowledge and keeping herself occupied.

Her father wanted to give the best education to his children and shifted to the holy town of Kumbakonam. At St Joseph’s Convent in Kumbakonam Jayalakshmi was given a platform

to showcase her talents in elocution, oratory, theatre and music. Since it was pre-Independence days, she used to sing patriotic songs which kindled national fervour.

“She used to memorise Bharathiar’s songs quickly to perform on stage and our teachers inculcated the spirit of freedom,” declares Jayalakshmi who reminisces about her youth with nostalgia. she was awed by her enunciation and chaste English. It was not common for women to learn English those days as it was taboo. But Jayalakshmi couldn’t care less for conservatism and studied in a convent. “she used to stage dramas and used to pen the script myself,” smiles the versatile woman.

Jayalakshmi reels off into poetic verses and comments on the lucidity in Wordsworth and Byron’s language. This proves her incredible memory.

“Her sisters were well-trained in music and she used to listen and sit along with them when they practiced,” avers Jayalakshmi. To comprehend slokas better, music is the only medium which makes us understand and remember, quips the kolattam mami who has learnt several Azhwar Pasurams from Kamamma, difficult though as the meter is difficult and may vary accordingly.

To recite Sri Vedanta Desikar’s ‘Raghuveera Gadhya’ is itself very difficult but Jayalakshmi learnt it with music. A lover of fine arts, she choreographed Andal Kalyanam incorporating *Pinnal kolattam* exclusively with women. Jayalakshmi feels that kolattam and gummi - a form of group dance – will improve our stamina as the energy level is high.

Her group has performed *Pinnal kolattam* and gummi in many places and has earned laurels for its style and elegance. She now plans to stage the lifehistory of spiritual preceptor Vedanta Desikar and Ramayana.

-----Interview on 23-05-2015

## MALATHY G. MENON -EDAPALLY-KOCHI

Malathy G. Menon. At the ripe age of 80, she is full of energy and wants it even practised by men though the form is confined to women until now. She is Spreading the joy of Thiruvathira dance – a traditional form of singing and dancing from Kerala.

She is keen to teach a new variety of the dance wherein dancers weave a set of ropes into a knot and then undo it as they continue to dance. She calls her invention as Pinnal Thiruvathira.

Ms. Menon, who was here to present Thiruvathira dance at the Onam celebration of Karnataka Nair Service Society, appears very passionate about it. “This was the only type of dancing in those days when I was young.” In the village of Kumbalam near Ernakulam, she grew up with it as young women performed it praying for “beautiful husbands” and married women sought long life for their husbands.

After her retirement as a government Hindi teacher, she has dedicated herself to the spread of this form. “I saw many women were wasting their time, sitting idle or quarrelling with neighbours. I thought they should learn and practise this instead.” And she offered to teach free of cost. In 2009, she started Paravendu School of Thiruvathira. She has published books on the art form.

Her glorious moment came when she had over 300 women perform it at Changampuzha Park, Edapally in Kochi in 2012. Then she went on to create a record for Limca Book of Records by getting more than 3,000 women to perform it in 2013.

Blessed with two daughters and a son, she says her husband Govindakutty Menon has been an ardent admirer of the art form and a constant source of support. Her new ambition is to

take the art form abroad and teach it to people in places such as Dubai. She has already taught it to people in Mumbai.

Ms. Menon, who has learnt Kathakali, dismisses the suggestions that the Thiruvathira has notional elements of Bharatanatyam or Kathakali. "There is no mudra" in this, she declares vehemently. Among the many awards she has received is the Kerala Sangeetha Nadaka Academy Gurupooja Award in 2008.

The Thiruvathira folk dance recital was the centre of attraction at the Onam celebrations of the Karnataka Nair Service Society at Kulal Bhavan here on Sunday. Presented by Malathy G. Menon of Kerala, it was marked by slow, graceful, yet simple movements that switched gear after each small piece.

The highlight was the way they moved their hands even while ensuring back and forth movements of their bodies. The women clad in settum mundum (white saree with golden borders) would move around a shining centre piece, placed on the ground. At first they would hit each other's palm and turn around themselves to find another partner in front of them and join hands with her.

