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## Tolpava Koothu

The Traditional Shadow Puppet Play of Kerala

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### *Introduction*

*Tolpava Koothu* (leather puppet play) occupies a very prominent place among the ancient art-forms of Kerala. This art is presented periodically at the Bhagavati or Bhadrakali temples of Palghat and the neighbouring areas as part of the ritualistic worship of the goddess. *Tol* means leather; *Pava* means puppet and *Koothu* means play. The theme of the *Tolpava Koothu* is always the story of the *Ramayana*. *Tolpava Koothu* is performed in a specially built playhouse called *Koothu Madam* in the temple premises. The puppets of the various charac-

ters are cut out from fine leather in the right shape and size and their shadows are projected on a white screen.

*Pava Koothu* is usually performed during the annual *utsava* (festival) in Kali temples. It is believed that the goddess will be watching the performance right from the beginning till the end and will be pleased by it. This belief is based on a legend which is even today current among *Pava Koothu* performers and devotees. Long ago there lived an *asura* (demon) named Darika, who was a threat even to the gods and who also became an intolerable menace to *rishi*-s and men. To kill this *asura*, Lord Shiva created the goddess called Bhadrakali out of the *Kalakooda* poison round his throat. Bhadrakali killed Darika in a prolonged battle. It was while Bhadrakali was engaged in this battle that Rama fought Ravana and killed him. Thus Bhadrakali was not able to witness Rama's triumph over Ravana. She was unhappy because she had missed watching this event. That is why the story of the *Ramayana* was chosen for *Tolpava Koothu* and is performed in Kali temples. We can only say that *Tolpava Koothu* is a very ancient art; but we do not know the exact date of its origin. The performers of *Tolpava Koothu* usually belong to the Vellalchetti and the Nair castes.

The theme of *Tolpava Koothu* is the *Ramayana* story, extending from the birth of Shri Rama to his coronation. It is presented through twenty-one parts on twenty-one days. The story of the *Ramayana* is specially written in twenty-one parts for *Tolpava Koothu*. This work, written partly in verse and partly in prose, is called *Adal Pattu*. *Adal* means 'acting' and *Pattu* means 'relating to'. The verse-portion of *Adal Pattu* is called *Koothu Kavikal*. The *Adal Pattu*, as presented today, includes a large number of verses from the *Kamba-Ramayana*, which is the *Ramayana* written in Tamil by the great Tamil poet, Kambar. But some of the verses of Kambar have been modified to suit the special needs of *Pava Koothu* performance. The *Pava Koothu* artistes have also added their own verses wherever necessary to suit certain occasions or contexts. The verses thus added by the *Pava Koothu* artistes are mostly in Tamil. There is a mixture of Tamil and Sanskrit in a few verses. The verses and the story of the *Ramayana* were written on palm-leaves and these are carefully preserved in the houses of the puppeteers. To illustrate and interpret the meaning of the verses, the performers of *Tolpava Koothu* have from time to time added stories, episodes, explanations and dialogue. But these are not included in the palm-leaf scripts. They are orally transmitted by the teacher to the student. In the explanations and interpretations, each performer demonstrates his originality, depending on his gifts and scholarship. The explanations of the verses and the dialogue are in a language which is a mixture of Tamil and Malayalam.

There is much difference of opinion among scholars regarding the age when Kambar lived. Some scholars place him in the ninth century, while others are of the opinion that he lived in the thirteenth century. Kambar's *Ramayana* consists of six *kanda*-s: *Balakanda*, *Ayodhyakanda*, *Aranyakanda*, *Kishkindhakanda*, *Sundarakanda* and *Yuddhakanda*. Even before *Kamba-Ramayana* came to Kerala, the *Ramayana* story used to be presented through *Tolpava Koothu* in the Bhadrakali temples. This leads us to infer that there existed a *Ramayana* specially written for *Pava Koothu* performance. But with the advent of *Kamba-Ramayana*, its influence became so strong that the original was altered and many verses of *Kamba-Ramayana* were incorporated into it.

