

Historicizing Tolpavakuthu: A study with special reference to the Kavalappara family**Dr Pushpalatha K****Associate Professor****Department of History****NSS College Ottapalam****Abstract**

Tolpavakuthu, the traditional shadow puppet theatre of Kerala, represents a distinctive synthesis of ritual, performance, literature, visual art and community traditions. Traditionally performed in temple theatres known as *Kuthumadams*, the art form is closely associated with the worship of goddess Bhadrakali and is based primarily on episodes from the Ramayana. The performance involves leather puppets, narration, music, ritual practices and the coordinated efforts of the performers, making it an important component of Kerala's intangible cultural heritage. This paper examines the historical evolution, ritual context, performance structure, and cultural significance of *Tolpavakuthu*, with particular attention to the role of traditional performing communities and patronage networks in sustaining the art form. The study seeks to highlight the significance of Tolpavakuthu as a living cultural tradition and to understand the challenges involved in its preservation and transmission to future generations.

Keywords: Tolpavakuthu, shadow Puppetry, Kerala, Bhadrakali, Ramayana, kavu, Kuthumadam, kuthu

Tolpavakuth¹, or leather shadow Puppetry, represents an important ritual and performative tradition that has flourished in parts of Kerala from the medieval periods onwards. Its historical development has been closely intertwined with the patronage of particular landed families, through which the art acquired distinctive ritual, social, and cultural significance. This paper examines the historical relationship between *Tolpavakuthu* and the Kavalappara family², a prominent landed family of South Malabar. It investigates the nature of the family's patronage and examines how its association with the performance of *Tolpavakuthu* contributed to the family's ritual status and social prestige. At the same time, the paper seeks to historicize the emergence and development of *Tolpavakuthu* in Kerala by situating the tradition within the changing socio-political and cultural contexts of South Malabar. The study thus explores Tolpavakuthu not merely as a performing art, but as a cultural practice shaped by patronage, ritual authority, and local social structures.

Puppetry has been popular in various regions of the civilized world from a very early historical period. It was particularly popular in China and in the rural areas of China, where shadow Puppetry continues to be popular. Through trade relations and cultural contacts, Puppetry spread to different regions. The Shadow puppet was carried to Indonesia, Siam, India, etc. Kerala had commercial contacts with China from a very early period. These ancient trade and cultural connections may have played an important role in the transmission and development of Puppetry traditions in Kerala³.



In India, this traditional art form continues to flourish in several regions beyond Kerala, particularly in Maharashtra, Odisha, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. Although the tradition exhibits certain regional variations in its performance practices, nomenclature, and artistic expression, it retains its fundamental identity as a distinctive form of shadow-puppet theatre. In Karnataka, it is known as *Thogalu Gombi Aatta*, while in Andhra Pradesh, it is referred to as *Tholubommallatta*⁴. These regional manifestations highlight the geographical spread, cultural adaptability, and enduring significance of the shadow – Puppetry tradition in India.

In this visual art the characters of the play are presented in the form of leather puppets. The shadow of these puppets will be made fall on the white screen arranged on the stage. Actually as in the case of other Puppetries- it is the skill of the artist that is seen in the play. The puppet is merely an instrument for communication and entertainment. When it is begun to perform before an audience it is the puppeteer who actually works through this kind of instrument by which he communicates with the audience through the universal language of finger movements. A puppet is simply an inanimate object, and therefore it is the manipulator who particularly holds the responsibility of establishing the credibility of the medium and performance⁵.

In the *Pavakuthu* in Kerala the puppets are made of deer skin. The purified hide of the animal is cut into the shapes of the characters of the play and decorated with colors, pictures and holes to make the puppets. Artistic skill is needed to make beautiful puppets. The puppets themselves are art forms and very beautiful in appearance. While staging the Puppetry, the puppet is controlled with a small stick. The shadow puppet play is performed by making the shadows of the puppets fall on the screen in the stage. The curtain is made of white cotton cloths and is known as *Ayapudava*⁶.

