

**Arts of Kerala kshetra – Book release**  
**IGNCA, Delhi - 21.04.2015**

Respected Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan, Respected President of IGNCA Shri C.R. Gharekhan, Veena Joshiji, my fellow panelists and my friends,

I am really excited to be with you in this august gathering on this auspicious occasion. My mind runs back to three decades, 28 years to be specific, when Kapilaji delivered the first Parikshith Memorial Lecture in the Govt. Sanskrit College at Tripunithura in Kerala. The Sanskrit College there, now celebrating the centenary, was established by the Scholar – King of the erstwhile Cochin State. Parikshith maharaja (1876 – 1964) was the last ruler. In his narration of the integration of Indian States, Sri. V.P. Menon recollects how graciously the Maharaja signed the agreement of accession to Indian Union without any claim or bargain. He was a philosopher-king in the true sense of the term. He was one of the greatest scholars of his time. I had the good fortune in my student days to see him from a distance majestically presiding over the annual assembly of Sanskrit Scholars. Later I became the Principal of that institution. One of our first ventures was to institute an international lecture to commemorate his scholarship. The Chairman of the College Committee, Sri. K.M. Kannampilly, the former ambassador invited Kapilaji to deliver the inaugural lecture. We could not contain our joy when the news of her acceptance reached us.

She delivered the lecture on three days from the first of August 1988 in the humble premises of the old college. Eminent dignitaries like Dr. U.R. Ananthamoorthy, Prof. G. Sankara Pillai, Kalamandalam Chairman K.V. Kochaniyan, Kalamandalam Kalyanikutty Amma and others participated in the sessions. The text of the lecture was released on the occasion of the next year's lecture which was delivered by Dr. Sheldon Pollock.

The lecture and the publication of the text evoked considerable interest in the academic circle.

I remember how the title Kerala Kshethra was misunderstood by some to mean simply the temple arts, without realising the significance of the term Kshetra in which it was used in the text. There were good reviews especially in the English press.

Little did I imagine, that the same scene will be re-enacted after three decades in this august assembly in the presence of Kapilaji in this way. I thank the authorities of the Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts for this kind gesture.

Kapilaji started her talk telling the audience that she comes to Kerala in a spirit of pilgrimage. She knows the land, her arts and culture more intimately and every visit makes the feeling more intense.

The central theme of her talk, therefore, is how the different traditions, let it be popular or classical, little or great, co-exist to form an integral part of the whole.

Two forms of Kerala have been recognised by UNESCO as the intangible heritage of humanity. They are Mutiyettu and Kutiyattam – the former a ritual worship of the mother goddess and the latter a stylised form of presentation of Sanskrit drama inherited from *Natyasastra*.

As is known to everybody the mother – Bhagavathy – is the primordial archetype of Kerala. She is worshipped in the pictorial kalams in the village shrines by her devotees.

Kalamezhuthu is the primeval form of painting of Kerala which traces its origin to the early days of the dawn of our civilization. It is the expression of love, fear and aspirations of a community in its infant stage, encoded in mythical and mysterious ritual practices. *Kalam* stands for the paddy field. After a rich harvest when people are free of work and the fertile land vacant, the community calls the village mother to share their fears and aspirations with her. One's child is seriously ill, another's husband is not loyal, yet another has lost everything in a calamity. There is none else with whom they are free to converse and seek solutions for their problems. The mother-goddess is protective, benevolent, even though furious at times over their omissions. The community contemplates, conceives her form in their minds and transfers the unconscious to line and colours to form an image. First they draw the border line, then start to stretch from the centre to the sides. The process is called writing not drawing as we usually do because the latter holds the stamp of authenticity. They choose the colours from their surroundings. They can distinguish between the day(white)and darkness(night) and the juncture of both *sandhya* (red).These were the three primary colours known to the ancient man. Slowly they recognised yellow and green. They were fascinated by the multiple combinations of these five basic colours. They cultivated an unfailing process to produce these colours from natural sources – white from rice powder, black by burning the husk of the corn, yellow from turmeric, green from dried leaves and red from a mixture of turmeric powder with quick lime. This indigenous pattern of colour synthesis is unique to Kerala.

Kutiyattam is the mode of acting Sanskrit plays prevalent in Kerala. It has a pan-Indian tradition of *Natyasastra* which can be traced back to two thousand years. But what we see in Kutiyattam today is the form as improvised by Kulasekhara by the application of the principles of *Dharani* of *Anandavardhana* as seen in *Vyangyavyakhya*. The imitation of Bharata was further developed into narration and interpretation. But the Vidushaka with his regional language has changed the stylistic form to a narrative. It is like a wall-clock. The face of it is more or less static, but the tongue move from the high to the low and again to the high breaking the rigid social structures.

Mutiyettu and Kutiyattam can be studied as the two extremes – the former the popular and the latter the stylised. In between these two, there are innumerable forms distinctive in form and content, but interconnected to one another in different ways. The theme of the lecture is to explore the possible links of these different traditions:

‘The moment we begin to observe a culture, especially a culture with long living continuities, change is, as in-built as is the fact that there is a perennial axis around which a lifestyle or a culture moves. It was these experiences in Kerala, which motivated me to explore further aspects of the artistic traditions both at the level of theory and practice. The results of these explorations, although inadequate and tentative, have been expressed at many forums.’

The task of the student is to recognize the *svarupa* and *svadharm*a of a kshetra at its micro and macro levels. So the diversity in the forms has some unifying principles in its formulation.

To cite a few examples –

1. The equivalent of the *saladahana in the yanja* is seen in the last part of Kutiyattam when the actor lit the fire and prostrate before it. Similarly the *dhulisilpa* is completely erased in all the *kalams* of Bhagvati worship.
2. See the different colour combinations of the *kalam*. The same can be repeated in more sophisticated way in the facial make ups of the kathakali and kutiyattam actors.
3. The organic synthesis of colour of *kalam* is seen reflected in the *dhulisilpams*, in the figures in mural paintings and pictures.

The instances can be multiplied. The central point in this discussion is to treat the forms as a single whole and study them as parts of the whole instead of separate entities.

Kerala’s innumerable manifestations of ritual, dance, drama, painting, *kalam*, etc., which are identified as little traditions, are somehow linked to the great traditions of kathakali, kutiyattam, etc. All of them make the whole of Kerala arts.

Our efforts should be directed to find out the bridges that link these traditions.