-----12-05-2015

*Pinnal kolattam* is performed in South .i.e.Tamilnadu , Andhra, Karnataka, Kerala and also in North i.e.Delhi,Mumbai.

In kerala there are few groups practiced this art and also teach this art. Particularly in Trivandrum and kochi.

In Trivandrum there are two groups of students.

#### I.Latha Ayyappan Group

Kolattam teacher Latha Ayyappan comes in, they move to the rear of the temple, all set to perform Kolattam. The heady fragrance of fresh flowers, incense, camphor and sandalwood fills the air at the Ganapathy temple on Punnakkal Road, near Vazhapally Junction. The soft chimes of the temple bells meld with giggles and tinkle of anklets as young girls, all dressed in their best pattupavadas, practise their steps, keeping time with wooden sticks.A group of women recite kirtans, while prettily dressed girls troop in, with matching bangles on their wrists and braided hair adorned with strings of jasmine.

Tuesdays and Fridays of the month of Karkidakam or Aadi, as the Tamil community calls it, are devoted to Kolattam [‘kol’ means stick and ‘attam’ is dance]. It’s an offering to the goddess, who, according to a legend, had dressed herself as a little girl to finish off the demons. Latha starts with a Ganapathy kirtan, with a group of women singing in chorus. Even as the drizzle continues, bells ring for the evening pujas. The girls dance to songs on Muruga, Krishna, and Devi, with different steps for each of the numbers, moving in and out in a circular pattern, with Latha calling out instructions now and then. *Pinnal kolattam* (an intricate form of the kolattam) follows. The girls move, beating the sticks holding one end of the rope in their hand. The ropes get intertwined to form a braid and then they reverse the steps to open the braid.

With a ‘mangalam’, the programme gets over, in an hour

-----11-05-2015

## II. Anusha Group

Anusha is Grand Daughter of Ambujam mami who lived in Sastha Kovil Street, Vazhapally Junction. Close to Padmanabha Swamy Temple.

As the girls moved around rhythmically beating the sticks they held in their hands, the mood was upbeat. Attired in bright, colourful traditional 'pattupavadai' and blouse, wearing netti chutti, pathakkam, mekhala, bangles, anklets, ring, jhumkas and with mound of flowers on their plaited hair, the girls looked absolutely adorable.

They were with this gang from Sastha Kovil Street near Vazhappally junction, close to Sree Padmanabha Swamy Temple, to enjoy 'kolattam', a dance form synonymous with the month of Karkkidakam for the Tamil community.

During the month (also referred to as 'Aadi'), the evenings of Tuesdays and Fridays are set apart for 'kolattam'. The girls, those who have not attained puberty, look forward to learn the steps and perform at temples or households. However, the situation has changed for the worse.

The interest is waning, since the young girls have got busy with studies, tuitions, television and other modes of entertainment. Only few 'agraharams' in the city are religiously holding fast to this tradition and even there the number of girls turning up are coming down. She said, "When I was young, we girls waited for the 'Aadi' month. Once we were back from school, we hurriedly changed into the traditional dress, got together at a particular place and would proceed to the temple where we were to stage 'kolattam'. Now, I miss all those times. Sadly, now only very few girls turn up to be part of this," says Anusha, an engineering student who lives along Sastha Kovil street.

And Anusha had the best of her training from her paternal grandmother, Ambujam, a veteran in teaching 'kolattam'. When we caught up with this skinny, ailing pious lady at her house, she sprang up at the very mention of 'kolattam'. "It is something very devotional. I used

to go around taking the girls to almost all the temples. There used to be some 50 girls at a time. Once I took 70 girls to Mukkolakkal temple,” says an enthusiastic 84-year-old Ambuja ‘maami’, as she is fondly called.

Breaking into a ‘kolattam’ song, she said, “I am still ready to teach the girls, if somebody can take me in an auto.” Her daughter-in-law Geetha added, “She is very passionate about ‘kolattam’ and has trained innumerable number of students. Every year temples would place bookings with her and she would take these girls there.

Very disciplined and punctual, she used to be in such a rush that she would sometimes forget to lock the house. And, on the last Aadi Tuesday, we would prepare a feast for all these girls. But, since she fell ill everything has stopped. And the girls have got busy with a lot of other things.’