Leather Puppetry has been popular in the Palakkad District of Kerala. It has been patronized by the feudal families. Its most important patron seems to have been the Kavalappara family which has been an important feudal ruling family of the area. The theme of the shadow plays the story of Ramayana as written by *Kambar*, the great Tamil poet. The Kavalappara family has its patron deity *Bhadrakali* in the Aryankavu temple in Ottappalam Taluk, Palakkad District. Puppet play is performed in order to propitiate this goddess to Aryankavu temple. The goddess is ferocious *Bhadrakali*. There are legends regarding the selection of this theme for *Tholpavakuthu*.

This legend is closely associated with the Puranic narrative of *Kali-Darika*. According to tradition, *Darika* was a powerful and wicked demon who tormented and ridiculed people without distinction. His cruel and oppressive actions caused great suffering among the people. In order to destroy *Darika*, Lord Siva created the goddess *Bhadrakali* from his third eye. *Bhadrakali* then sent out to confront the demon. A fierce battle ensued between *Bhadrakali* and *Darika*, which ultimately ended with the defeat and death of *Darika*. The fight between *Bhadrakali* and *Darika* took place simultaneously with the Rama-Ravana battle, in which Ravana was killed. Thus, *Bhadrakali* missed the opportunity to witness Ravana's death. To compensate for this, the encounter between Rama and Ravana is reenacted for *Bhadrakali* through *Tholpavakuthu* every year⁷. Thus, the central theme of the performance is the Ramayana. In Kerala, the puppets are modelled on *Kathakali* characters, and the performance is staged in several temples across Palakkad District. However, the complete narrative of the Ramayana is enacted only at the Aryankavu temple, which is under the

control of Kavalappara family⁸. This practice is regarded as a symbol of the ritual authority and supremacy exercised by the Kavalappara family over other subordinate and lesser feudal families in the region.

The institutions of feudalism and theocracy played a significant role in the political structure of medieval Kerala. The *Nambuthiries* constituted the priestly class and exercised considerable ritual and religious authority over the land and its people. They also enjoyed a privileged ritual status and were supported by the Nayar nobility in exercising control over and checking royal power⁹. The Kavalappara family has been a typical *Marumakkathayam Tharavadu* (a matrilineal joint family). The head or the *Karanavar* of the family is called *Mooppil Nayar*. The headquarters of this *taravad* is in the Kavalappara *desam* in the *Karakkat Amsom* of the former valluvanadu Taluk of South Malabar¹⁰.

The Kavalappara family established itself as a ruling family of chieftains following the fall of the *Perumals* of the Mahodayapuram. This family lost its independent status only in 1748 when the Zamorin attacked their domain¹¹. For a period it was under the Rajas of Palaghat and for some time under the Rajas of Cochin¹². In 1776 the family was under the control of the Raja of Cochin¹³. The Kavalappara Mooppil Nayar was a *Naduvazhi* but he also enjoyed the powers and privileges of *Desavazhi* in several villages¹⁴. The family lost its independence during the period of the Mysorean occupation. After the fall of Tippu Sultan the English East India company reinstated the Nayar in his former position but as a subordinate landlord of the Company.

Leather Puppetry may be regarded as a significant cultural expression that emerged from the historical and cultural expression that emerged from the historical and cultural intermingling of Tamil and Malayalam traditions. The Palakkad region, situated at the cultural interface between Tamil Nadu and Kerala, exhibits a distinctive synthesis of these two traditions. It is within this culturally diverse milieu that leather Puppetry has flourished as an important ritual and performative tradition. In the region, Puppetry is primarily performed as a sacred ritual in *Devi* temples, where it forms an integral part of the temple's ritual practices and cultural heritage¹⁵.

The puppet performance is preceded by a ritual known as *Kelikottu*, which marks the formal commencement of the performance. It is a band music using the instrument of *Chenda*, *Madhalam* and *Elathalam*. It is like an announcement of the beginning of the play. It will be followed by the *Ganapathi pooja*. After this there would be the *vandhanasloka* or priority songs for saluting *Ganapathi*, *Saraswathi* and *Narayana*. The play will begin with the *vanakkam* or salutation which will be performed by children characters. *Vanakkam* is also called *Pattupavakali*. This is followed by ritual salutations to the teachers and the ceremonial worship of the deity, performed by the puppeteers. Following this there will be an oration called *Akavan*¹⁶. After this the theme of the play would be explained. There will also be *Sadhyavazhathal* in praise of the person who conducts the play of that day as an offering to the temple. The expenses for the play of each day would be borne by certain persons or families as an offering to the temple. Then the story of the play will be begun¹⁷.

