

**Book Review: Kathakali Padangal (Verses of Kathakali) by Vellinezhi Achuthankutty**

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## **Book Review: *Kathakali Padangal (Verses of Kathakali)* by Vellinezhi Achuthankutty**

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The traditional art forms of Asia have been used for socio-political, moral and religious purposes; they have resorted to pure entertainment alone. Asian folk-art forms have a generous mix of dialogue, dance, song, morals and prayer. It caters to small audiences at a time, it impacts on a personal and intimate level. Traditional art forms satisfy our innate need for self-expression.

Kathakali is a dance drama of Kerala, that originated in Kottarakkara during the first quarter of the 15th Century. The art form slowly made its impact throughout Kerala, with the introduction of four classical stories with human heroes by Kottayam Thampuran (North) in the second half of the 17th Century, Ramanattam started known as Kathakali. Thus, this art form left its divine nature and transformed into an absolute theatre status by the 18th century. The unique style of the depiction of the Bhavas (Emotional states), physical movements, the interfilming dance element and colourful costumes were widely acclaimed. By the 1950s this classical art form attracted connoisseurs from all over the world.

The chapters herein provide seven distinct stages of a full night Kathakali programme, viz, *Keli*, *Thodayam*, *Vandana Sloka*, *Purappad*, *Melappadam*, *Kathavaranam* and *Dhanashi* along with the rare *Vandana* and *Managala* Slokas purappadu and texts of 36 most popular plays with brief choreography. The book is quite vast, with 904 pages, but its well-laid-out structure and comprehensiveness are commendable.

The book consists of a foreword, an introduction, seven chapters, and a concluding note. Chapter one is *Keli* (Percussion Announcement), the core purpose of *Keli* is to inform people that Kathakali is about to be performed. It is usually performed at a location away from the venue of the performance, at a place of congregation of the public. *Chenda* and *Maddalam* are complimenting instruments. This is followed by Chapter two which deals with *Thodayam* (Invocation). It is an invocative dance of the participating actors performed without formal costumes behind the curtains with the accompaniment of *Maddalam*. The lyrics for praying obeisance to various gods and the rhythmic structure of dancing sequences are detailed. There are compositions by many composers for *Thodayam*. The most widely used slokas are those composed by Karthika Thirunal and Kottayam Thampuran.

Chapter three deals with *Vandanaslokam* (Praying Obeisance), Following the *Thodayam*, *Vandanasloka*-s are rendered by the singers. These lyrics have been written by the composers at the beginning of each *Aattakatha*, and the frequently sung *Vandanalokas* are written by

Kottayam Thampuran and Kottarakkara Thampuran. It is sung in the raga *Kedaragowla*. Often the musician renders more than one sloka of their choice, this chapter contains twenty-eight such quatrains including rare ones.

Chapter four is about *Purappad* (Visual Prelude), which is an important item preceding the main performance. It is the introduction of the main characters of the first play of the night in full costumes. This is typically performed by two males and females in the northern style, two or four male characters in the southern style of performance of Kathakali with the recital of *Padam* (Verses), these *Padams* are also called *Nilappadams*. The prelude has four stages of dancing sequences without much emphasis on *Padatharthabhinaya* (Verbatim). The book lists out the text and choreography of thirty-two *Purappads*.

Chapter five narrates *Melappadam* (Percussion Ensemble), an innovative introduction by Kottayam Thampuran; the nineteenth *Astapathi* of Git Govindham is sung by the singers along with the *Maddalam*, *Chenda*, *Ilathalam* and *Chengila*. The Six *Charanams* commencing with *Manjuthara* are sung in the different ragas beginning with *Mohanam* and ending with *Madhyamavati*. The whole item is set to *Champa Thalam* (basic 40 beats) in varied tempos. *Melappadam* ends with the combined drumming of Chenda and Maddalam. It offers an occasion for the drummers and singers to showcase their skills.