Several scholars believe that the influence of *Kamba-Ramayana* on *Tolpava Koothu* must have begun about 350 years ago. At Puthur in Palghat lived a scholar named Chinna Tampi Vadhyar, belonging to the Vellalchetti caste. It is believed that Chinna Tampi Vadhyar first incorporated verses from *Kamba-Ramayana* into the existing *Adal Pattu*. One day Chinna Tampi Vadhyar, who was deeply learned in the *Ramayana*, went to a neighbouring Brahmin's house to listen to the recitation of *Ramayana*. But he was not admitted into that assembly of Brahmins because he belonged to a lower caste. The humiliated Chinna Tampi decided to present *Kamba-Ramayana* in such a way that people of all castes could have access to its beauty. He chose the medium of *Tolpava Koothu*. He changed the existing *Adal Pattu* by introducing several verses from *Kamba-Ramayana*. Chinna Tampi was responsible for the great increase in the popularity of *Tolpava Koothu*. Kunchan Nambiar, one of the great Malayalam poets of the eighteenth century, has referred to *Pava Koothu* with veneration in his Tullal poem called *Ghoshayatra*. This indicates how popular *Pava Koothu* was in the eighteenth century.

During the performance the artistes offer explanations and interpretations of the verses as demanded by the context. Sometimes this commentary on a verse or a couplet lasts for hours. Furthermore, the puppeteer, when he relates a story, tends to digress, though with a show of relevance, and introduces topics of interest to the common people. For instance, in the first day's play there is the description of the attention received by the queens of Dasharatha during the period of pregnancy. At this point the puppeteer himself becomes an Ayurvedic practitioner, offering detailed instructions to be followed, right from conception to confinement. Similarly, the sixth day's story describes Anasuya, the wife of Atri Maharshi, relating to Sita the qualities of a chaste wife. Here the puppeteer reaches poetic heights as he describes the ideals of Indian womanhood. Thus the story-teller is constantly looking for opportunities to digress into Ayurveda, astrology, temple architecture and allied topics.

In *Pava Koothu*, the recitation of verses and the delivery of prose pieces follow a special style and tone. For the singing of verses—though there are no set *raga*-s (as in music)—the tone is modified to suit the context and the characters. When one artiste is reciting a verse the others produce the *Aaa* sound in harmony with its tone and rhythm, and produce a sort of musical effect.

### *Puppet-making*

Deer-skin is used to make the puppets because it is believed that deer-skin has sacred and pure properties. First, a thick paste of water and ashes is spread on the hairy side of the skin and exposed to dry in the sun. The treatment helps the hairs to fall away. When the skin has been cleaned and dried, the outline of the puppet is drawn on it. The next step is shaping the puppets through careful chiselling. It is their black shadow that should fall on the screen and so the natural thickness of deer-skin is retained with care. The skin is carefully cut to ensure that the shapes, facial expressions and decorations of the puppets are accurately duplicated in their shadows. Tiny holes are punched in the leather to highlight the shadow. About a dozen chisels of different shapes and sizes are used for this delicate job.



