

# Between Ritual and Radical

## Socio-Political Discourses at the Transition of Kūṭiyāṭṭam's Performance Tradition

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### *Introduction*

This article considers the performative tradition of nineteenth-century Kūṭiyāṭṭam and the circumstances that led to a canon shift in this theatre form during this time, with a special focus on the performance of Kūṭiyāṭṭam in the provincial theatre complexes in Kerala. In contrast to larger cities such as Bombay and Kolkata, where modern, proscenium-style theatre was being performed, theatre in Kerala was predominantly presented within temples and court establishments, a situation that in this context is understood as a representation of provincial-theatre practice in India. This paper examines the transitions that occurred in the provincial-theatre complexes in Kerala since the nineteenth century, the moment when Kūṭiyāṭṭam was first introduced to the masses, the influence of British colonial rule on the performance of Kūṭiyāṭṭam, and the effect of the feudal establishment of Kerala on the socio-cultural and political aspects of its theatre tradition.

The study examines performance in provincial theatres as structured behavior through an analytical framework that integrates interdisciplinary methodologies. This approach highlights the dynamic intersection between aesthetics and politics. Employing a historical research method, the study draws on primary and secondary sources, including archival data.

### *Kūṭiyāṭṭam – setting a historical backdrop*

Tracing the roots of the *Natyasastra*, the ancient Sanskrit treatise on performing arts written around the second century CE, reveals that southern India, especially the area known as the Tamilakam (Fig. 1), including the erstwhile kingdoms of Cholas, Ceras, and Pandyas, had a strong theatrical tradition, often termed as a golden era for Sanskrit theatre (500 BCE – 400 CE). There is also considerable evidence that Sanskrit theatre was used both as propaganda and a religious tool during the period of Brahmin-Buddhist religious contention.<sup>1</sup>

However, the following four centuries marked a decline of Sanskrit theatre. By the eleventh century CE, it was on the verge of extinction on the Indian subcontinent, with the prominent growth of vernacular languages as well as art forms

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<sup>1</sup> Mundoli Narayanan, *Space, Time and Ways of Seeing. The Performance Culture of Kutiyattam*, New York 2022, p. 61.

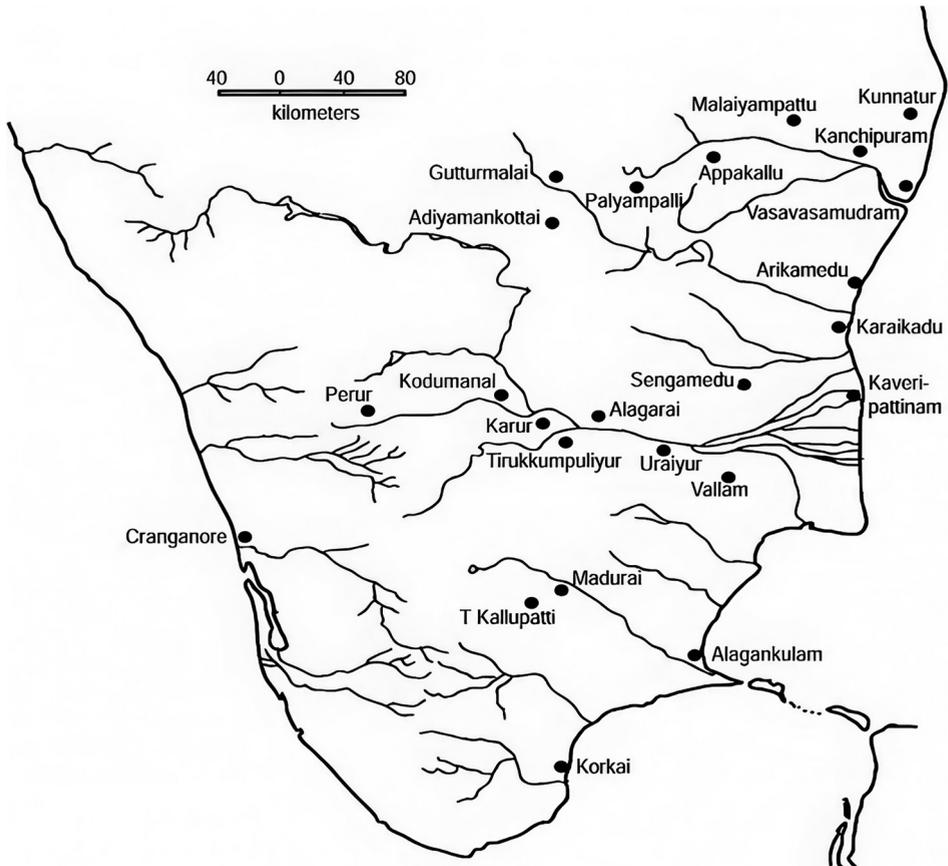


Fig. 1. Settlements in Tamilakam from 300 BCE to 300 CE (Shinu A. Abraham, Chera, Chola, Pandya. Using Archaeological Evidence to Identify the Tamil Kingdoms of Early Historic South India, in *Asian Perspectives* 42/2, 2003, pp. 207–223, here p. 214)

that adapted to regional and more flexible Desi traditions. Desi traditions are art forms shaped by regional and cultural variations, distinct from those that adhered strictly to the codified principles and performance guidelines outlined in the *Natyasastra*.

