

Notes on the Restoration of a Temple Theatre for Sanskrit Drama

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Restoration and Rediscovery

The great temple theatre, or *kuttambalam*,¹ for the ritual performance of Kutiyattam Sanskrit drama in the Vatakkunnathan temple in the city of Trichur, Kerala, has recently undergone a partial restoration, a task which will be fully completed within the next few years.

In recent years there have been occasional performances of Kutiyattam outside of Kerala in cities such as Madras, New Delhi, Banaras and Bombay. Thus the art-conscious public now has some familiarity with this authentic art of Sanskrit theatre which has survived in Kerala. With increasing interest have come a few new published articles on the subject; however, little so far has been reported concerning the theatres specially built for Kutiyattam during the thousand years or more of the history of the Chakyars' art of Sanskrit drama.

The temple theatres now standing are datable only to the late medieval period; however, it is a proven fact that they follow the canonical injunctions of the *shastras*. What is even more significant is that they are acoustically perfect, logical, architectural solutions to the requirements of the theatre tradition which they serve and its cultural and climatic environment. Above all, they are beautiful structures, to be ranked with the finest theatre architecture of any nation.

In recognition of the need for fundamental research and preservation of such rare and unprotected arts, the Smithsonian Institution recently provided the means to assist in the restoration of the Vatakkunnathan *kuttambalam*, one of the major temple theatres for Kutiyattam Sanskrit drama. The undertaking was carried out on a cooperative basis with the Cochin Devaswom Board, furthering the work of their temple restoration program. The Cochin Devaswom Board is one of the few local institutions which have taken steps to preserve the heritage of medieval temple theatre architecture in Kerala.

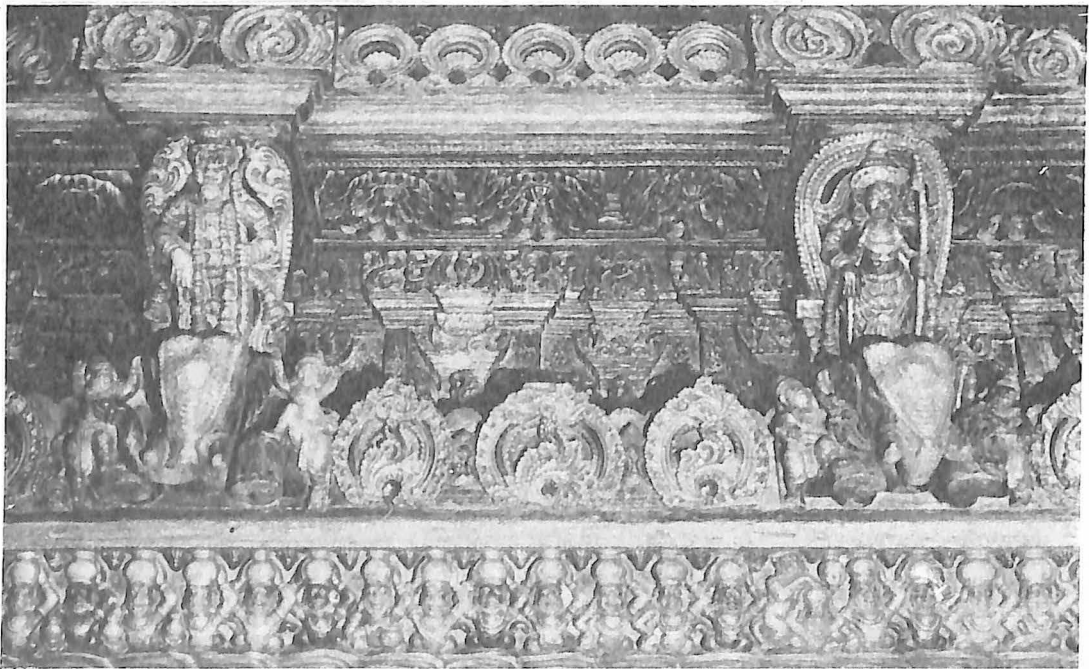
The *ranga mandapa*, or stage pavilion, was given priority and work began on the considerable task of removing the heavy layers of soot that covered the inner ceiling above the stage. This soot is an inevitable result of the use of the *vilakku*, an oil wick-lamp, for lighting the performance.

