

# KUTIYATTAM: UNESCO PROCLAMATION AND THE CHANGE IN INSTITUTIONAL MODEL AND PATRONAGE

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*On 24 May 2000, I hired a taxi to go to watch a Kutiyattam performance, something I had been doing periodically. But today the taxi driver looked at me differently. "Oh you are going to watch the Kutiyattam performance. You know it has won UNESCO recognition!" The taxi driver, who had apparently never seen a performance himself or heard about Kutiyattam before, was proudly informing me that Kutiyattam has won world recognition! Kerala, which prides itself on its hundred percent literacy and has a population that reads newspapers and watches television, seems to have noticed its own art form after the UNESCO news...<sup>1</sup>*

What does the future hold for Kutiyattam? Situated in the twenty-first century, how does one deal with an art that has claims of going back two millennia, and has a recorded history of more than twelve centuries? With its moorings in a strictly sacred tradition and confined to the temple complex, Kutiyattam was not accessible to anyone other than the "higher" caste communities in Kerala until a few decades back. Additionally, its highly complex theater grammar and deliberately slow dramatic action demand a viewership responsive to the intricacies of its enactment and adapted to leisurely relishing and slow assimilation. It took a long time for Kutiyattam to open its doors to the outside world. However, change was needed, and now it is no longer an esoteric domain of a restricted group of people. It was not easy for Kutiyattam, the Sanskrit theater of India, to gain acceptance and recognition of theater lovers across the world in a fast-changing environment.

This paper restricts itself to the shift in patronage systems in Kutiyattam from the late nineteen

nineties and the initiatives for its revitalization after the UNESCO Proclamation. Revolutionary changes started happening in Kutiyattam from the second half of the twentieth century. The introduction of an institutional model of training with the opening of a department at *Kalamandalam* in 1965 transformed the traditional mode of *gurukula sampradaya*, the practice of the disciple learning the art by staying at his master's house and painstakingly imbibing the skills. With more and more people from other castes joining the institutions to take it up as a profession, the art had by and large ceased to be the preserve of the Chakyar families. The three established schools of Kutiyattam by the early eighties—*Kerala Kalamandalam* in Cheruthuruthy, *Margi* in Thiruvananthapuram and *Ammannur Chachu Chakyar Smaraka Gurukulam* in Irinjalakkuda—while incorporating changes in the pedagogy to suit the demands of a new generation of actors and viewers, have tried to retain the traditional content of Kutiyattam. These schools have come to be established as three *sampradayas* and have opened up new possibilities for the art form. Government and its agencies such as the *Sangeet Natak Akademi* stepped in with initiatives in recent years to encourage and support Kutiyattam. There are sponsors, though few, from the non-government sectors in Kerala, such as temple administrations and other private trusts. Over the years, the unique theater language of classical theater in Kerala has caught the attention of scholars and theater people from all parts of the world. In recent times, cross-cultural studies have revitalized interest in classical theaters such as Kutiyattam, serving as routes to the discovery of tradition, leading sociologists and theater scholars to search deep into roots of "classicization".

By the early nineties, *Sangeet Natak Akademi* had come up with a restoration plan, recognizing the importance of preservation of artistic traditions that appear to be threatened by the ever-changing socio-economic environment, and its possible loss to posterity. The plan comprised strategies to ensure the transmission of Kutiyattam through revitalizing the *guru-shishya parampara*, providing economic sustenance to the artistes, and creating performance opportunities. For achieving this, the *Akademi* made *Margi* and *Ammannur Gurukulam* its grant-in-aid institutions, the former primarily as a repertory providing ongoing performances of Kutiyattam and the latter as a training institution to create a new generation of actors. Financial assistance was also provided to P.K. Narayanan Nambiar, the *mizhavu* maestro, for training students in *mizhavu*. At a time when the financial resources and internal capacities of these organizations were minimal, the Kutiyattam Scheme of the *Sangeet Natak Akademi* was a major boost to the revitalization of the art form. By the late nineties, new centers exclusively devoted to Kutiyattam mushroomed in Kerala. Among them, the *Padmasri Mani Madhava Chakyar Smaraka Gurukulam* started functioning in the memory of the late master-performer Mani Madhava Chakyar and concentrated mainly on giving intensive training in *mizhavu*. The *International Centre for Kutiyattam* in Thrippunithura, established in 1995, directed its efforts in improving access to the art by organizing short-term foundation courses and conducting classes on Kutiyattam. It took Kutiyattam to schools and colleges across Kerala and other places in the country for lecture-demonstrations and performances.

In 2000, a unique opportunity was created with UNESCO starting a new initiative called the “Intangible Cultural Heritage” and within it, a program for proclaiming outstanding forms of cultural expression as the collective heritage of the world. In view of the great awareness across the world for the urgent need to safeguard and preserve intangible cultural expressions, UNESCO created the Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity. The aim was to encourage governments, NGOs and local communities to identify, preserve and

promote their intangible heritage. It was also intended to encourage individuals, groups, institutions and organizations to make outstanding contributions to managing, preserving, protecting and promoting the intangible heritage.