During the golden era of Sanskrit theatre, this genre did not create much movement in Kerala. However, whereas it continued to diminish in its glory in the rest of the country, in the twelfth century in the region then known as Tamilakam, Sanskrit theatre saw its repertoire grow in abundance thanks to contributions from playwrights Kavi Nilakantha (author of *Kalyanasaugandhikam*)<sup>2</sup> and Kulasekhara Varman<sup>3</sup> (author of *Subhadhrādhananjayam*, *Tapatisamvaranam*). Kulasekhara Varman, considered a pioneer in the field, brought in an innovative method of

<sup>2</sup> Text written in the 6<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>3</sup> Royal Dramatist from Kerala who lived in the 11<sup>th</sup> century.

presentation, namely the enactment of the *vyāṅgya*, the underlying meaning of the text.<sup>4</sup> An inscription from Chembra in 954/55 CE mentions the performance of the play *Tapatisaṃvaraṇam*.<sup>5</sup> In medieval Kerala, theatrical performances were often organised and performed by members of the royal lineage as part of religious ceremonies or as means of entertainment. In the following centuries, plays ascribed to the playwright Bhasa<sup>6</sup> were frequently represented on Kerala stages, and actors prepared an elaborate stage manual on techniques that were deviations from the traditionally written texts.<sup>7</sup>

### *Kūṭiyāṭṭam – performative aspects*

The pre-modern sociopolitical and cultural landscape of the territory of Kerala paved the way for the emergence of numerous art forms, including Kūṭiyāṭṭam, which has remained an age-old art tradition in this province. One of the oldest living theatrical traditions, it represents a synthesis of Sanskrit classicism and reflects the local traditions of Kerala, emphasising a highly stylised and codified theatrical language. The twelfth to fourteenth centuries are considered the origin phase of Kūṭiyāṭṭam, an art form connected to the temples and performed for the temple-going elites.

While some have speculated that it began as a secular performance in royal courts, it was definitively incorporated into Kerala's caste-based temple complex in the thirteenth or fourteenth century, where it remained until 1949 [...]. As a *kulathozhil*, or hereditary occupation, it was performed in the temple by both men and women [of upper-caste communities].<sup>8</sup>

Bruce Sullivan argues that the adaptation of Kūṭiyāṭṭam performers to evolving ritual and religious frameworks within the temple space has been a key factor in the innovation and survival of the theatre form. Rather than merely maintaining traditional temple performances, performers have actively reinterpreted and expanded ritual elements, incorporating extended gestures, narrative elaborations, and heightened devotional aspects that align Kūṭiyāṭṭam more closely with temple liturgical practices. These innovations include the deepening of *abhinaya* (expressive acting) to highlight theological themes, the integration of specific ritual invocations, and an increased emphasis on the performer's sacred status within temple

<sup>4</sup> Narayanan, *Space, Time and Ways of Seeing*, pp. 74–76.

<sup>5</sup> Manu V. Devadevan, *Knowing and Beeing*. The Semantic Universe of the Kūṭiyāṭṭam Theatre, in Devadevan, *The 'Early Medieval' Origins of India*, Cambridge 2020, pp. 225–253, here pp. 229–231.

<sup>6</sup> Celebrated Sanskrit playwright who is believed to have lived between 200–300 CE.

<sup>7</sup> See e.g. K. G. Paulose, *Kutiyattam Theatre. The Earliest Living Tradition*, Tripunithura 2006, p. 66.

<sup>8</sup> Leah Lowthorp, *Voices on the Ground*. Kutiyattam, UNESCO, and the Heritage of Humanity, in *UNESCO on the Ground. Local Perspectives on Intangible Cultural Heritage*, ed. by Michael Dylan Foster/Lisa Gilman, Bloomington 2015, pp. 17–180, here pp. 19f. See also Leah K. Lowthorp, *Folklore, Politics, and the State*. Kutiyattam Theatre and National/Global Heritage in India, in *South Asian History and Culture* 8/4, 2017, pp. 542–559, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19472498.2017.1371513> (all weblinks in this article last consulted 13 February 2025).

spaces. This ritual augmentation, while reinforcing Kūṭiyāṭṭam's connection to temple culture, also played a role in its adaptation to public, non-temple venues.<sup>9</sup>

However, the extension of Kūṭiyāṭṭam beyond the temple setting – into more democratised public performance spaces – was historically constrained by social structures, including caste hierarchies and gender restrictions. The authority historically wielded by the *cākyār* (performer) and *nambiyār* (musician) communities within temple spaces did not automatically translate into control over Kūṭiyāṭṭam's presence in secular or non-traditional settings. This transition, particularly in the modern era, involved negotiating social barriers and redefining the performative agency of actors, musicians, and even female performers, who were traditionally excluded from the form. Understanding this trajectory provides insight into how Kūṭiyāṭṭam has evolved, balancing its ritual sanctity with contemporary theatrical expressions.

From the perspective of linguistics, Kūṭiyāṭṭam was often considered as an elitist art form. This has much to do with the use of classical Sanskrit texts as performative texts. Even though the Indologist David Shulman highlights its classical status and heavy reliance on Sanskrit, he thinks that the dominant language of Kūṭiyāṭṭam is in fact Malayalam because actors perform according to the *Aattaprakaram* acting manuals,<sup>10</sup> which are written in Malayalam, and because the *vidūṣaka* (jester) speaks in Malayalam.<sup>11</sup> The *vidūṣaka*, an important figure in Kūṭiyāṭṭam, used the vernacular Malayalam language (instead of Sanskrit) to make subtle witticisms and engage the public.<sup>12</sup> This was the first evidence of Malayalam penetrating into the otherwise rigid structure of Sanskrit theatre. The *vidūṣaka* thus appealed to the common audience and slowly gained more prominence than the mute hero of Kūṭiyāṭṭam plays – in a sense, taking centre stage.