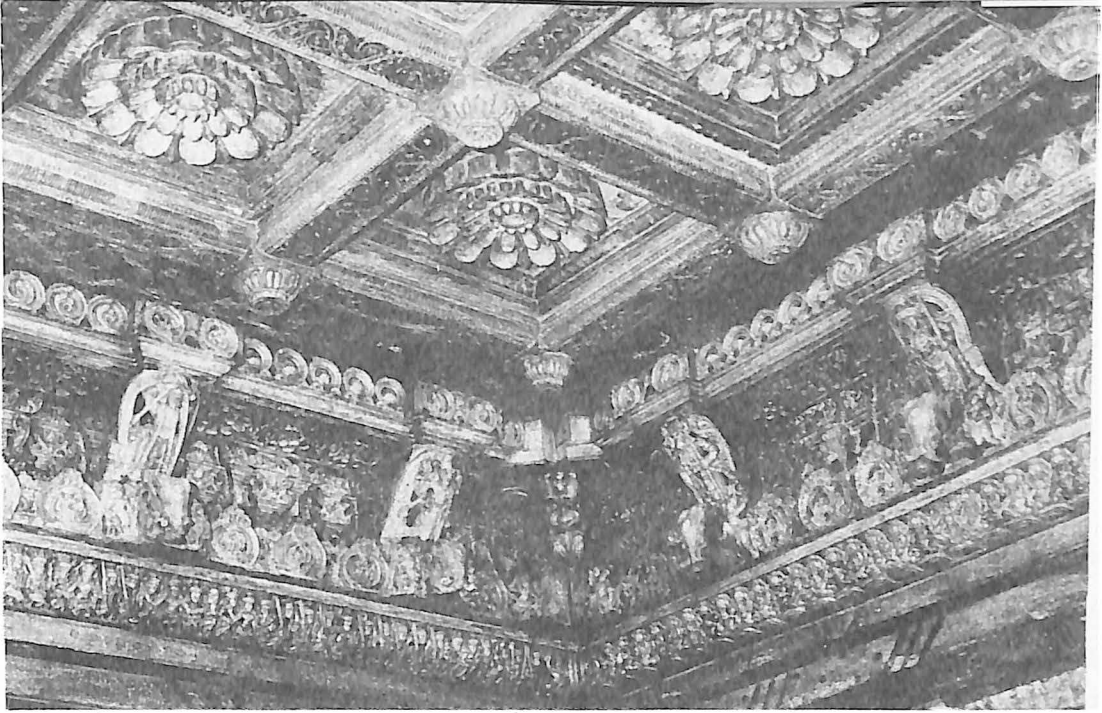
¹ *Kuttambalam* is also spelt as *Koothampalam*.

After a full week of continuous cleaning, the elaborately carved ceiling began to emerge, revealing a fully polychromed inner entablature of teak-wood, replete with carved narrative reliefs of such epic and puranic subjects as the Coronation of Sri Rama, the Churning of the Ocean of Milk, royal battle scenes, etc. Above these were revealed thirty-two carved brackets with engaged sculptures of Gods and heroes, among them the ten *avatars* of Vishnu, a series of four figures depicting the characters in the story of Kiratarjuniyam, and independent figures of Sri Lakshmi, Parasurama, Narada, Mahavishnu, Bhagavati, Siva, and Hanuman. The ceiling and additional architectural courses are executed in floral and abstract patterns. In the very center of the coffered ceiling, a red lotus is carved in the middle of nine designated squares representing the Dikpalas, or guardians of the directions. The red lotus here is symbolic of the Creator Deity Brahma who presides over the stage at the center of his reflected creation. The pigments used in the painting are hand-ground mineral and vegetable colors in a range from rich earth reds and olive greens to brilliant orange, vermillion, and golden yellows.

The now fully revealed seventeenth century ceiling is clearly of an earlier period than the last recorded restoration of the theatre, which occurred late in the last century. The excellence of the craftsmanship in carving and the nearly completely preserved painting is very rare. Unfortunately, the painted ceilings of other temple theatres, at the Kudalmanikkam temple, at the Guruvayur temple, and at several other temples, have been almost completely destroyed.

Carved brackets and decorative and narrative courses. The lowermost panel depicts priests carrying pots of holy water to the coronation of Sri Rama.





A corner of the carved ceiling of the mandapa over the stage.

