

**Revised report of the Project work under Safeguarding the  
ICH traditions and diverse cultural traditions of India**

## **Documentation of Old Tholpavakoothu style ( Leather Puppets of Kerala)**

### **Objectives of the project**

Main objective of the above project was to document the traditional Tholpavakoothu (Leather puppetry) of Kerala in order to preserve the age old tradition and pass it to the coming generations.

For achieving the above goal, I have made a survey and document the traditional families who are the traditional bearers of Tholpavakoothu in Kerala. The centuries old Tholpavakoothu tradition ,is now exists in the three districts of Kerala. They are Palakkad, Thrissur and Malappuram. There were around 200 traditional Puppet theatres ( Koothumadam) The tradition bearers were around 30 families in olden days . But now only very few families practice it.

# Introduction

Tholpavakoothu is a form of shadow puppetry unique to central kerala,in southern india .It is performed in permanent temple theatres as a form of ritual primarily honouring the Goddess of Bhadrakali.It enacts the hindu epic Ramayana in a version based on the Tamil Ramayana of Kambar.A highly flexible narrative allows a typical cycle of Tholpavakooth to extend between seven and twenty one nights, depending on the performance commissioned and sponsored locally .After remaining largely unknown to the West, until the twentieth century, recent scholarship has established its ancient beginnings ,while also highlighting the absence of a detailed account of the Art in performance over centuries of its existence

## **Tholpavakoothu In Mythology**

Long ago the creator Bhrahma blessed a demons and as a result of his blessing she gave birth to a son named Darika. When this Demon boy grew up, he became so strong that he turned out to be a threat and a constant source of harassment to the gods. sages and hermits .They approached Lord Shiva for help .In order to kill Darika shiva created the goddess Bhadrakali from the kaalakooda poison lodged in his throat . A fierce fight ensued between Darika and Bhadrakali ,lasting several days. Finally Bhadrakali killed Darika. While Bhadrakali was engaged in fighting Darika,Rama was fighting Ravana.So Bhadrakali was not able to see Rama and Ravana fight. That is why the Ramayana story is enacted in her presence through tholpavakoothu

## History

Modern Kerala was originally a part of Dakshina Dravida or Tamilakam. This large region extended to the west and east right up to the ocean. Its northern boundary was Tirupati and is stretched up to Kanyakumari in the south. This region consisted of three kingdoms: Chera, Chola, and Pandya. Modern Kerala was part of the Chera kingdom. Tamil was the common language of all these three kingdoms. The modern language of Kerala, Malayalam, took shape as a language distinct from Tamil only in the ninth century A.D. till then Tamil was the language of Kerala.

It is believed that the man who first incorporated verses from the Kamparamayana into the literary composition for Puppukoothu was Chinnathampi Vidhyar who belonged to Puthur village of Palakkad. He came from a family famous for its scholar astrologers and Ayurvedic physicians. Chinnathampi was a scholar who had studied Ramayana and since he was deeply interested in the epic he went, one day to a Brahmin's house to listen to the recitation of the Kamparamayana. But the Brahmins did not give him admission to the hall because he was a Shudra. They claimed that he had no right to listen to the reading of the Puranas and the scriptures, insulted by this treatment he resolved to present the Kamparamayana in such a way that even ordinary people could enjoy it. He believed that Puppukoothu would be the best medium for presenting the narrative to ordinary people. Chinnathampi Vidhyar must have lived about 600 years ago. In Guruvandanam, for the last five generations the guru mentioned is Kuzhiyathu Kandappanezhuthachan, the second place for Venmaya Pulavar, Tamil classic Chilapathikaram written in 2nd century AD, mentions about puppetry.