Kūṭiyāṭṭam is traditionally performed in the *kūttampalam*, the part of the Hindu temple that was intended as a stage for dances and dramas. Access to performances was originally restricted owing to their sacred nature, but in the twentieth century, the plays have progressively opened up to larger audiences. The participation in and audience for Kūṭiyāṭṭam performances were influenced by a variety of factors including social class, gender, religion, and cultural norms.

Kūṭiyāṭṭam as an art tradition heavily relies on extending the performance score to heights of imaginative fancy while choosing a text that encompasses poetic

<sup>9</sup> Bruce M. Sullivan, Temple Rites and Temple Servants. Religion's Role in the Survival of Kerala's Kūṭiyāṭṭam Drama Tradition, in *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 1/1, 1997, pp. 97–115, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11407-997-0014-9>, esp. pp. 98 and 107.

<sup>10</sup> Acting manuals that help the *cākyār* in stage performance with specific reference for the actors related to movement. They were handed down by the actors to their trainees, often remaining even in the family until late in the twentieth century. See e.g. Mani Madhava Chakyar, *Nāṭya-kalpadrumam*, Kerala 1975.

<sup>11</sup> Sudha Gopalakrishnan, *Kutiyattam*. In *Conversation with David Shulman*, online, 9 January 2015, [www.sahapedia.org/kutiyattam-conversation-david-shulman](http://www.sahapedia.org/kutiyattam-conversation-david-shulman).

<sup>12</sup> Rajendran Chettiarthodi, From Fast to Feast. The Asana Discourse of the Vidusaka in Kerala's Traditional Sanskrit Theatre, in *A World of Nourishment. Reflections on Food in Indian Culture*, ed. by Cinzia Pieruccini/Paola M. Rossi, Milano 2016, pp. 111–120.

quality, multiple layers of meaning, speech, and obscure expressions. Through the performance, the performers try to exemplify a character's ideas and emotions through intricate detailing of events via the layered *abhinaya*.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, the convergence of Sanskrit theatre, pioneering playwrights, and the mixing of Sanskrit with the Malayalam vernacular paved the way for the emergence of Kūṭiyāṭṭam as a unique art form.

### *Time and spatiality of the oldest performance tradition*

Most of the sophisticated art forms of South India had their genesis and growth in medieval temples. The late medieval inscriptions of Kerala temples refer to the *kūttampalam*, the stage where dances and dramas were performed. *Kūttampalam* exemplifies the medieval styles of Kerala temple architecture.<sup>14</sup>

In order to appreciate the manner in which space is employed in the construction and conceptualization of the *kūttambalam*, one needs to understand the concept of *vāstupuruṣamaṇḍala*, which is a composite of three words: *vāstu*, *Puruṣa*, and *maṇḍala*. The word *vāstu* means site or residence. In the context of *vāstupuruṣamaṇḍala* it means boundaries of existence, of space, of an ordered universe – hence, in this instance, the boundaries of the temple and the *kūttambalam*. As the universe is the outward manifestation of the Divine Cosmic Essence (*Puruṣa*), the temple is also, together with the *kūttambalam*, the outward form of this Divine Cosmic Essence.<sup>15</sup>

Prominent performance-studies researcher Mundoli Narayanan explains that the “*kūttampalam* brings the actors and spectators to meet in a small, circumscribed space, the length of which is between 6 and 30/40 feet [...]. It [is] a ‘close, proximal viewing’ which enables certain ways of seeing that are possible only in that particular space.”<sup>16</sup>

In the *kūttampalams*, the space and the audience's view are both defined through the use of a single lamp to light the space in a particular manner:

The crucial feature of the single lamp is that its twin flames offer a small circle of light which delimits the area of prime visibility to a defined arc downstage centre, steeping everything outside the arc in relative darkness [...]. In a sense, the light of the single lamp provided the spectator with a pin-hole vision, in which only an area of a small circumference is properly visible, the other areas outside being pushed into non-visibility and the border areas between the two appearing in a hazy penumbra. [...] With the light being circumscribed to a small area, larger movements are effectively curtailed, and the actor is generally fixed to one location.<sup>17</sup>

However, this “stasis” elevates the effectiveness of fine movement such as “eye movements, facial expressions and minute variations in hand gestures”, all of

<sup>13</sup> Gopalakrishnan, *Kutiyattam*.

<sup>14</sup> Narayanan, *Space, Time and Ways of Seeing*, pp. 85–120.

<sup>15</sup> Farley Richmond/Yasmin Richmond: The Multiple Dimensions of Time and Space in *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*, the Sanskrit Theatre of Kerala, in *Asian Theatre Journal* 2/1, 1985, pp. 50–60, here p. 52.

<sup>16</sup> Narayanan, *Space, Time and Ways of Seeing*, pp. 87f.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 90 and 94.

which can be executed in the limited space and are perceptible for the audience given their proximity to the action and the slower overall tempo of this style of acting.

[I]n response to a microscopic way of seeing, a microscopic way of doing evolved, wherein every phenomenon that is featured in the acting came to be magnified and its fine details revealed as if viewed through a microscope. This microscopic method of acting is undoubtedly the primary cause and motivation for Kutiyattam's culture of elaboration, which in the parlance of the form is known as *vistarikkal* (to elaborate).<sup>18</sup>

### *The role of the vidūṣaka – the popularisation of Kūṭiyāṭṭam*

The *vidūṣaka* is credited with inspiring additions of colloquial language and usages to Kūṭiyāṭṭam with its otherwise stylised Sanskrit vocabulary. The *vācika* (verbal expression through speech and dialogue) acting technique of the *vidūṣaka*

provides the significant model for the enactment practices of all other characters, especially in the translation and interpretation of the Sanskrit play text into Malayalam, through a process of questions and answers that unravels the significance of each important element of the text.<sup>19</sup>