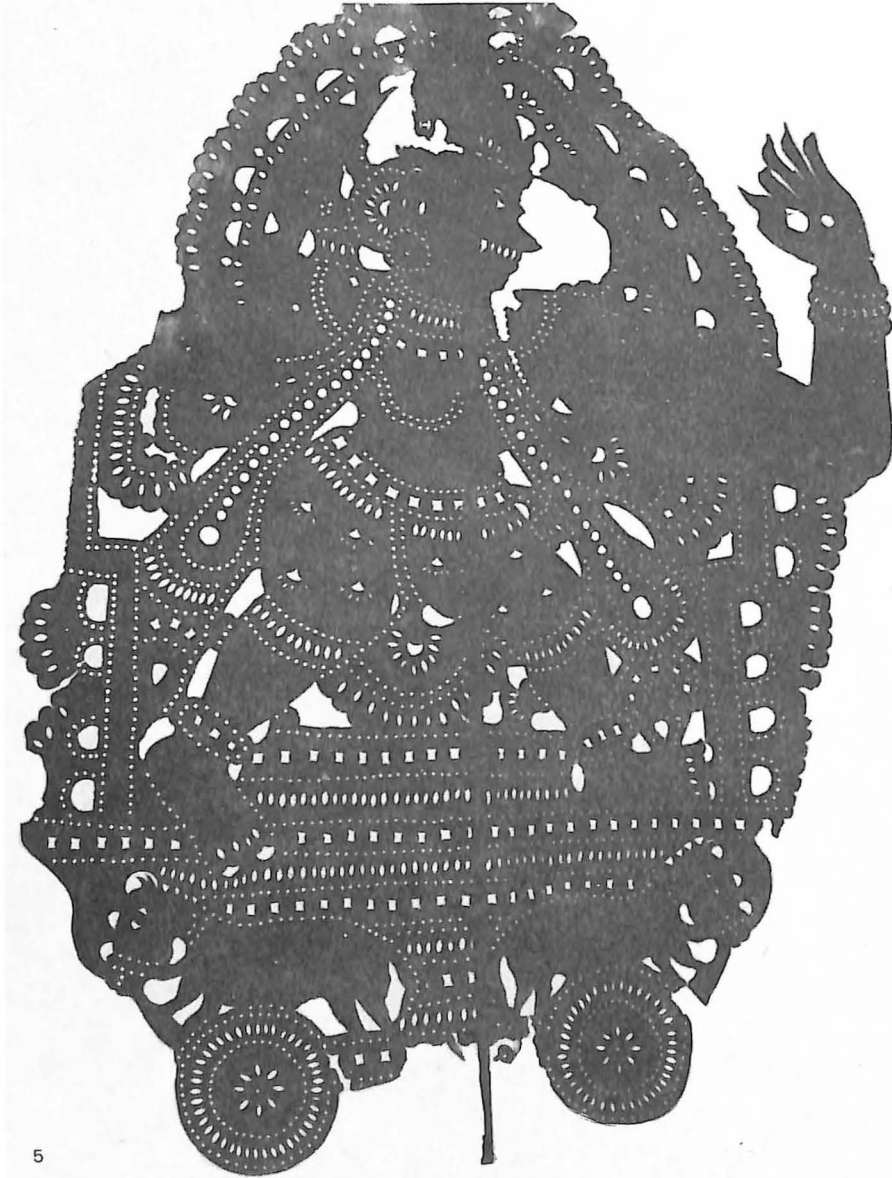
A bamboo spill is fixed vertically along the whole length of the puppet, right in its centre. This is done to prevent the leather from wilting or swaying to the sides. About 130 puppets are in use for the entire presentation of the *Ramayana* story. To help identify the puppets, and to make them attractive, they are painted in artistic colours. The bark of the tree called *Kasav* and certain kinds of leaves (including *Neeli*) are used to make these colours.



Each important character in the story is represented by puppets in three different postures: sitting, walking and fighting. Usually only one hand of the puppet is fixed in such a manner that it can be moved and it has both the movable joints to be found in that human limb. But the puppet which is shown fighting has both its hands movable. The reason is obvious: To hold the bow and arrow, to engage in a fist-fight, the puppet has to make use of both hands. The puppets representing animals and birds are provided with different types of joints.



To depict natural scenes, for instance trees, or a lake, or a mountain or the sea, there are appropriately fashioned puppets. Similarly there are puppets shaped to represent the elephant, the horse, the monkey, the peacock and other birds or animals.



An important character, for instance Shri Rama in a walking posture, is usually 79 cm. long and 46 cm. broad. The dimensions of Ravana in the fighting posture are 80 cm. in length and 68 cm. in breadth. If we study the shapes and facial expressions of the puppets, we discover a close resemblance between them and the figures in the mural paintings and sculptures of ancient temples in Kerala. If it is stored carefully, a puppet can be used and preserved for a hundred years.



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### *The Stage*

Permanent stages for puppet shows have been constructed in the compound of various temples. They are called *Koothu Madam* or playhouses and are so positioned that they face the image of the goddess in the temple because it is believed that she would be present to witness the performance. The dimensions of this structure, which is raised well above the ground level, covered on its three sides, and provided with a roofing, show some minor variations. The dimensions of the playhouse in Kavalappara Aryan Kavu Temple, which is famous for *Tolpava Koothu*, are 11 metres 43 cm. in length, 3 metres 81 cm. in width and 1 metre 53 cm. in height.