The songs are basically about Devi. They also dance to the songs about Lord Muruga and Lord Krishna. Lakshmi of Kumarapuram who calls herself a disciple of Ambuja maami said, “You won’t find anybody as dedicated as her when it comes to ‘kolattam’,” she said, adding, ‘*Pinnal kolattam*’ has been a special item of Ambuja maami.’

‘*Pinnal kolattam*’ uses colourful ropes. While one end of each of the rope is tied to a pole, the other end will be held by each dancer and on that end a stick will be tied. In the other hand, the dancers (an even number of them) hold the other&stick. As the song begins, they beat the stick and cross each other. As the dance progresses, the ropes intertwine to form a colourful braid. Once the entire length forms a braid, they reverse the dance steps, thus opening the braid. The dancers have to be careful about the steps, otherwise, it will end up a mess.

Another individual who devoted herself to the dance form many years back is A R Saraswathi, a retired employee of VSSC. It was after her retirement 10 years back that



Saraswathi took to teaching 'kolattam'. What is interesting about her is that she has composed her own songs. A trained singer, she has come up with her own lyrics, beautifully blending portions from famous keerthanas, slokas and even from poems of Bharatiyar. Besides 'kolattam', the girls have been taught 'kummi' also.

"Saraswathi maami has spent a lot of money and time on us. She used to buy accessories for us and would do anything to make the whole thing a grand affair," Anusha says. She even brought special sticks, brightly painted and decorated with bells attached to the ends, from Gujarat.

"I want the future generation to know about our culture. I am very satisfied teaching them Ramayana, Mahabharata and slokas because today's generation is totally ignorant about all that," Saraswathi says. Shedding more light on the concept of 'kolattam', she says, "Every little girl is considered 'Balatripurasundari', ie the form which Goddess took to finish off the demons, till the age of 8 or 9. These young girls are dressed up in their best like the Devi. Besides temples, these girls perform at households on special invitation. They are often given special rewards or gifts."

She even used to invite these girls and their parents for a performance at her home and prepared food for all of them. Quite unhappy with the lukewarm attitude of the present generation to 'kolattam', she is also saddened by the fact that she would be shifting to Chennai from her house at Sreevarahom with her husband next year.

There is indeed a silver lining. A handful of 'kolattam' groups are there in the city, like those in Valiyasala, Chinnasala and Karamana. Jaya has been training the girls in Valiyasala for the last few years. On Tuesday evening, they staged a grand 'kolattam', it being the last Tuesday of the *Karkkidakam*.

*PINNAL KOLATTAM* DOLLS -NEDUMANGADU VALIYA KOYIKKAL PALACE-

FOLK LORE MUSEUM -TRIVANDRUM

The delicate classical *Pinnal kolattam* was also on display. This is much more delicate dance with less moves and performed by women. Here life sized dolls were put up on display. In this dance, a group of women danced about in circles with a rope in each one's hand that came from the centre of the roof. They dance back and forth in a beautiful pattern, the rope gets braided.





Disciples of Natyamani, Bharatha Natya Kalarathna  
Sri Pandanallur Rathna Subramaniam



Pandanallur pasupathiswarar Temple, Sivarathri festival- 2010



Pandanallur Sivarathi Festival - 2011





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Vithaldhas at Tirunelveli - 2019.







PINNAL KOLATTAM DOLLS -NEDUMANGADU VALIYA KOYIKKAL PALACE-  
FOLK LORE MUSEUM -TRIVANDRUM

The delicate classical Pinnal Kolattam was also on display. This is much more delicate dance with less moves and performed by women. Here life sized dolls were put up on display . In this dance , a group of women danced about in circles with a rope in each one's hand that came from the centre of the roof. They dance back and forth in a beautiful pattern, the rope gets braided.



DISCIPLES OF SMT. MALATHY G. MENON  
3000 WOMEN PERFORM IN KOCHI









Smt. Jayalakshmi Eshwar - Abhinaya.  
 also Pinnal Kolattam teacher - Interview  
 01-20-04, 2015  
 Delhi;



Smt. Jayalakshmi Eshwar, Bharathanatyan Exponent.  
 Master. Chandrameni & Dr. Jayavidhya.



Students of Khitya-Arpan School of Bharathanatya  
& Indian Folk dance - 2013 - Nov.