The Kūṭiyāṭṭam “tradition of providing complete immunity to the character of the *vidūṣaka* where he can lash out at anyone on any level or status of society”<sup>20</sup> is funded

at least in part on the Cakyars' interstitial and illegitimate position in the caste hierarchy. This position allows a Cakyar playing the Vidusaka not only to break social barriers by criticizing his “betters,” but also to use the parody of the four *puruṣārthas*<sup>21</sup> to criticize the caste system itself by describing illicit sexual relationships between Brahmin men and courtesans.<sup>22</sup>

The fact that this criticism

was not just tolerated but was positively accepted and encouraged by the Brahmins themselves, who most often would sit with undisguised glee as they themselves were being ridiculed and derided, suggests that it was a sanctioned subversion, a controlled carnivalesque, where critique was permitted as a social safety valve that ultimately serves to preserve rather than destabilize that society and its power structures.<sup>23</sup>

In the tenth century CE, Tolan, the legendary court poet and jester of Kulasekhara Varman, is believed to have reformed Kūṭiyāṭṭam theatre. One of the many major contributions brought by Tolan was the foregrounding of the character of the

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., pp. 94f.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 236.

<sup>20</sup> Kapila Vatsayayan, *Traditional Indian Theatres. Multiple Streams*, New Delhi 1980, p. 26.

<sup>21</sup> *Puruṣārthas* literally means ‘object of men’. It is a key concept in Hinduism and refers to the four proper goals or aims of a human life. The four *puruṣārthas* are Dharma, Artha, Kama, and Moksha (righteousness, prosperity, pleasure, and self-actualisation).

<sup>22</sup> Christian DuComb, Present-Day Kutiyattam. G. Venu's Radical and Reactionary Sanskrit Theatre, in *TDR. The Drama Review* 51/3, 2007, pp. 98–117, here p. 103.

<sup>23</sup> Narayanan, *Space, Time and Ways of Seeing*, p. 239.

*vidūṣaka*, which in turn made the *cākyār* into a crucial and engaging presence in Kūṭiyāṭṭam.<sup>24</sup> The emerging prominence of the *vidūṣaka* figure was the striking element that led to the popularisation as well as the colloquialisation of the art form.

While the rest of the characters can never acknowledge the presence of the audience or directly interact with them, the *vidūṣaka* makes direct remarks to the audience, comments on them, makes fun of them, asks them questions, and also refers to features, events, and persons figuring in their lives. The audience, however, can never talk back to the *vidūṣaka* or bring him down to their mundane level, their responses being limited solely to passive actions such as laughter, sounds of appreciation, and so on. In a sense, the *vidūṣaka* inhabits a time/space matrix between that of the play and that of the audience and functions as a link between the two worlds.<sup>25</sup>

### *Prominence of Cākyār-kūttu performances in the nineteenth century – a source-based analysis*

The role of the *vidūṣaka* became a full-fledged form called Cākyār-kūttu, which emerged as an offshoot of Kūṭiyāṭṭam and became prominent during the nineteenth century. Cākyār-kūttu is a solo performance where the *cākyār* is supported by two drummers of the *nambyār* caste who drive the rhythm of the performance and emphasise the *cākyār*'s punchlines on large pot-shaped drums called *miḷavu*.<sup>26</sup>

In a satirical performance, the *cākyār* narrates stories, incidents, or anecdotes from the *Puranas* (ancient texts, epics like *Ramayana* or *Mahabharata*) and entertains the audience. During the *Kūttu* (performance), the *cākyār* comments on current affairs of society. The text for such presentations was produced by either *cākyārs* or poets. These texts are called *prabandhas*, and their performance came to be known as *Prabandhakūttu*. *Prabandhas* were written mostly in *Champu* style, a literary tradition that combines poetry and prose. *Prabandhakūttu* and Cākyār-kūttu are sometimes used interchangeably, the difference being that when *Prabandhakūttu* is performed, the text consists exclusively of *prabandhas* whereas when Cākyār-kūttu is performed, the text could contain *prabandhas* as well as other ancient Sanskrit texts. These *prabandhas* became prominent during and after the nineteenth century, as is clearly established in two sources: the Sanskrit *bhāṇa*<sup>27</sup> and colonial administrative records of that period.

<sup>24</sup> Snehal P. Sanathanan/Vinod Balakrishnan, Before the Political Cartoonist, There Was the Vidusaka. A Case for an Indigenous Comic Tradition, in *The European Journal of Humour Research* 9/4, 2021, pp. 91–109, <https://europeanjournalofhumour.org/ejhr/article/view/571>.

<sup>25</sup> Mundoli Narayanan, Over-Ritualization of Performance. Western Discourses on Kutiyattam, in *TDR. The Drama Review* 50/2, 2006, pp. 136–153, here p. 146.

<sup>26</sup> Donald R. Davis Jr, Satire as Apology. The Puruṣārthakkūttū of Kerala, in *Irreverent History. Essays for MGS Narayanan*, ed. by Kesavan Veluthat/Donald Richard Davis, New Delhi 2014, pp. 93–109.

<sup>27</sup> *Bhāṇa* is a comedic monologue in one act, in which the *viṭa* or 'playboy' engages with a number of unseen characters, using the *ākāśabhāṣita* ('talking to the sky') technique. The *viṭa* is highly witty and satirises the evils of the society. He is similar to the *vidūṣaka*, the difference being that the *viṭa* used Sanskrit whereas the *vidūṣaka* used the local Malayalam language.