Chapter six deals with the presentation of Kathakali performances of thirty-three stories. Typically, a full-night performance consists of the presentation of two or three plays. The presentation hierarchy is mostly in the order of Protagonist role Minukku/ Pacha, Vella Thadi/Kathi and Kari/Chuvanna Thadi. The performance opens with a slow tempo sequence, mostly like a dalliance. Then comes a sequence of increasing tempo where the story develops to its core element. And then there will be a scene of confrontation between the protagonist and the antagonist. And finally, the performance comes to its conclusion in a sombre mood. Any work of art, whether literature or performing type, usually moves through specific stages of emotional momentum before concluding. Those stages usually start with a slow pace, then pick up the tempo, pass through a crescendo and ultimately land in a sombre and solemn mood of satisfaction. This is related to the five different sandhis (*mukha*, *pratimukha*, *garbha*, *vimarsa*, and *nirvahana*) of classical Indian dramaturgy. Plays like *Kuchelavruttham*, *Sandanagopalam*, *Rugminswayamvaram*, *Rugmantharitham*, *Subhadraharanam*, and *Nalaritham* fall in the plays that are enacted immediately after *Melappadam*. Plays with Kathi or Vella Thadi types as heroes like *Keechakavadham*, *Baalivijayam*, *Ravanavijayam*, *Ravanodbavam*, *Rajasooyam* and *Lavanasuravadham* fall in the series of plays that are enacted during the midnight. In Kathakali performance the *Padinja Padams* (Enacting in the slowest tempo) are sung and enacted in the slowest tempo of four *Thaalas* (combination of a specified number of base beats) viz. Chempata (32 beats), *Chempa* (40 beats), *Adantha* (56 beats) and *Panchari* (12 beats). The tempo is dependent on the depth of emotion of the Padam. The distribution of the Aksharas of the script along the Thaalavatta (a fixed number of beats) is in specified beats, in synchronisation with the depiction of Mudras. However, on the stage, the time of execution of one Thaalavattam, as well as the synchronisation of *Aksharas* with *Mudras*, is not strictly adhered to. Beats of rhythm are the string on which the music, percussion and enacting are sewn. The tempo of beats determines the depth of emotion, the slowest the deeper.

The plays that are enacted during the early hours of the morning, Red Beard or Kari prominent ones are *Duryodhanavadham*, *Dakshayagam*, *Baalivadhham* and *Kiradhham*. Indeed, the Red

Beard is mostly considered an antagonist. And that satisfies certain theatrical requirements in terms of stage presence and enhanced vitality of stage performance. But it is not always so. As mentioned earlier, *Bali*, *Sugriva*, and *Virabhadra* are not antagonistic characters. In *Balivijayam*, *Bali* can even be viewed as a protagonist, even though Ravana's role is reserved for the senior and leading actor. But the point is that even these characters with protagonistic potential are brought under the beard category because of the vigour and vitality of their character to be highlighted and also to match with the typical theatrical modalities of Kathakali.

In Kathakali stories, prime importance is given to the depiction of *Shrungara Rasa*, by the presentation of a scene with the protagonist and the heroine. The intensity of emotion is elated by including a *Raaga Alaapan* followed by a dramatic visual prelude. This mode of presentation, irrespective of the story, is character dependent. The Rhythmic sequence and Raagam are pre-choreographed. The tempo is the slowest of the *Thaala*. Though there is a fixed time for execution in *Kalari*, it is seldom followed on stage due to varied reasons. The tempo of the presentation underwent an evolution process too. The modern stages lack thorough knowledge of the situation, as can be witnessed from the performances.

Chapter seven "*Dhanashi*" is the concluding obeisance. It is the expression of gratitude for a successful performance to the almighty. The Green type characters of the last play will perform the obeisance in a typical dancing sequence in tune with the *Mangalaslokas* rendered by the playback singers. Achuthankutty's collection includes twenty such *Slokas* and three *Stuthis* (Prayers).

Achuthankutty's work makes a genuine contribution to the study of Kerala performing arts: to our understanding of Kathakali stories, songs & verses, stage presentations and choreographic structures. The book will greatly interest readers interested in learning more about the Kathakali verses, Puranic Stories, *Vandanaslokas*, Kathakali Masters and stage presentations.