

Inaugural address – 18.08.2016

Nepathya Kutiyattam Festival – 2016

The president of this august function Adv. M.P. Sreekrishnan, Prof. David Shulman who is our focus today being honored for his creditable achievements, Sri. C.N. Mohanan, Panchayath Vice President, Professor Yigal Bronner our hon'ble guest from Hebrew University Jerusalem, Smt. Elena Mucciarelli from Tubingen University, Germany, and my friends on the dias and the audience.

I am glad to be with you on this happy occasion. The annual Kutiyattam Festival, as all of you know, has become a joyful confluence of different cultures far and near. It not only preserves this surviving relic of the earliest living tradition, but also promotes and popularises this intangible heritage of humanity. we are very much indebted to our honorable guests from the foreign universities who are on pilgrimage to the land of Kutiyattam every year.

This happens to be the birth centenary year of Ammannoor Madhava Chakyar, the doyen of Kutiyattam who left us in 2008. Hence this is an

occasion to pay our homage to that great artist. The Acharya when he passed away at the age of 92 was the senior most practising exponent of Kutiyattam. He has enthralled the connoisseurs all over the world by his wonderful histrionic talents and has created many admirers for Kutiyattam providing an exalted space for Kutiyattam in the world theatre movement.

As you know, the acting community of Kerala is responsible for preserving this traditions for us. They considered it their sacred duty, we may say Kulavrta, to learn, practice perform and hand over this knowledge to posterity. It is supposed that in olden days there were 18 families of Chakyars in Kerala. Ammannur is one of the most illustrious among them. The original home of the Ammannoor family was in Koppam near Pattambi in the Palakkad District. By some reason they ran away leaving their ancestral home and settled in this place Moozhikulam and later spread to Irrinjalakuda where Madhavachakyar was born and spent his life time.

There are legendary stories about the histrionic talents of the actors of this lineage. It will interesting to hear one episode. When king Marthandavarma, who died in the Malayalam year 1858, was the heir apparent, who had as his servant and counsellor Easwara Pillai, the well-known Kathakali performer. The prince had invited Ammannur Parameswara Chakyar the incomparable actor of Kuttiyattam to Thiruvananthapuram to train Eswara Pillai in abhinaya. During his stay the

Chakyar went out one day for a walk in the evening by the sea-shore. There was also present at that time the 'Resident' (Officer) who was an Englishman, his wife and their beloved dog. Though the dog would not attack or bite anyone unless the Englishman or his wife ordered, it was so huge and terrifying that whoever saw it got scared. The dog would not bite but it would go near people and smell around. It saw the Chakyar and went near him. He got really scared and started shouting 'Dog; Dog'. The English man and his wife who knew that the dog would not bite did not call it back and started laughing at the scared Chakyar. When there was no other alternative, the Chakyar bent down and seemingly picked up a stone and hurled it at the dog. But the dog thought that it was hit by the stone and ran away whining. The Englishman and his wife thought that stone had really hit their dog and became angry. On coming to know that the Chakyar was there on royal orders, they decided not to respond immediately; instead went and lodged a complaint in the palace. The Chakyar was summoned and he explained in detail what happened. But the complainants argued that the Chakyar was lying for their dog would not be scared if the Chakyar had only shown the gesture of throwing a stone. "Let me see if I can convince the English man", said the Chakyar and took a few steps backward, acted as though he was picking up a big piece of granite from a pile and dropped it on the man's head. The English man believed that a big stone had fallen

on his head and so fell down screaming. The wife was quite agitated believing that the Chakyar had really dropped a huge stone on her husband's head. The English man regained consciousness after a long time. He sat up, washed his face, drank some water, had servants fan him, and only then could he talk. He then felt his head, made sure that the stone had not fallen on him and said, "Our dog also was not hit then. I have never seen such an accomplished actor in the whole Europe. It is a matter of great pride that there is such a great artist in Kerala", and honoured him with gifts.

You may, perhaps, find it difficult to believe; this anecdote but we cannot rule out these narrations as totally incredible. At a very early age Madhava Chakyar had his education in traditional way – acting methods and Sanskrit. But he was fortunate to get specialised intense training from the Natyasastra scholars of Kodungallore at that time. Two important things he learned from there was the control of inner air (svaravayu) and the subtle and complex eye exercises (Kannusadhakam). It was the Kotungalloor experts, especially Kunjunni Tampuran who enriched *netrabhinaya* in Kerala's natya tradition. Both Kathakali and Kutiyattam gained much through the wonderful emotions that actors expressed through the movement of eyes. Those who have seen the death of Bali presented by

Ammannoor will understand his mastery over controlling the air. His Narasimha, the frightening roaring of the lion, is another example.

G. Venu met Guru in the early eighties. It was from then onwards that his reputation crossed the oceans and Kutiyattam travelled far and wide which ultimately brought the recognition of UNESCO.

Madhava Chakyar was orthodox in preserving the tradition. Earlier he was reluctant to move out of the temple premises. His first journey to Delhi was a horrible experience. He felt guilty to move out of the Koothampalam; his foreign journeys gave him traumatic experiences. Yet he led the renaissance movements vehemently compromising to some extent. There were voices of criticism when he taught non-chakyar students. Even Venuji's debut on stage was criticised. But he ignored them and walked through the high-roads to lead the movement. To wipe out the misconceptions he himself shared stage with his disciple. More than that he bestowed his blessings to Sakuntala, though it was a non-conventional Kutiyattam. Without going further to the details, I will try to summarise the contributions of the great artist.