The Sanskrit *bhāṇa* is one of the classical forms of theatre delineated by Bharat-amuni in his *Nāṭyaśāstra*. This tradition of performing *bhāṇas* spread across the country, and Kerala was not untouched by this development. Particularly between the fourteenth and mid-nineteenth century, many *bhāṇas* were produced and performed in Sanskrit and Malayalam for audiences across Kerala.<sup>28</sup>

The Kerala *bhāṇas* seem to have interfered with the styles of *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* and *Cākyārkūttu*: “[T]he fact remains that the *Bhāṇas* influenced the *Cākyārkūttu* and in terms [recte: in turn] the *Cākyārkūttu* encouraged the composition of a large number of *bhāṇa*.”<sup>29</sup>

Here, it is crucial to mention one of the *bhāṇa* texts of nineteenth-century Kerala that gives a vivid account of the *Cākyārkūttu* theatre and its relevance during this period. *Rasasadana-bhāṇa* by Godavarma Yuvaraja (1800–1851) was a popular text of that period that was widely performed. The main character of the plot is the *viṭa* named Pallavaka.

He is clever, confident, and married; an expert in the erotic arts and wise to the ins and outs of the red-light district. His friend has asked him to escort his wife, Candanamālā, to go and worship at the temple of the Goddess Bhadrakālī (Bhagavathy) amidst the annual *Keliyātrā* (Tālappoli) festival that is happening at the temple. During the morning hours, the *Viṭa* successfully accomplishes this task, with an assortment of encounters along the way.<sup>30</sup>

Towards the end of the *Rasasadana-bhāṇa*, the *viṭa* “finds himself near a stage where drumrolls can be heard, summoning people to an enactment” of a *prabandha*.<sup>31</sup> The description suggests it to be a *Kūttu*, one of the earliest performative traditions of Kerala:

The stage is rocking to the beat of the drum in the back, in the middle is a pleasant shining lamp, while on the side there are marvelous female musicians, and, in the front, distinguished Brahmins, the *rasa*-connoisseurs. Onto this stage, some actor enters, and enacts some sort of story (*prabandham*) with clear expressions.<sup>32</sup>

The *viṭa* calls this performance something extraordinary. He subsequently says:

What is this play? Ah, it’s like the sweetness of *athirasa*, deriving its essence from the expressions of emotions and gestures. Through the eyes, through the gestures prescribed by Sanjaya, through the subtle nuances of speech, the soul of Sanskrit storytelling is revealed. Explaining

<sup>28</sup> See Tarakad S. Devarajan, *A Critical Study of the Bhāṇa Literature of Kerala*, PhD dissertation, University of Kerala 1988.

<sup>29</sup> K. K. Raji, *Rasaratnākara Bhāṇa. Critical Study and Translation*, PhD dissertation, Government Sanskrit College Tripunithura 1999, pp. 66–83, quotation on p. 83. See also Elena Mucciarelli/Adheesh Sathaye, Transcreating Sanskrit Humour through *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*. The Translation and Performance of the *Rasasadana Bhāṇa*, in *Asian Literature and Translation* 11/1, 2024, pp. 16–51, <https://doi.org/10.18573/alt.38>.

<sup>30</sup> Kerala *Bhāṇas*, *Nepathya. Humour through Kūṭiyāṭṭam Performance*, online, n.d., <https://blogs.ubc.ca/bhana/>.

<sup>31</sup> Mucciarelli/Sathaye, *Transcreating Sanskrit Humour through Kūṭiyāṭṭam*, p. 26.

<sup>32</sup> “अत्र गतवेदमपि कचिदिवलोकयामि । (इति तथा कृत्वा ।) मध्ये दीपज्वळनमधुरे पार्श्वतः पाणधिसूत्री- चित्तिभूते सरसहृदयर्भूसरैभस राधे । पृष्ठे मारुदङ्गकिलिसति रङ्गदेशे प्रवर्षितः स्पष्टाकृतं नटयति नटः कोऽपि किंचपिरबन्धम् ॥ २२० ॥” (*Rasasadana*: 220). Quoted after *The Rasasadana Bhāṇa of Yuvarāja*, ed. by Pandit S’ivadatta/Kās’ināth Pāndurang Parab, Bombay 1893 (*Kavyamala*, 37), p. 59. Translation: Kerala *Bhāṇas*, *Nepathya*.

each element in detail, with all its six virtues shining brightly as ornaments, one can see the essence.<sup>33</sup>

In the above reference, it is pretty clear that the *viṭa*, who is himself a wanderer, observes a *Prabandhakūttu* and registers the minute details of the performance. The detailing is similar to what has been mentioned earlier about the space and the sequence of events that is followed while performing *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*.

Another source for performance traditions of nineteenth-century *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* are the British colonial accounts where we find descriptions of *Cākyārkkūttu*. During the nineteenth century, the colonial masters strengthened their grip all over India. In the province of Kerala, the princely states of Cochin and Travancore became a subsidiary alliance, and the Malabar region came under direct rule.<sup>34</sup> During the late part of the nineteenth century, *Cākyārkkūttu* formed a major part of the repertoire of *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*. With temples' resources dwindling and the princely states of Travancore and Cochin having limited resources to fund the temples and the *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* performers, the artists used the *vidūṣaka* and the solo performances of *Cākyārkkūttu* as a means to critique the state and tell of their present dismal conditions.