There are in all 63 *Koothu Madam*-s in Palghat and its suburbs. It is said that formerly these playhouses existed in at least hundred temples. The front of the stage is curtained off with a thin white cloth, called *Ayapudava*. The lower half of this curtain is covered with black cloth to represent *Patala* or the nether world, while the white area stands for the earth and heaven.



A long and narrow wooden plank is fixed at a height of 1 metre 30 cm. behind the curtain and some distance away from it. This plank covers the whole length of the stage. The lights needed for the shadow play are placed on this plank which is called *Vilakkumadam*.

#### *Illumination and Stage Arrangements*

Dehusked coconuts broken into two equal halves serve as lamps. These coconut halves are placed at equally spaced distances on a row on the *Vilakkumadam*. Coconut oil is poured into these halves and thick broad-based cotton wicks are placed inside them. Then they are lighted. Usually there are twenty-one such lamps in use. On special occasions, extra lighting effects are created by throwing *Telli* powder (made by drying and pounding the gum of a special tree found in Kerala) on to the flame of the lamps which then begin to blaze. Fire-torches are also lit during some special scenes.

The front portion of the *Koothu Madam* is usually decorated with tender coconut leaves and flower garlands. During the presentation of some important scenes, flower garlands also decorate the area behind the curtain. The stage-manager (*Madupulavar*) supervises the stage arrangements.

### *Musical Instruments and Sound Effects*

The two usual accompanying instruments for *Pava Koothu* are the drum *Ezhupara* (which has a prepared jack-wood frame with the ends covered with calf-skin) and bell-metal cymbals. To enhance the dramatic effect, the *Chenda*, *Maddalam*, the gong, the pipe and the conch are also played on special occasions.

The artistes add special *Vaithari*-s (rhythmic syllables) and sounds when they are presenting scenes of battle and when the dialogue of the combatants is being delivered. For example, during the fight between Bali and Sugriva, the two combatants clench their teeth, uproot trees and fling them at each other or they pick up rocks and hurl them. When this is happening appropriate *Vaithari*-s and interjections are uttered, in tune with the rhythm.

### *Manipulation of the Puppets*

Since the puppets are to be presented over the whole length of the curtain (which is about twelve metres long), at least five artistes have to be in charge of this work. On some occasions they have actually to run from one end of the curtain to the other, with the puppets in their hands. The three or four artistes entrusted with the singing of the verses and the delivery of the dialogue take up their positions behind those who manipulate the puppets. This arrangement is necessary because the play continues all through the night and it is too taxing for the same person to undertake both these activities for such a length of time.

The artiste, in charge of handling the puppets, holds it by grasping, with his one hand, the lower portion of the wooden splinter fixed to the puppet. Simultaneously he manipulates the hand of the puppet or the puppet itself with a stick held in his other hand. He also holds an anklet in his hand. When he manipulates a puppet, he also shakes the anklet producing synchronizing sounds. When a slaying or maiming of important characters is presented, a red liquid (made of turmeric water and some slaked lime) is thrown on the curtain to produce a realistic picture of blood.

The scene in which Indrajit discharges *Nagapasha*, a divine snake-arrow, (causing Lakshmana, Sugriva and others to fall into a swoon, with Garuda arriving to help them) is depicted in some temples with special technical effects. A tall pole is fixed on the ground some distance away from the front of the playhouse and a strong thread is tied to it while the other end is fastened to the roof of the *Koothu Madam*. Garuda's puppet, shaped in wood and beautifully painted, is suspended from a string. It is moved to create the impression of flying. To the accompaniment of drums, pipes and fire-works, the Garuda puppet makes its appearance in front of the curtain, attracting large crowds.

### *The Performance*

*Pava Koothu* performances are conducted as part of the annual festival in temples or devotees pay for their presentation in fulfilment of a religious vow. In many temples there is a puppet show on every single day of the *utsava*. It would take twenty-one days to play the *Ramayana* story in full. Abridged versions are presented on fourteen or even seven nights.