The *Pavakuthu* is performed in the *Kavus* or temples of *Bhagavati* only. The stage for this puppet play is called *kuthumadam*. The *Kuthumadam* will be 42 feet in length and 12 feet height. The three sides of the stage will be closed. The building of the *Kuthumadam* itself shows artistic and scientific skill in construction. The *Kuthumadam* is also called *Nalapathiradi kalari* (Kalari of 42 feet)¹⁸.



The *Kuthumadam* may best be conceived as the stage part of an open air theatre with the spectators squatting in the front. It may be a masonry structure with a tiled roof but most often it is a temporary shed put up for the occasion¹⁹. The *Kuthumadam* will be completely draped in front, from the floor to the eaves, the upper part in white and lower in black curtain. It will be outside the temple. At a time when temple entry was not allowed to the members of the lower castes, this facilitated people of all castes to come and see the performance. The figurine puppets are attached behind the white screen and held them in position by fixing them with pins or thorn spikes of *Karamullu*²⁰. Below the figures and just above the black curtain is arranged a long row of lamps. The light of the lamps bright up the white screen on which are disposed the figures. The lights employed are either small pottery basin lamps in a long bamboo grove, each lamp fixed in a spat of clay or coconut shell, each serving as a lamp arranged on a long plank²¹.

The staging of shadow Puppetry in certain temples in the erstwhile Valluvanadu marks the beginning of festivals in the area. It starts with the staging of the same on the first Tuesday of the month of *Makaram* (January-February) in the Puthanakkal *Bhagavati* temple of Cheruplasseri²². The *Pavakuthu* would be from 11 o'clock in the night to the dawn. In certain temples of the locality the Puppetry will be staged for 14 days²³. In the temples other than Aryankavu temple the full story will begin only from *Panchavadi*. In the Kavalappara Aryankavu temple the full story from the birth of Sree Rama to his coronation is enacted²⁴. This is privilege and monopoly of Kavalappara family people will not question it. The supremacy once enjoyed by the Kavalappara family continued to be a ritual supremacy even after the decline of the Kavalappara family as a feudal landlord. It will last for forty one days. The performance of this art form is a token of the ritual status of the feudal and ruling family of Kavalappara. The physical presence of the members of the family, the rights and privileges enjoyed by them in the temple, and the performance the *Pavakuthu* etc. make the people aware of the supreme status of the family even after the abolition of feudalism and the decline of this feudal house. Even now the right to light the lamp in the *Kuthumadam* of Aryankavu temple is exclusively enjoyed by the Kavalappara family.

Legends show that the Kavalappara family has been responsible for the introduction of the Puppetry in the area. Once the Raja of Kollamgod at Palakkad came to have no heirs. Then as an offering goddess he conducted *Pavakuthu* at the *Bhagavati* temple Purattiyar and Pailoor in Palakkad District under his patronage. For forty one days the *Pavakuthu* was conducted following this he was blessed with a child and it was believed that it was the result of propitiating the goddess through conducting the *Pavakuthu*. Once the Kavalappara Mooppil Nayar also came to have no heirs. Then as per the advice of the Raja, the Mooppil Nayar arranged for the performance of *Pavakuthu* in the Aryankavu temple. This had the desired effect. Then the Kavalappara Nayar approached the *poonthur sangam* of *Tolpavakuthu* artists and asked them to come and settle down in his area for staging the Puppetry regularly in the temples of his realm.

These artists came from Tamil speaking areas and were *Saiva Vellallars*. They were traders and used to accompany the *vaishnavaites* also. In the wake of their travels they would stay in the premises of temples at night. They would recite Ramayanam songs as *Adalpattu*. The story contained in the songs would be enacted as *Pavakuthu* in which the puppets were made of palm leaf. It was in a later period that the puppets came to be made of the skin of deer. Thus they came and

settled at Koonathara near Ottapalam in Palakkad District. This artists continued to be supported and patronized by Kavalappara Moopil Nayar. Through the year the conducting of this art form became a matter of prestige for the Kavalappara family. These artists used to perform the *Kuthu* in the other temples of the area also ²⁵.