In one instance, Nagam Aiya writes a detailed account of *Cākyārkkūttu*:

The Chakkiyar Koothu is one of the chief elements of enjoyment in a temple Ootsavam [festival], affording intellectual recreation to the middle aged and the old [...]. The Chakkiyar is well up in the art of humouring his audience. The one that I heard is particularly a great master of that art, being considered one of the very ablest performers in Malabar. He is well read and can himself compose in Sanskrit or Malayalam. The delivery is extempore and the Chakkiyar himself told me that he knows by rote about 15,000 Sanskrit slokas [verses].<sup>35</sup> [...] The Chakkiyar criticises men in authority and their measures in terms of scathing sarcasm whenever he gets an opportunity for doing so, or when he feels sufficient confidence in the good sense and tolerance of the officials who listen to him. Even princes and nobles are not spared. H. H. the late Maha Rajah once listened to a performance by this same Chakkiyar in one of the *Koothambaloms* attached to a most important pagoda in North Travancore. This *Koothambalom* was in a very neglected condition. The roof was riddled with holes. Wishing to draw His Highness' attention to the wretched condition of the roof, the Chakkiyar quietly remarked in the course of his performance that the occasion was not only honoured by the presence of the august Maharajah and his officials, but even by the moon and the stars resplendently shining through the roof. This had a most wholesome effect, for the building was taken in hand the next day and put into thorough order; but he is neither vulgar nor offensive in his criticisms. [...] The Chakkiyar is also a very contented gentleman, for he gives you this magnificent performance for the small sum of three rupees and a quarter, which is generally paid by one of the audience, the remaining hundreds of spectators enjoying the

<sup>33</sup> “अये, अतरिसावहमेवैतत् । यतः । भावव्यजनमन्यदेव ललतितुत्पादति नेत्रयोः संज्जायै वह्नितिसु हस्ततलयो दासु चान्यो गुणः । वाणी प्राकृतसंस्कृतात्मकतया द्वेधापयुदीण पुनयीख्याता च परैव षगुणवती सख तदसयाद्भुतम् ॥ २२१ ॥” (*Rasasadana*: 221). Quoted after *The Rasasadana Bhāna of Yuvarāja*, ed. by Pandit S'ivadatta/Kās'ināth Pāndurang Parab, Bombay 1893 (*Kavyamala*, 37), p. 59. Translation by the present writers.

<sup>34</sup> Narayanan, *Space, Time and Ways of Seeing*, p. 244.

<sup>35</sup> The performers of *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* were well versed in numerous Sanskrit texts. The training process of the artists, which lasted for years, had strict adherence to rote learning of Sanskrit *shlokas*. In this case, the Chakkiyar claims that he knows by rote around 15,000 *shlokas*.

amusement gratis. The performance continues for several nights during the Ootsavam season, and is given in nearly all the big temples of the country. The *Chakkyarkoothu* is one of the most popular institutions of the land[.]<sup>36</sup>

Kūṭiyāṭṭam is referred to here as institution in itself that provides intellectual recreation. The impact of the colonial rule is implicitly registered as the *cākyār* makes satirical jibes at the Maharaja. The patron-client relationship that flourished during the medieval period (twelfth–eighteenth centuries) had dwindled with the takeover by the colonial administration. The *cākyār* was now dependent on the audiences for payment, which was meagre compared to the time and effort he put in. So, through satire, he depicts the dismal condition of the space, the *kūttampalam* and the performers.

So, in a nutshell, it is quite evident that during the nineteenth century, Cākyār-kūttu, the offshoot of Kūṭiyāṭṭam, became prominent and was widely performed across Kerala. Its prominence can be established not only by the *prabandha* texts written and performed by the *cākyār* in this period but also by the detailed references of Cākyār-kūttu in other performing traditions such as the Kerala *bhāṇas* and in the records of colonial administration.

### *Reasons for the decline of Kūṭiyāṭṭam in the late nineteenth century*

During the nineteenth century important developments happened in Kerala. Firstly,

British colonialism came to take firm root in Kerala, with the Malabar region in the north under direct rule, and with Cochin and Travancore signing treaties of subsidiary alliance as princely states under British control.<sup>37</sup>

Second, there were caste-based reform movements throughout Kerala in this period:

[T]here was a marked decline and breakdown of the Brahminical order and the caste system associated with it. There was a steady weakening of the temple establishments as economic centres and a rapid dissolution of agrarian temple societies and their system of caste-based professions supported by *virutti* [revenue] from the temples. As the process intensified, many temples found their resources drying up and even the continuation of their customary practices being threatened due to increasing lack of funds.<sup>38</sup>

Third, this period witnessed a decline in the influence of the temple ecosystem and its associated traditions over the people.

In fact, the period saw a steady exodus of people from their age-old, caste-based professions and practices to ones that were part of a more modern, capital-based, mercantile economy

<sup>36</sup> Nagam V. Aiya, *The Travancore State Manual*, Trivandrum 1906, 2, pp. 332–334 (quoting his own “Report on the Census of Travancore for 1891”).

<sup>37</sup> Narayanan, *Space, Time and Ways of Seeing*, p. 244.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 245.

and from the villages where their families had been resident for centuries to newly forming towns and urban centres.<sup>39</sup>

Narayanan argues that all these elements “had a tremendous impact” on Kūṭiyāṭṭam with respect to “its economic contexts and structures of reception”. From the late nineteenth century, Kūṭiyāṭṭam “started facing a serious decline in economic support and [aesthetic] patronage.”<sup>40</sup> The system of patronage prevalent in the temples of Kerala was weakening, and there was but negligible state support for the traditional art of learning *Guru-Sisya Sampradaya* (the Indian tradition of teacher-disciple relations), especially as colonial curricula took over the Indian educational system. For these reasons, it became difficult for Kūṭiyāṭṭam to sustain itself.