Two important parts of the final work on the stage were the restoration of the damaged copper *stupika*, or finial, above the roof of the stage, and the complete cleaning and polishing of the twelve magnificent pillars supporting the carved ceiling above the stage. The pillars are turned and lacquered in brilliant red-orange with the color and polished surface of a winter persimmon. Fully revealed in their brilliance from beneath layers of grime, the pillars now give an architectural illusion which seems to enlarge the stage area. Further, the lamp light reflected upon the pillars at night during a performance echo and complement the vibrant red-orange of *tecci* garlands which are a part of the traditional costume of the actors and actresses.

By carefully making tests for vestiges of the earlier painting, the *adhishthana* or socle of the stage was successfully repainted in the same type of flat water-based resinous pigments as the original, and in the original colors. The combination of velvety painted surfaces with the high polish of the lacquered pillars in pure unadorned geometric forms, contrasting against the ornate, highly articulated and richly painted and carved ceiling, is a lesson in traditional aesthetic taste and sensibility. This is a feature too often missing in traditional classical theatre performances today. The perfect balance of the architectural elements, with their rich contrasting color accents, creates the perfect spatial environment, degree by degree, in preparation for the more ornate, embellished, and gilded costumes of the actors in the drama.

This restoration of at least a part of the elegance of the traditional environment of the classical stage is but a beginning. There are other temple theatres in Kerala, some older and even more elegantly carved and embellished, which today stand neglected, slowly disintegrating for want of repair. It need not be so. The informed and discriminating patronage of

the past can continue if a truly concerned and sensitive audience can be reached.

A Royal Inscription

The reconstruction of the Vatakkunnathan temple theatre, one of the most massive in plan and ambitious in execution, was last undertaken at the end of the nineteenth century, which marks the transition from an era of traditional royal patronage into the changing period of modern Indian society in Kerala.

The inscription relating to this reconstruction, the latest so far discovered relating to the construction of temple theatres in Kerala, is found in the *kuttambalam* itself. It is located on the base of the first main pillar to the right of the southern entrance to the temple theatre. Its style is, for such a late date, an anachronism which gives it even greater interest as a kind of commentary on the end of an era. The inscription is in Sanskrit for the first two lines and heavily Sanskritized Malayalam for the last two lines.

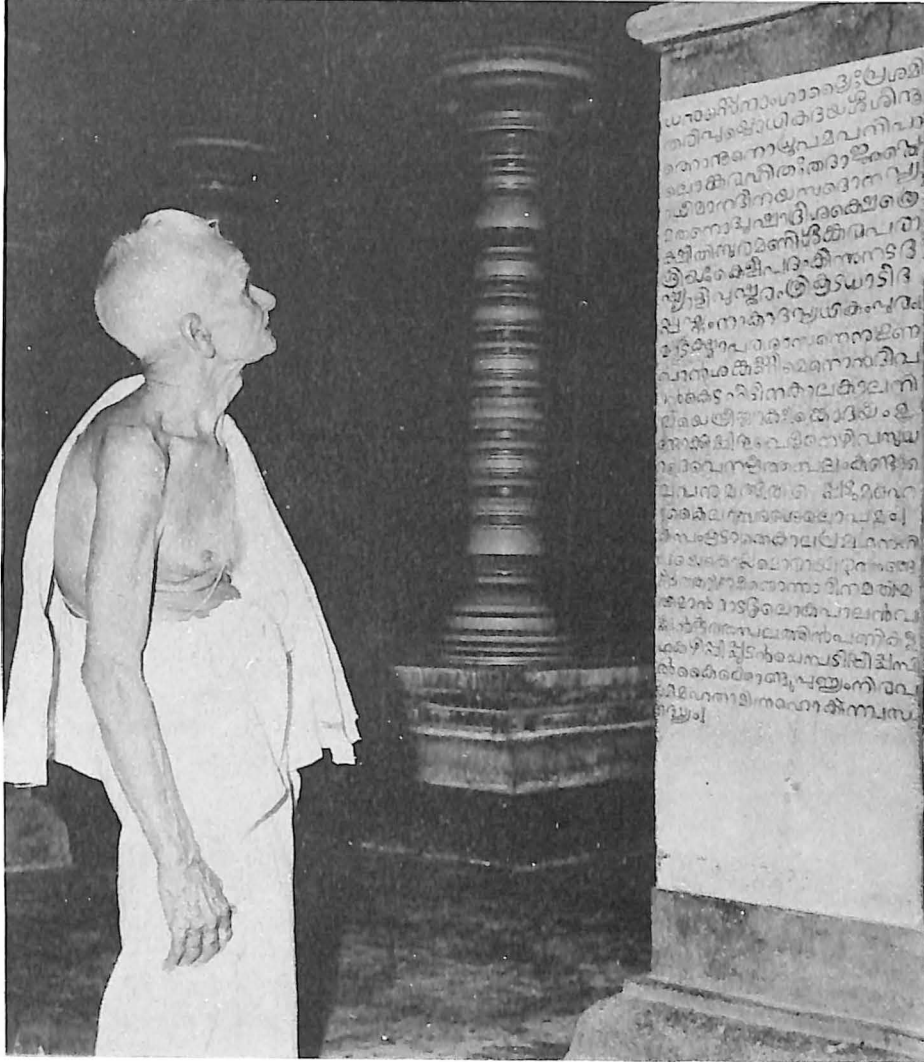
Translation:

The merciful protector of the earth, who like the unwaning moon is without blemish, by whom enemies are destroyed with bow and (the four) limbs of the army, ordered the new theatre to be made in the temple of Vatakkunnathan by the wise gem among the Brahmanas devoted to the Lord Sankara.

This castle, is it not like a playground of the Goddess of Prosperity; a lotus for the actor's beetle-like eyes; which destroys the pride of Trikuta (the triple-peaked mountain)? It is even greater than the heavens.

By order of the King of Cochin, the virtuous Divan Sankunni Menon, with pleasure caused a *kuttambalam* without fault to be built by the Velanezhi Brahmana in the perfect abode of Siva. Anyone who beholds it (will exclaim) with wonder: Ah! (It is) like the Kailasa mountain!

In the abode of Siva (the Destroyer of Time) on the first day of the Kollam Era 1055 (1880 A.D.) the King of Cochin, great protector of mother earth, without faltering, having caused the construction of the *kuttambalam* to be completed, then at once caused copper sheathing to be affixed with proper devotion, (thus) he attained virtue in ample measure. For the great, oh! what is impossible?



Inscription recording the rebuilding of the Vadakunnathan temple theatre by the Maharaja of Cochin in the nineteenth century.

The above inscription demonstrates perhaps the last expression of a great tradition in patronage. The style of the language is in the old tradition of royal eulogy. In a kingdom scarcely a quarter of the size of present day Kerala State, the ruler was still referred to as the "protector of mother earth". The simile of likening the temple theatre to the "triple-peaked mountain" follows the great tradition which speaks of the temple or palace as a veritable Kailasa, reaching to the heavens; the *Natyashastra* compares the interior of the theatre to a mountain cave. The comparison of the stage and the actor's eyes to a lotus with bees or beetles is also in the poetic tradition of an earlier age. The Nambutiri Brahmana master architect is referred to as a "gem among Brahmanas". These expressions, which have long since faded from the present with the last disappearing vestiges of the medieval Hindu tradition in Kerala, have a certain nostalgia.

The master architect is known by his family name of Velanezhi which is a Nambutiri *mana* located near Painkulam, the home of a branch of the Koyappa Chakyars, one of the famous hereditary families of actors of Sanskrit drama.

There is a legend connected with the rebuilding of the Trichur temple theatre. It is said that the previous theatre had been long in a decaying state, but that none of the experts consulted would undertake the responsibility of reconstruction as it was too large and too complex a structure to replace accurately. The Velanezhi Nambutiri, undaunted, lay upon the floor in the center of the theatre hall in meditation until he memorized the relationship of every minute part and proportion of the entire structure from base to finials. As the story is told, "He had rebuilt the theatre in his mind!" Then, "The entire superstructure was dismantled, the unsound parts replaced, everything made ready. Then in the space of a moon the entire theatre was reassembled without a nail". It is true at least that the total wooden superstructure is joined by morticing and pegging with wooden pins and piercing rails (*valaya*). The copper sheet roof however does have copper nails. Nonetheless it is an interesting tale.