The information regarding the new initiative by UNESCO reached the world of Kutiyattam by chance. In late 1999, as Vice President of Margi, I led a performance tour of the Margi troupe to Paris at the invitation of *Mandapa*, an organization run by Milena Salvini. Watching the performances of Painkulam Rama Chakyar along with his young students of the Kalamandalam Kutiyattam School including Rama Chakyar, Sivan Namboothiri, Girija and Shylaja had awakened my interest in Kutiyattam from the early seventies. In those days, I had the opportunity to see performances at the Margi Kutiyattam School, interact with scholars like D. Appukkuttan Nair and observe great practitioners at work, including the great Painkulam Rama Chakyar (Senior) and Ammannur Madhava Chakyar. Through the visit of the Margi troupe to Paris, we made contact with UNESCO, which was in the process of developing the program of Intangible Cultural Heritage and the Proclamation of select cultural expressions as supreme examples of world heritage. Margi took the initiative to put together a nomination dossier.<sup>2</sup> Fielded by the Government of India, Kutiyattam was selected by an international jury along with eighteen other expressions of heritage from across the world, and proclaimed a “Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity” in May 2001.

The resurgence of Kutiyattam gained momentum with the UNESCO recognition. At the regional level, new initiatives were planned to safeguard the art form and make it available to a wider community of people. Performance opportunities increased, as did its cultural value. Shortly after the announcement of the recognition, the Kutiyattam community came together, perhaps for the first time in history, to address the issue of its revitalization. In spite of financial constraints, there is a renewed energy among artistes in applying themselves to new and creative projects. The three major schools—*Kerala Kalamandalam*, *Margi* and *Ammannur Gurukulam*—directed their efforts to creating new

productions, reviving earlier plays and developing new choreographies. For example, Margi revived Kulasekhar's *Subhadradhananjayam* (Act II), while Ammannur Gurukulam choreographed Kalidasa's play *Sakuntalam*.

One of the more important results of recognition is the establishment of more institutions dedicated to the pursuance and teaching of Kutiyattam in Kerala. *Painkulam Ramachakyar Smaraka Gurukulam* in Painkulam, *Mani Madhava Chakyar Gurukulam* in Lakkidi, *Pothiyil Gurukulam* in Kottayam, the *Krishnan Nambiar Smaraka Mizhavu Kalari* by V.K.K. Hariharan and Usha Nangiar, *Nepathya* by Margi Madhu and Indu G., and *Koppu Nirmana Kendram* in Vellinezhi (dedicated to the carpentry of costumes) are new centers playing a big role in the consolidation and propagation of the tradition of Kutiyattam by training a new generation of students, reviving old choreographies, codifying new ones and transmitting the art through performances and lecture-demonstrations across the country.

After the Proclamation, UNESCO made a comprehensive action plan through the Japan-Funds-in-Trust for the revitalization of Kutiyattam. As part assistance for the ten-year action plan projected in the nomination dossier, it sought to support and consolidate the network of Kutiyattam practitioners and to ensure its continued safeguarding. UNESCO identified the following objectives: assist intangible cultural heritage custodians and practitioners in their efforts to safeguard and transmit this heritage to future generations and to target young audiences and potential performers; assist and support the creation of a network of Kutiyattam institutions involved in the preservation of this art form; foster further academic research and publish texts and audio-visual documentation; assist in establishing a centralized archive and library on Kutiyattam and raise awareness of young people in the local community of the important role they should play in ensuring the maintenance of their cultural heritage and also within Indian society at large.

The UNESCO project sought to support local practitioners from the six Kutiyattam schools and institutions located in Kerala. This involved organizing training courses, performances, lecture-demonstrations and workshops, Kutiyattam festivals

and an international seminar. The promotion of performances was directed at bringing together artistes from the major schools of Kutiyattam on a common platform. Other efforts included making traditional theater houses available for public performances, conducting annual workshops with the participation of all the schools, and providing refresher courses for all the artistes and students from Kutiyattam institutions. Furthermore, the project emphasized the improvement of research facilities in the six institutions, with the creation of Academic Resource Centers in the schools. It envisaged the setting up of a centralized archive and library with cataloguing and electronic storage facilities to maintain the literature, documents, performance manuals and audio-video material on Kutiyattam. Other initiatives planned were the holding of seminars, bringing out publications including new research, translations of manuscripts, and original writings on Kutiyattam. A program of Documentation of Masters Series was directed towards the audio-visual documentation of distinctive artistic styles and techniques of the master-performers of Kutiyattam. To put these comprehensive plans into practice, UNESCO identified two forms of assistance. The first was for supporting and facilitating the creation of the network (representatives of six institutions engaged in safeguarding Kutiyattam) and for sustaining its activities for the preservation, conservation and dissemination of Kutiyattam Sanskrit Theater. It also recommended tapping private and public sources of funding at the local, regional and national level with a view to creating a Kutiyattam Fund. The other program sought to sustain the specific needs, such as the ongoing activities of the six institutions of the network, to enable them to safeguard and transmit their art. Within the resources allocated from the Japan Funds-in Trust Scheme, financial assistance was given to individual institutions (Kalamandalam, Margi, Ammannoor Gurukulam, Mani Madhava Chakyar Gurukulam, International Centre for Kutiyattam and the Department of Ancient Theater in Sree Sankara University) for activities ranging from the upgrading of infrastructure facilities, production choreography of new plays based on existing texts, and organizing training programs/lecture-demonstrations performances to outreach activities and documentation.