The families of these artists were supported by the Kavalappara family. In effect this art form became a medium for expression the prominent status of the Kavalappara family in the area. In the beginning of the puppet play the artists recite poems praising its patron ²⁶. The community of *Pavakuthu* artists in called *Pulavar* means Scholar. The *Pulavar* scholars composed poems by themselves in order to praise their patron. Thus it was a sort of advertisement and acknowledgement of the supremacy of the chieftain in the area the Kavalappara family. As noted before the right of having the whole story of Ramayana upto *Pattabhishekam* is enacted only in the Aryankavu temple under the control of the Kavalappara family. For staging the Ramayana story 120 puppets are needed. The Kavalappara family has their own puppets for such performance.

The *Pavakuthu* in the Aryankavu temple is scheduled to begun on the first day of the month of *Meenam* (March-April). Now the entire expenses for the performance of the *kuthu* on that day is borne the senior lady of the Kavalappara family ²⁷. This right is enjoyed by them as a monopoly. Any other person belonging to any other family can not conduct *kuthu* on that day even if he wished it respecting and fearing the divine sanction which is believes to be behind it. The rites conducted with the *kuthu* of the 9th day also is a monopoly of the family. The expenses for the *Niramala* (decoration of the temple with garlands) on that day will be met by a junior member of the family. The right of conducting the functions of the 18th day is the exclusive right of Moopil Nayar, the head of Kavalappara family ²⁸.

On all days the functions connected with the *kuthu* started from the sunset. The puppets will be carried along with *Nagaswaram, Thayambaka, Kelikai, kombu pattu, Madhala pattu* and other forms of Orchestra to the stage. Orchestra will continue up to the time of the entrance to the *Kuthumadam* and it will be by 10 o'clock at night. The procession comprising certain temple functionaries led by the Oracle, circumambulates the temple three times. This is followed by their entry into the *Kuthumadam*. The oracle will bless the stage and ensure that he will see that the *kuthu* will be conducted successfully with all paraphernalia. All the instruments for the band music that have been carrying in the procession would be placed before the *Kuthumadam*.

As noted before it is the special right of the Aryankavu temple to have the *kuthu* conducted for forty one days from the very incarceration of lord Sree Rama to his coronation and it was because Aryankavu was the abode of the tutelage deity of Kavalappara family. If the story performed in the play extends only up to the entry into *Panchavadi*, twenty-one days will be sufficient. The *kuthu* in all temples will end with Sree Rama *Pattabhishekam*. On the final day, a grand festival is held ²⁹. Such a division of the lengthy story into separate segments helped facilitate the financial management of the performance.

At the zenith of his power the entire play for forty one days was conducted under the auspices of Kavalappara family ³⁰. The performers were patronized by the family. The right to perform *Pavakuthu* belonged to the community of *Pulavar*. They include the money in the form of *Chattupanam*

,*Pathupanam* etc, which were given in the form of offerings. The public also would make offerings in connection with *Tolpavakuthu*. They are meant for the betterment of their agricultural forms, cattle poultry farm etc, and for the general progress of the family. The cost of an offering varies from Rs.3000/- to Rs 4000/-. The money goes in favor of the artist of *Tholpavakuthu*³¹. The devotees would give *dakshina* also in the form of money to the artist. Even now the *Pavakuthu* is the traditional occupation of the *Pulavar*.

The conversation in the play will be in the form of songs. In the beginning it will be like the *Allarippu* song of *Bharathanatyam*. The poems will be sung after the model of *thrivaimozhi*. There are clear references to *chilapathikaram* in the play which denotes the influence of Tamil culture. In South East Asian countries also the theme of the play is *Ramayanam*³². The leather Puppetry is intimately connected with the beginning of the drama and the evolution of stage performance in Kerala. Some of the outstanding artists of leather Puppetry are Koonathara Krishnan kutty Pulavar, U. Sankara Narayanan, Koonathara Pazhanikutty Pulavar, Nadesa Mundali and Sankaran Ezhuthassan³³. These artists are known for their outstanding proficiency in singing and explaining the story. They have performed this art form in many foreign countries.