1. In a crucial moment of near extinction of Kutiyattam, Madhava Chakyar tried hard for its resurrection and found out an international plat-form for it which eventually led to its global recognition.

2. By the special kind of training he gained from the Kodungallor, Chakyar could improve the acting techniques of Kutiyattam to make it more sophisticated and attractive.
3. Along with continuing the existing stories he prepared acting manuals for many plays. The *parnasalankam* which we are going to witness is the best example.
4. Kutiyattam theatre unlike many other classical forms give equal importance to women. But due to socio-cultural reasons roles of women were neglected in Kutiyattam for a long time. Today there is a powerful presence of women in Kutiyattam. Ammannoor rejuvenated Nangiar Kuttu by preparing acting manuals and teaching them to his disciples.
5. Ammannoor does not have progeny to inherit his tradition. But his rich legacy continues through his disciples. It is his greatest contribution to Kutiyattam. Ammannoor Kochukuttan Chakyar, an accomplished artist is now the senior member of the family. There is a new generation that has grown up and becoming known as Madhava Chakyar's disciples. They include Usha Nangiar, Kapila, Sooraj Nambiar, Ammannur Rajaneesh, Ranjit Ramachandran,

Aparna Nangiar from the Ammannur Gurukulam and Margi Madhu, Narayanan and Raman through Margi school.

I do not hesitate to state here that Margi Madhu, Indu and Sreehari are the greatest contributions of Ammannoor tradition to Kutiyattam. This festival itself is a homage to the master.

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I can stop it here. But yesterday Madhu entrusted two more functions to me. One is to inaugurate this function. A few words in that capacity.

As we know Kutiyattam is the presentation of Sanskrit dramas on Kerala stage. Only four Sanskrit plays are chosen from Kerala for this purpose – Kalyana Saugandhika, Subhadradhananja, Tapati Samvarana and Ascharyachudamani. AC in seven Acts deals with the theme of Ramayana. This comparatively small play is the most favourite of actors on Kutiyattam stage, the total presentation of which extends over hundred days. This was presented in full by Margi under the guidance of Sri. D. Appukuttan Nair in the nineteen.

The first Act of it is parnaslankam – the act which presents the construction of a parnasala – grove with leaves. Lakshmana constructs a small hut for Rama and Sita to live in. The original text comes to about six pages in print. This small text is extended to fourteen nights for its performance.

This is the unique dialectics between text and performance in Kutiyattam. Let us analyse this transformation. The first two days are devoted for the entry of the director (sutradhara) to introduce the play to the audience. The next five days are for the entry of the first character – Lakshmana. The next character is on stage on the eight and ninth days. The actual text is enacted only on the last three days! That means, out of the 14 days on stage, the actual play is only for three days and the eleven days are used for the narration of the entries of sutradhara and two characters. What a strange combination! This is not based on the principles of Natyasastra, but an innovation of Kerala. Kulasekhara, a 10th century royal dramatist of Kerala wrote two Sanskrit plays and formulated certain rules for the presentation of his plays. Vyangyavyakhya is the name of his stage manual. He insisted that every character in his first entry should establish himself by narrating his previous story up to the point of his entry. This is to facilitate the audience to understand the character more clearly. All these narrations are non-textual. The actor can use his imagination to construct this pre-text. The result of this on theatre was that –

- i. The author of the text became virtually irrelevant. The multi – charactered stage thus was transferred to mono acting.
- ii. Sanskrit theatre became an ‘actors’ theatre. Actor is liberated from all kinds of restraints.

- iii. Three functions were bestowed upon the actor – that of imitator, narrator and interpreter.
- iv. Bharata's theatre was imitative ; Kutiyatam theatre became imaginative – unique theatre of imagination.

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Before concluding this, I have the pleasant duty to honour our great friend David Shulman. His has become a household name for us. He has been conferred the this year's Israel Prize for his research on the literature and culture of Southern India.

Prof. Shulman is intimately connected with all of us. Even before his Nepathya Kutiyattam experiences, we were good friends; he had visited the Sanskrit University and the Sanskrit College at Tripunithura. I have always admired him as one of the World's foremost authorities on the languages of India. He is a poet, a literary critic and a cultural anthropologist. He has authored/co-authored more than 20 books on various subjects that cover the wide spectrum of the Cultural History of South India.

What I admire most is the peace – activist in him. He is very much worried over the conflict between Israel and Palastine. He wonders how Israel, 'once a home to utopian idealists and humanists, should have engendered and given free rein to a murderous, also ultimately suicidal, messianism,'

and asks if the 'humane heart of the Jewish tradition' always contain the 'seeds of self-righteous terror' he observed among settlers. He finds within himself an intersection of hope, faith and empathy, and 'the same dark forces that are active among the most predatory of the settlers', and it is this which provides him with 'a reason to act'^[17] against what he regards as 'pure, rarefied, unadulterated, unreasoning, uncontainable human evil'.

You will be surprised to know that he announced that he will donate the prize to movement that provides support to Palestinian residents in the Hebron area.

Dear Shulman, we are proud of your activities. Please accept this honour as a humble token of our recognition of your achievements.

Thank you!