In order to document the tradition I have conducted a survey among the following traditional families .They are-

### **1 Koonathara tradition ( Now in three families)**

It is believed that koonathara tradition started 1200 years ago. It started from Chinnathampi Pulavar . The chronology of the bearers of this tradition is not known. However name of Thampi Pulavar cannot be ignored . Present tradition started from Ilapulavar and passed to his son Muthappa pulavar and then to Lakshmana pulavar. A known artist of this tradition is starts Krishnankutty Pulavar. This tradition has three families now. They are-

Ramachandra Pulavar ( 55 year)

Viswanatha Pulavar ( 53 year)

Lakshmana Pulavar (49 years)



Ramachandra Pulavar

Viswanatha Pulavar

Lakshmana Pulavar

## 2 Kavalappara tradition



**Kavalappara kottaram**

It has 400 years history . kavalappara tradition started from Kavalappara Mooppil Nair , a Chieftain. The main tradition bearers are -

Ramakrishnan nair ( Madapulavar)

Karuthodi Kunhan Nair

Sekharan Nair

Angappa Pulavar

Keshava kurup

Nobody lives in this tradition now. Exists only 30 puppets,lying in Aryankavu temple.



## Aryankavu Koothumadam



Sitting posture of Dasaradha ,



Before Tholpavakooth performance oracle blessing to puppeteers

### 3 Ottapalam tradition

Ottappalam tradition is also known as Thrikkankodu tradition. Sankaran Ezhuthassan. he was a great artist and had performed in several places. But he was confined to play only for seven days. Nobody is alive in this tradition.



Kaniyampuram koothumadam



Manissery koothumadam

## 4 Ambalappara tradition

Ramakrishnan , aged about 68 years is an Ezhava man who learned this art from Kuthanur tradition and finally practiced in around ten temples regularly. Now it has become a tradition. But he is one and only Ezhava community man performing this. Ramakrishnan has Muthalapparakavu, Vengasseri temple, Pariyanam patta , Pookkottukali kavu, Thootha Bhagavathi temple.



Ramakrishnan with his traditional puppets

## 5 Palappuram tradition



Annamala pulavar(1914-2010)



Sadhananda pulavar



Traditional puppets of Palappuram tradition

It has a long tradition. These traditional bearers had come from the banks of Nila river and settled in Palappuram long back. Krishnapulavar started the palappuram tradition. They are weavers by profession. Annamala pular , son of Krishn Pulavar was also a famous artist in this tradition. Now Sadananda pulavar is the main performer of this tradition.

## 6 Vellinezhi tradition

Subramania pulavar is a known artist in this tradition. He has learned this art form from Ramakrishnan . koothumadams belong to Karakurissi, Pookkottukavu, Uthrathilkavu, Mangodu kavu, Cherukunnathu kavu, etc are the temples under his tradition for his performance.

## 7 Kuthanoor tradition

This tradition has a long history. They are the only two performers who perform continuously for 72 days in one temple-Mannoor Kaimunnathukavu. Known artistes of this tradition are Gangadhara Pulavar and Prabhakara Pulavar. Gangadhara Pulavar is dead now. Prabhakarapulavar is around 90 years. They belong to Mannadiyar community. They had around 20 temples but now the rights were reduced to two temples.



## **8 Mathur tradition**

Mathur tradition consists of two groups . In which one is Ezhuthassan community and the other is Nair. Krishnan Ezhuthassan was famous among them. No body survives in this tradition now. But one BalanPillai studied under them. Main feature of this tradition is that it is more musical than other traditions.



Balan pillai

## **9 Koduvayur tradition**

previously one Ponnu Pulavar was the main performer in this tradition. reading of Skandapuram and Ramayanam are also under taken by these tradition bearers.

## **10 Karipode tradition**

Mannathu bhagavathi temple ,Karipode has no tradition bearers now. It is supposed to be the biggest Koothumadams found under this tradition.

## **11 Pallasana tradition**

Prabhakar Pulavar , One among the Kuthanur tradition bearers , lives in Pallasasana now and performs at Pallassana Meenkulathi kavu. It is also known as Pazhayakavu Devaswam. It is believed that Shinki Pulavar, who is believed to be the founder of Tholkpavakoothu lived here.

## **12 Palakkad tradition**

One of the senior most artist, Ponnuswami Pulavar ( Krishna Pulavar) lives here. He has around three to four temples for performance. He is known for his authentic narration.



Ponnuswami pulavar( Krishnapulavar)

## **13 Mannarkkad tradition**

Puppets under this tradition is famous for its intrinsic craft . This traditional bearers speak Tamil language as their mother tongue. Their tradition confined to Mannarkkad area of Palakkad. Nobody survives in this tradition now.



#### **14 Vemballur tradition**

There is no traditional bearers in this tradition now.