A comprehensive action plan was also evolved at the national level to revitalize Kutiyattam by ensuring its financial support and sustenance. An Intangible Heritage Fund was created and, through this, funds were channeled. A budget line (head) was created in the Ministry of Culture as the Intangible Heritage Fund to give support to Indian art forms declared by UNESCO as the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity. Under this head, a series of activities leading to the promotion of Kutiyattam were budgeted. The Tenth Five Year Plan of India set aside resources for the revitalization of Kutiyattam. One of the most significant developments was that, in the National Budget for 2006, the Minister for Finance, Government of India, announced a special provision for the cultural expressions declared as Masterpieces by UNESCO. The announcement said: "I am happy to inform the House that Kutiyattam, Vedic Chanting and Ramlila have been declared 'Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity' by UNESCO. These old art forms and oral traditions need to be safeguarded. Pending drawing up a detailed scheme, I propose to make an initial provision of Rs. 5 crore [Rs. 50 million] in 2006-07."

The action plan outlined by the Ministry of Culture, Government of India envisaged financial support for reviving old plays and choreographing new productions; promotion of performance opportunities, training and consolidation through *guru-shisya parampara*; visual documentation and research; organization of outreach activities in educational institutions as well as seminars, festivals and publishing books. The fund for Kutiyattam was subsequently transferred to the *Sangeet Natak Akademi* and as a development of its earlier project, the Akademi started *Kutiyattam Kendra: National Centre for Kutiyattam* in Thiruvananthapuram in 2006. Some of its objectives are the preservation and creative growth of Kutiyattam; the creation of an informed audience and *rasikas*; providing a platform for discussion and exchange of concepts among

gurus, artistes and scholars; sponsoring training, as well as performance opportunities; encouraging research in affiliated theatrical traditions; maintaining the genealogy of families of Chakyars and Nambiars; and supporting traditional families and the conservation of traditional theaters. There are provisions for infrastructural support to all the existing institutions, annual grants, and performance subsidies, monthly remuneration of each artiste in all the institutions, scholarships to students, research and publication grants, as well as dissemination activities such as the organization of Kutiyattam festivals. The *National Centre for Kutiyattam* now serves as a platform to address matters relating to Kutiyattam in a wide-ranging manner and to ensure its sustenance.

When we look at Kutiyattam in the context of the modern world, an ambivalent picture emerges. The incentives and various programs instituted by the government and its agencies like the *Sangeet Natak Akademi* has "re-established" and institutionalized the art form. There is an increased interest in Kutiyattam among theater lovers across the world, and there are positive benefits such as more performance opportunities, a rise in the number of students learning the art and in institutions for imparting training, re-inventing old texts and choreographies, and more documentation and increased coverage in the media leading to what may



Photo Courtesy: H. Moser

Uṣa Nāṅṅār performing Nāṅṅār-Kūttu in the kūtampalam of the Vaṭakkunāthan temple (Tālam: Aparṇṇa Nāṅṅār, Mīlāvu: Nārāyaṇa Nampyār); Trṣṣūr, 17.08.1995.

be called a resurgence. With the increase in funding and creative opportunities there is a revitalization of interest in this art form. Kutiyattam today is well known across the world of theater internationally, and some degree of sustainable income for the Kutiyattam performer has made her/him less vulnerable. However, change in a predominantly traditional art such as Kutiyattam does not always lead only to positive results, for as the speed of life increases there are some inevitable challenges to the traditional ways of its practice and performance. With the introduction of school-based learning and the mushrooming of institutions catering to a wide, disparate group of students (including school students who come to train themselves for one-time events like school competitions) there is a general, perceived decrease in the high-quality training that was once accorded in this traditional art form through individualized training or *guru-shishya*

*parampara*. The intensive, long drawn-out *abhinaya*, which is the hallmark of Kutiyattam, has given way to the depiction of dramatically effective scenes of shorter duration. The introduction of financial support for newer choreographies has compelled almost every actor to turn into a choreographer, and as a result, new plays and newer interpretations of existing plays have surged across the field, perhaps not always with positive results. It is now a challenge for Kutiyattam to find a fine balance leading to the integration of traditional expertise and its adaptation to the needs of today.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Diane Daugherty, a scholar who worked on Kutiyattam for several years, in conversation with me.

<sup>2</sup> Adoor Gopalakrishnan did the video documentation of Kutiyattam and Sudha Gopalakrishnan prepared the nomination dossier on behalf of Margi. ❁