The patronage of *Tolpavakuthu* is a special feature of the Kavalappara family. In the case of many a landlord of South Malabar, it was the *Kathakali* that was patronized by them. In the case of Northern Kerala it was *teyyam*. The feudal family of Koodali in North Kerala enjoyed certain exclusive rights and privileges in connection with the performance of *teyyam* in the Koodali *kavu*³⁴.

In brief the land owning family of Kavalappara enjoyed its ritual and economic status through establishing its superiority through the control of Aryankavu temple. The performance of puppetry was also carried out to establish superiority over other landlords and tenants of the region. Here one could see the interrelationship with temple and land monopoly. The epics like *Ramayana* was also used for authority over tenants and others. The exclusive right of the entire performance enjoyed by the family helped them to retain the ritual as well as the superior status. Even after the decline of the landlordism, in the rural areas such ritual superiority of the former landlords continued as on in a historical past.

Notes and References

- 1 In Malayalam *Tol* means leather, *Pava* means Puppet and *Kuthu* means play.
- 2 Kavalappara family has been an important feudal ruling family of South Malabar, in Palakkad District, which has been a feudatory of both Cochin Raja and the Palaghat Raja.
- 3 M S Raghavan, *Folk Plays and Dances of Kerala*, The Rama Varma Archaeological Society, Trissur, 1122/1947, p.37
- 4 G Venu, "Tolpavakuthu", Malika Sarabhai. et al (ed), *Performing Arts of Kerala*, Ahmedabad, 1994, p.1163
- 5 Shyam Parmar, *Traditional Folk Media in India*, New Delhi, 1975, p.42

6 K K Ramachandra Pulavar, "Tolpavakuthu", Suresh Babu .A R (ed), *Kaali sangalpam Kerala Parisarathil*, Kerala Folklore Academy, Kannur, 2004,p.219

7 G Venu ,*op.cit*, p.1163

8 Chummar Chundal, " Moonu Naden Kalaroopangal" (Malayalam) ,*Mathrubhumi weekly*, Annual number, Calicut, 1977,p.142

9 P K S Raja ,*Medieval Kerala*, Calicut, 1956.p.VIII.

10 For details see K K N Kurup (ed), *Kavalappara Papers*, Calicut University Historical Series, No.1 ,University of Calicut ,1984,Introduction.

11 *Ibid*.

12 *Ibid*, p.xiii.

13 *Ibid* ,Document No. 16

14 *Desam* was the smallest unit of administration as far as revenue collection was concerned *Nadu* was a larger unit than the *Desam* . For details see M R Raghava Varier, *Village Community in Pre-colonial Kerala* ,New Delhi,1994,p.8

15 P Govindhan Mathoor,*Kerala Vinjana Kosham*, Thiruvananthapuram, 1987,p.905

16 Chummar Chundal,*op.cit*,p.141

17 *Ibid*.

18 *Ibid* .

19 M D Raghavan, *op.cit*,p.38

20 *Ibid*.

21 *Ibid*,p. 31

22 P Govindhan Mathoor,*op.cit*,p.905

23 P C Kartha ,*Acharanushtanakosham*, Kottayam, 1998,p.307

24 K K N Kurup, *op.cit*,p.xiv

25 Interview with K K Ramachandra Pulavar, famous *Tolpavakuthu* artist

26 K L Krishnan Kutty Pulavar, *Tolpavakuthu.The Traditional Shadow Puppet Play of Kerala*,Vol.1 ,Trichur,1987,p.14

27 Chummar Chundal, *op.cit*,P.142

28 Interview with K K Ramachandra Pulavar, *op.cit*.

29 Chummar Chundal, *op.cit*,p.142

30 *Ibid*

31 K K N Kurup, *op.cit*, Document No.46,p.51

32 Chummar Chundal, *op.cit*,p.142

33 *Ibid*

34 K K N Kurup (ed), *Koodali Grandhavari*, Calicut University Historical Series No.4, Calicut University, 1995, Document No.1, Section A, p.1.