#### **15 Thachappan mannadityar tradition**

Mannadiyar family was once famous for Koothu tradition. But no body survives in this tradition now. Thachappan Mannadiyar was among the traditional bearers of this tradition.

#### **16 Killimangalam tradition**

One Balan nair , who was the only surviving artist died around ten year back. He had studied Koothu under tutelage of Kunjappu Pulavar of Koonathara. He made the performance sarcastically .

## 17 Munnorkode Kalari tradition

Panickers , who are also called kalari Panickers , perform puppetry in two or three Koothumadams . They are astrologers by profession and the custodians of Koothumadams. Aravindan, Babu, Krishnakumar are the present performers of this tradition.



Mulayankavu Koothumadam

## 18 Kizhur Kalari tradition

Viswanatha panicker is the only surviving artist belong to this tradition. he is also well versed in percussion using Para. He is an authority of singing songs and narration during Natakam kali .



## **19 Ezhuvanthala tradition**

Last surviving artist under this tradition was Ravunny master who died around 25 year ago. Now no body is available to follow this tradition. They are known for the narration in rational way.

## **20 Attoor tradition**

Unnikrishnan Nair is a Madappulavar as he is the custodian of six or seven koothumadams. His father Raman Nair was a famous Puppeteer in this tradition. Kandanisseri, Nelluvayi, Killimangalam and Placode , Enamavu etc are the places where he performs. They dont have puppets as their own.



## **21 Pattambi tradition**

Puppeteers of this Tradition belong to Kalari Panicker community( Astrologers) They are the custodians of koothumadam. They have only one Koothumadam belong to Palappetti Bhagavathi temple that faces Arabian sea. One important aspect of this tradition is that they bring the deity to be seated in front of Koothumadam so as to witness Ravanavadham.



## **22 Manavikrama pulavar tradition**

Nobody knows about this tradition now. There are songs which are believed to be sung by Manavikrama pulavar in Koothumadams of Palakkad district.

## **23 Padinharangadi panikker Tradition**

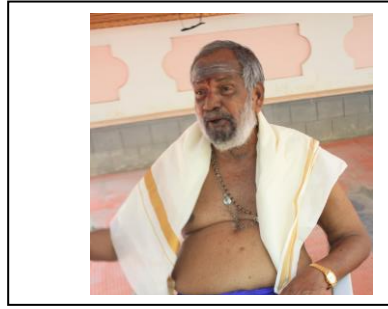
As the name denotes they belong to western part of Palakkad district . No body survives in this tradition as puppeteers as the surviving male members of this family have opted for astrology as their avocation.

## **24 Kollangode tradition**

Once famous tradition, as they are the Court puppeteers of Kollangode kovilakam. nobody survives in this tradition now.

## **25 Kayiliad tradition**

Panjunair was famous among this tradition. After him, his son Uppath Narayanan nair became the sole authority of this tradition. He also died recently. He was the last artist who could sing and narrate 21 days performance with out looking into the text. Another artist , Ravunny nair was well versed in Sanskrit.



## 26 Mundakottukurissi tradition

Last surviving artist was Shankaran nair who died around eight years ago. Nobody survives now in this tradition.

## 27 Parali tradition

Two known artists under this tradition were Kankan and Mani. They have the right to maintain the koothumadam. Now their children maintain the koothumadam, but they are not the artistes.

## 28 Pathirippala tradition

previously members of Parli tradition performed here also. No surviving member is available under this tradition.



Up stair Koothmadam, Down stair rest in puppeteers

## 29 Pallatheri tradition

Pazhaniyappan has the right to maintain the koothumadam. He is attached to two traditions such as Koonathara and pallatheri traditions.



Pazhaniyappan

## 30 Njangattiri traditions.

There were four puppeteers. Famous among them were Shanakanarayanan and Balan Nair. No surviving tradition bearers are available now.



Nhangattiri tradition has another feature . The performers conducts *Murukkipiriyal* ceremony to mark the conclusion of the seven day Koothu. Since there is no traditional bearers available now, Mr Viswanatha Pulavar is the performer now. He also conducts *murukki piriyaal* ceremony to settle disputes among the artistes, temple officials and other issues related to the festival.



K.Viswanatha Pulavar