Such tales, aside from their "mystery", carry with them the fame of the architects of the past, a still precariously surviving tradition which perhaps reached its peak with the reconstruction of the temple theatre at Trichur. Since that rebuilding, only one total reconstruction of a temple theatre is known—at Tirumuzhikulam, 1945—in which the forms and proportions of the tradition have been continued, but the media have been altered to suit the times. Concrete with its permanence and greater economy has replaced teak and dressed stone almost completely. The entire base with its traditional mouldings, the stairways on the east, west, north and south, with their *vyala* faces and curving tongue-like faceted bannisters, and the classic chamfered pillars of the interior, are all of finely finished modern reinforced concrete. The teakwood superstructure of the roof follows the past tradition. The superstructure of the stage is uninspired but correct and workmanlike. The fine orange lacquer and the polychroming are missing, but we are as yet spared the use of modern enamel paint.

An End or a Beginning?

The tradition of building temple theatres may possibly end with this last *kuttambalam* at Tirumuzhikulam. The survival of the Chakyars' dramatic tradition and the temple theatres in which it has been performed for hundreds of years is still in the limbo of a changing society and cultural pattern. The institution of the temple complex as a school of higher learning in philosophy, religion, and the arts, as a major economic structure, as a place of aesthetic experience and amusement as well as a place of worship, is changing rapidly all over India. The survival of these traditions of the temple in the emerging socio-cultural pattern in Kerala is precarious at best.

Kutiyattam, the only known surviving form of Sanskrit drama, and the *kuttambalam*, the temple theatre for Sanskrit drama, stand today at the head of a continuous tradition that stretches back in time to at least the tenth century. Inscriptional data point to the earlier existence of the Sanskrit drama tradition in the Tamil country of the Chola period. A period earlier than this we cannot support with continuous historical documentation.

The logical immediate further source would seem to be the development of theatre art under the Pallavas. Beyond the two plays of this period attributed to Mahendravarma Pallava (*Mattavilasa* and *Bhagavadajjuka*) and still extant in the repertoire of Kutiyattam, we can only conjecture.

We know from tradition that at least a significant part of the source materials of the *Shilpashastra* texts now known in Kerala came from works existing in the Chola and Chalukya kingdoms from about the tenth century. We know that the forms and techniques, orientation and execution of the *kuttambalam* and the smaller *mandapa* it encloses, are in accordance with the cumulative tradition of *Shilpashastra* as it survives in the *Tantrasamuccaya* and *Shilparatna* in Kerala. The remarkable correspondence to aspects of the older tradition of theatre construction as given in the *Natyashastra* is evident as well.

That such a brilliant tradition of theatre architecture should eventually die for lack of patronage and responsible care and maintenance would seem criminal. The social pattern that developed and sustained the art of Sanskrit theatre and the construction of temple theatres in the canonical mode is now virtually gone. The needs and demands of society have changed, and change they will and must. However, the preservation, maintenance and development of the priceless art of the only surviving classical tradition of Sanskrit drama and its matchless theatres are now the responsibility of the new political, administrative, and economic elites that have replaced the feudal aristocracy in power and patronage. The assumption of that responsibility to protect the irreplaceable legacy of culture and art of India's past and present is a challenge and a test. When the Japanese speak of their ancient performing arts and distinguished artists as "intangible treasures", they eloquently express the value of these traditions which nothing can ever quite replace.

If the Tirumuzhikulam *kuttambalam* marks the last of the old tradition of building temple theatres, perhaps the construction of the new *natya-mandapa* soon to be inaugurated at Kerala Kalamandalam will mark a new beginning. It is designed and will be constructed under the personal supervision of Sri Appukkuttan Nair, a man of remarkable imagination and taste, who may well initiate a much needed new era in architecture for traditional theatre in India. The theatre is to be constructed on the principles of the classical texts on *Shilpashastra*. For perhaps the first time a public contemporary theatre for the purpose of performing traditional Indian theatre arts will be constructed in traditional Indian architectural style, rather than imitating the worst era of Western theatre building, which has too often been the rule in the past. Shorn of meaningless curtains, two-dimensional prosceniums, and invariably ugly painted scenery, the traditional Indian theatre in a new environment may yet regain its own identity in contemporary times as the supreme theatre of taste and imagination it truly is.

Dr. Jones is presently engaged in a project of research and documentation of traditional art forms, supported by a grant from the Smithsonian Institution, awarded through the American Institute of Indian Studies.