On the day on which the performance is to begin special *pooja*-s and offerings are made to the goddess a little after sunset. Then a *Tookkuvilakku* (an oil-lamp made of bronze with a chain attached for hanging it) is lighted from the oil lamp burning in front of the goddess' image and brought to the *Koothu Madam*. It is hung in front of the *Koothu Madam* to the accompaniment of instrumental music. The next step involves the hanging of a curtain in the *Koothu Madam* in a ceremonial manner. This ritual is called *Kooraiduka* (*Koora* means curtain and *Iduka* means placing or setting). Then the stage is decorated.

By about nine o'clock at night a large crowd gathers in the compound of the temple to witness the show. The *Velichappadu* (the oracle of the goddess who blesses the gathering on her behalf and who communicates her orders to them), wearing a red silk scarf round his waist, anklets round his ankles, and holding his sword in his hand, encircles the temple three times. Then he comes to the *Koothu Madam* and blesses all the *Pava Koothu* artistes. In certain temples this entry of the *Velichappadu* from the temple to the *Koothu Madam* is an elaborate religious ceremony. For example, in the Payilur Temple (at Kollengode) there is a distance of more than a furlong between the temple and the *Koothu Madam*. The *Velichappadu* is led from the temple to the *Koothu Madam* in a colourful procession headed by three caparisoned elephants and accompanied by music and fireworks.

When the *Velichappadu* has blessed the *Pava Koothu* performers and given them permission to begin the performance, the instrumental music which is a preliminary to the play begins. This is followed by the ceremony called *Kalarichindu*. The puppeteers sing hymns to invoke the blessings of Ganapati, Saraswati, Mahavishnu and other gods and goddesses. Then they take the *Tookuvilakku* behind the curtain and light with it the twenty-one lamps placed there. Then the *Madapulavar* (the stage-manager) sanctifies the stage by performing a special *pooja* called *Ranga Pooja*. The object of this *Pooja* is to ensure the success of the performance. After this the puppet of Ganapati is presented on the curtain and the performers sing hymns to propitiate Ganapati and invoke his blessings. Then the puppets of certain Brahmin characters are shown on the curtain. These puppets are called *Patta Pavakal* which means 'puppets of Brahmins' (*Pattar* means Brahmin). These Brahmin characters are the *Sutradhar*-s of the *Pava Koothu*. They are known by names such as Mallika Pattar, Somasu Pattar, Mootha Pattar and Gangayadi Pattar. The puppeteer often converses with them in certain situations. An example of the conversation is as follows:

Puppeteer	:	Oh, Mallika Pattar, won't you come?
Mallika Pattar	:	Yes, I have come, I have come.
Puppeteer	:	Oh, Somasu Pattar, haven't you come?
Somasu Pattar	:	Yes, I am here, I have come.
Puppeteer	:	Oh, Mootha Pattar, have you arrived?
Mootha Pattar	:	Yes, I have come, I am here.
Puppeteer	:	Has Gangayadi Pattar come?
Gangayadi Pattar	:	I have arrived, I am present here.
All the Brahmins together	:	Hari Hari Govinda! May Shri Rama be victorious! If Shri Rama wins and prospers, we will also have happiness and prosperity!

Then the Brahmins sing the glory of Mahavishnu. Next they extol the *Yaga*-s and sacrifices performed for the welfare of mankind and sing hymns

in praise of the gods. The next duty is the salutation to the former *guru-s* of *Tolpava Koothu*. But as these *guru-s* of *Pava Koothu* belonged to the lower castes, the belief is that it is not proper for the Brahmin puppets to do obeisance to them. So leaving that duty to the *Pulavar* (puppeteer), the Brahmin puppets disappear from the screen. The *Pava Koothu* performers now perform the *Guru Vandanam* ceremony.

When the *Guru Vandanam* is over, the Brahmin puppets reappear on the curtain and address the audience thus: "Watching the beautiful dance of the peacock with its outstretched feathers, the wild cock also tries to dance in imitation of the peacock. Our attempts to present the play to the distinguished audience here may appear equally futile and ridiculous. So we humbly request the learned audience to forgive us our blunders and failures." Then the Brahmin puppets give a summary of the story that is going to be enacted that day. This is followed by the ritual called *Sadya Vazhthal* (*Sadya* means feast; *Vazhthal* means praise), which involves thanking and blessing the members of the house where the *Pava Koothu* troupe had their meals on that day. While thanking them and invoking the blessings of Bhagvati and Shri Rama for them, the artistes praise the feast that the family prepared for them, even mentioning the items of food of that meal.