Even within castes traditionally associated with temple service, the advent of modern education and the shifting knowledge requirements of emerging professions led to a steady decline in those proficient in Sanskrit and the gestural vocabulary of Kūṭiyāṭṭam. Additionally, modernisation and secularisation contributed to the diminishing value placed on traditional lifestyles and practices, resulting in the marginalisation of Kūṭiyāṭṭam and related temple art forms.<sup>41</sup>

There was a steady attenuation in the rate and number of performances, and many temples had little option but to discontinue performances altogether because their resources were totally inadequate to meet the costs of performance. At the same time, in a few temples where performances were continued, probably due to ritual considerations, the payment for the practitioners failed to do justice to their actual costs of living and performance in a drastically altered and monetized economic system. As a result, in many temples, performances continued only because the performers considered it a sacred duty they had to carry out irrespective of whether they were paid or not. Such performances were usually conducted in a vastly shrunken, ‘skeletal’ form, whereby they “became just a ‘ritual,’ in the unsavory sense of the term” [...].<sup>42</sup> A major consequence of this was that several acts, roles and sections of plays fell into disuse and gradually disappeared from the stage altogether. This is of course not to deny that in some richer temples, such as the Pūrnatrayīśa Temple in Tripunithura and the Vaṭakkumṇāthan Temple in Thrissur, performances continued unhindered [by] the changing economic conditions.<sup>43</sup>

Figure 2 gives an overview of the temples where Kūṭiyāṭṭam was (or is) performed.

At the same time, several other forms of popular entertainment [...] entered the scene, which demanded much less investment in terms of pre-knowledge, attendance time or attention. Inevitably, all this led to a drastic dwindling of the audiences for Kutiyattam until, by the 1950s, only a few remained as regular, knowledgeable viewers.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 246.

<sup>42</sup> See also Mundoli Narayanan, *From Exclusivity to Exposure. The Changing Circumstances of Kutiyattam*, in *Comparative Culture* 11, 2005, pp. 31–46, here p. 44.

<sup>43</sup> Narayanan, *Space, Time and Ways of Seeing*, pp. 245f.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.



Fig. 2. Map of the main temples where *Küttu* was (or is) performed (© Virginie Johan, see V. Johan, *The Flower Needs its Roots to Continue to Grow*, in *Indian Folklife. A Quarterly Newsletter from National Folklore Support Centre* 38, 2011, pp. 20–26)

Fearing the loss of this theatre tradition, in this phase many reformist performers decided to bring Kūṭiyāṭṭam into public places after having been limited to the *kūttampalams* for the last six centuries.<sup>45</sup>

This implied changes in the aesthetics and the performative aspect of the performance, such as the use of space, light and timings of the performance. Due to the larger dimensions of the stage and the auditorium in most public theatres and the increased distance between the performer and the audience, it became unfeasible for the audience to pay close attention to fine details and subtle movements. Similarly, the actors could not fully realise the traditional measured, contained style of acting with its strong emphasis on suggestion and evocation.<sup>46</sup>

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Kerala, once-rich temples lost their holdings in the wake of land reforms. This led to performances being drastically curtailed [...]. The temples were no longer able to support the Kūṭiyāṭṭam-performing families. Additionally, [in this period there were fewer audiences] who could properly follow a theatre cultivated for an educated elite, and who could develop an appreciation for its subtly mediated messages.<sup>47</sup>

In the 1920s, an effort was made to take Kūṭiyāṭṭam out of the temple theatre and to provide better access to the public, who were eager to watch the so-called temple art forms. Patrons of the fine arts and the elite Hindu population wanted to make Kūṭiyāṭṭam accessible to the common people, captured in an anecdote from famous actore Mani Madhava Chakyar, who was requested by P. S. Varier<sup>48</sup> to present a full-fledged Kūṭiyāṭṭam production in Varier's drama hall in order to start a movement and promote the artists: "We cannot take our temples everywhere we go, so we have to think of other means to present Kūṭiyāṭṭam to the public."<sup>49</sup> Mani Madhava Chakyar did not accept this request as he could not have gone against the existing social norms surrounding the art tradition. However, in a historical milestone, Mani Madhava Chakyar would in fact later take Kūṭiyāṭṭam beyond the boundaries of the traditional stage. The progress was slow-paced: initially he began by arranging Kūṭiyāṭṭam performances outside the *kūttampalam*, and later he performed Cākṃyārkūttu for All-India Radio and in a school at Killikkurissimangalam. He then took the form beyond the borders of Kerala, first to Madras and then to Delhi, Benares, and Ujjain. By the 1950s, Kūṭiyāṭṭam had gained wide acclamation and national attention as one of the oldest existing theatre forms.

By the 1990s, Kūṭiyāṭṭam performances staged outside the temple were no longer considered as a rare sight, and this progress was lauded as one of the most favourable consequences of the formation of a wider audience and led to not just

<sup>45</sup> Heike Moser, Kūṭiyāṭṭam on the Move. From Temple Theatres to Festival Stages, in *South Asian Festivals on the Move*, ed. by Ute Hüsken/Axel Michaels, Wiesbaden 2013 (Ethno-Indology, Vol. 13), pp. 245–274, p. 251.

<sup>46</sup> See also Narayanan, *Space, Time and Ways of Seeing*, p. 250.

<sup>47</sup> Moser, Kūṭiyāṭṭam on the Move, p. 251.

<sup>48</sup> Founder of the now world famous Kottakkal Arya vaidya Shala, a prestigious Ayurveda research centre in Kerala. He is also a luminary in the art world who has made significant contributions to the Artscape of Kerala.

<sup>49</sup> Paulose, *Kutiyattam Theatre*, p. 221.

local and national but global acclamation for this art form. In the same period there was an upsurge of social and aesthetic patronage through which the form was brought into the forefront through art institutions, further distancing it from the rigid caste hierarchy.<sup>50</sup> World institutions also recognised this, and in 2001, Kūṭiyāṭṭam became the first art form in India to get the “UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity” tag.<sup>51</sup>

### *Ritual versus the radical – socio-politically induced canon shift in the performing tradition*

The shift of Kūṭiyāṭṭam from the temples to public places and its continued legacy can be attributed to two factors. First, the great practitioners of Kūṭiyāṭṭam managed to preserve elements of the *Aattaprakaram* (acting manuals) while evolving their practice to suit the new performance venues. Second is the aesthetic experience of the audience, which has been wide-ranging. The comedic and satirical performances of the *cākyār* have just added to this experience. Kūṭiyāṭṭam emerged as one of the prominent actor’s theatres with detailed acting techniques being developed and perfected.

As Narayanan has argued, in Western discourses Kūṭiyāṭṭam has been over-ritualised whereas this was not actually the case for this art form. He states:

[T]he very system of kutiyattam and its basic theatrical ethos do not permit devotional approaches, precisely because of the highly self-conscious nature of the kutiyattam theatrical performance. In numerous folk/ritual performances, such as *theyyam*, *thira*, or *kagura*, the god himself is supposed to be present and manifested through the actor during the time of performance; in other words, the actor is supposed to be transformed into the god-figure he plays and thus accepted with reverence by the audience/the faithful. By contrast, in kutiyattam, the actor always maintains his or her distinct identity and never fully becomes the character. The actor is the ground on which a character is placed and constructed, the neutrality of which is always preserved in order that it can be revisited and other characters constructed at the same site, with the possibility of alternation between characters.<sup>52</sup>

In Kūṭiyāṭṭam, the theatrical illusion is never entirely concealed; the audience remains aware that an actor is portraying a character. In many cases, this awareness is deliberately emphasised, allowing the performance to fully explore and utilise theatrical conventions and dramatic artifice. Sudha Gopalakrishnan explains this fact in the following:

The actor has no dramatic empathy with the role/roles presented, for it is only a ‘performance’, with the actor *narrating* the events and *projecting* the roles played on the stage. Drama here

<sup>50</sup> See Moser, Kūṭiyāṭṭam on the Move.

<sup>51</sup> See Lowthorp, Voices on the Ground.

<sup>52</sup> Narayanan, Over-Ritualization of Performance, p. 140.

assumes an unparalleled elasticity, and acting establishes the illusory nature of play – drama is pretense; to see it is to recognise and accept the pretense.<sup>53</sup>

The persistent presence of the actor as a performer, coupled with the audience's awareness of the established principles and conventions of acting, added layers of complexity to the cultivation of religious devotion within the Kūṭiyāṭṭam repertoire. Another crucial aspect is that the audience's engagement was not driven by narrative curiosity, as they were already familiar with the overarching stories of the plays. Since these performances extended over several days, with only a single act presented each day, the audience's focus did not center on the progression of the storyline. Instead, the primary emphasis was placed on the audiovisual theatrical narrative, which was shaped by a series of carefully constructed onstage micro-situations. These moments arose either from the necessity of elaborating and interpreting the play's text or from the need for character exposition, each presenting distinct challenges that demanded exceptional skill and technique from the performers. For an initiated audience, critical engagement revolved around the immediate theatrical experience and the actor's proficiency and artistry in delivering each specific situation in accordance with established expectations from past performances. Their appreciation extended beyond purely religious concerns, such as the triumph of good over evil or deities over demons, to the meticulous execution of theatrical techniques and the artistic mastery displayed onstage.

### Conclusion

Mūlikūḷam Kocckuṭṭan Cākyār described the transition of the Kūṭiyāṭṭam performance tradition thus: "Once Kūṭiyāṭṭam was done for the deity; now the people have become the deity, and we try to please the people".<sup>54</sup> From the nineteenth century onward, when the art form was made available outside the temple for the wider public, the act of the *vidūṣaka* and Cākyār-kūttu gained significance. The debates around Kūṭiyāṭṭam's radical mobility from the temple to more democratic spheres were largely based on the loss of an 'original purity' when transplanted from its original setting: the *kūttampalams* that principally accommodated caste audiences. However, practitioners of Kūṭiyāṭṭam are stuck in the dilemma of mediating between the claims of preserving the traditional repertoire and at the same time adhering to the need to sustain the relevance to modern-day viewership. As social-science and performance-studies scholars argue, the attempt to preserve the ritualistic as well as the traditional style would also imply reviving the bygone social structure with its concomitant hierarchy and rigid social order. It is merely the extra-textual performance elements, like the nuanced method of acting,

<sup>53</sup> Sudha Gopalakrishnan, *Kutiyattam*, online, n.d., [http://ignca.gov.in/PDF\\_data/Kutiyattam.pdf](http://ignca.gov.in/PDF_data/Kutiyattam.pdf), p. [4].

<sup>54</sup> Mūlikūḷam Kocckuṭṭan Cākyār, quoted in N. P. Unni/Bruce M. Sullivan, *The Wedding of Arjuna and Subhadrā. The Kūṭiyāṭṭam Drama Subhadrā-Dhanañjaya*, Delhi 2001, p. 64.

the recitations, that have strengthened the performativity of the art form while being connected to the religious domain, even in current times. Nevertheless, the strength of the performance tradition from its inception is derived from the power of the acting technique *abhinaya* (expressions), which yields *rasa-anubhava* (the aesthetic experience).<sup>55</sup> The informed theatre-going audiences are accustomed to the slow tempo of the performance, complexities of Sanskrit, and the rigidity of the performance elements such as gestures and expressions. Therefore, the performance and viewership has been limited when it comes to Kūṭiyāṭṭam, with its structure and training patterns, which has been changing in the recent past. There is a need to protect the performative elements which are unique to this art form, but at the same time, make it accessible to the ardent performers who have followed the traditional repertoire and not on the basis of familial lineage and patronage.

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<sup>55</sup> The ensuant of emotions.