When these ritualistic ceremonies are over, the *Pava Koothu* performance begins. During the presentation of certain incidents in the story, devotees offer money, or coconuts, plantains, jaggery, flower garlands or other auspicious items to the artistes, as an offering for the deity in the temple to seek Her blessings for progeny, good harvests and auspicious marriages. An important type of offering is called *Nadakam*. Here, certain auspicious events in the story are celebrated by exhibiting a dance of *Devastri-s* (women of heaven). At this time the puppeteer prays for the prosperity of the devotee who had made the offerings, specifying his name and even the date of his birth.

After the twentieth-day play is over, concluding with the slaying of Ravana, the curtain is removed and sent for cleaning. The freshly washed curtain is again used for the next day's performance, namely, *Sri Rama Pattabhisheka* (The Coronation of Rama) which concludes the series. Now the curtain is removed and the *Madapulavar* cuts it into pieces which are distributed among the artistes. Convention demands that a curtain once used should not be used again. The season for puppet shows is from January to the end of April.

The villagers call the puppeteers *Pulavar-s* (scholars). They respect a puppeteer not just for his art; they also seek his advice on their problems. When a *Pava Koothu* troupe arrives for a programme in the temple, some of the well-to-do families in the area play host to them. In some temples, families undertake the responsibility of sponsoring the puppet show in the temple on each day. The artistes are thus the guests of that family till dusk when they proceed to the temple in a ceremonial procession.

### *The Future*

Formerly the puppeteers did not consider this art as a source of livelihood. They had land of their own and farming was their main source of livelihood. They

were trained in puppetry during the intervals when there was no work on the farm. They took part in the puppet performance because of their devotion to God and their yearning to earn an honourable place in society. The payment offered from temples was pitifully nominal but they honestly believed that their performances would bring material prosperity to them and also to those who encouraged and witnessed their performance.

Now the whole pattern has undergone a radical change. Most of those who participate in the art-form are poor and in dire want. They no longer have their family land. The income from the performance is too meagre to support a family. Interest in their performance is on the decline owing to the popularity of the cinema. The highest fee that an artiste of *Pava Koothu* can now hope for is only fifteen rupees. A long period of training goes into the making of a good *Pava Koothu* artiste, who begins when he is no more than seven years old to recite the verses, to learn them by heart and to imbibe the art of making and manipulating puppets. For some families *Pava Koothu* is a traditional heritage. The well-known Koonathara family can boast four generations of *Pava Koothu* artistes. Its members (Tampi Pulavar, Ila Pulavar, Muthappa Pulavar and Lakshmana Pulavar) are names to reckon with in this field. The present head of this family is Krishnankutty Pulavar. In Mathur, Kuthannur, Pudusseri and Kayiliyad there were families with a strong tradition of accomplishment in *Pava Koothu*. The younger generation in these families, however, has no interest in this art-form. This state of affairs justifiably gave rise to the fear that *Pava Koothu* was on the decline. Fortunately, during the last three or four years fresh life has been infused in this art. The National Shadow Theatre Festival, organised by the Sangeet Nataka Akademi at Bangalore, in 1978, helped to confer a national status on *Tolpava Koothu*. This art-form was selected for presentation at the International Festival of the Puppet Theatres of Asian Countries held in the Soviet Union in 1979. In 1980, the Sangeet Natak Akademi honoured the *Pava Koothu* expert, Krishnankutty Pulavar, with an award. The Department of Culture, Government of India, and the Sangeet Natak Akademi now awards scholarships to pupils undergoing training in *Pava Koothu*.

Today there are about thirty practising artistes of *Pava Koothu* in Kerala. This art-form which was once confined to the temple as a votive offering is now welcomed outside the temples by the people of Kerala and other states of India.

## Illustrations

1. *Shri Rama*
2. *Shri Rama in a walking posture*
3. *Sita and Ponman (the golden deer)*
4. *Vidushaka (clown)*
5. *Indrajit*
6. *Surpanakha*
7. *Koothu Madam of the Kavalappara Aryan Kavu Temple*