

# The Creative Launcher

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## Padayani as an Indian Epic Drama

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### Abstract

Padayani, the time-tested folk art of Southern Kerala, is deep-rooted in the cultural ethos of rural life. Any old but existing art form that blends uniquely life and myth provides a kaleidoscopic view of the people's cultural variety and the underlying unitary vision behind the phenomenon. Folk arts have been called fossils of a distant past. It is a call from the distant past reaching out to the present. The paper deals with the Epic nature of Padayani and the showcase the scope of Padayani highlighting 'Padayani as an Epic Drama'. Padayani in its total structure and style is an epic drama. How many characters! How many conflicting incidents! The natural costumes; the natural light settings; the deep back colour of the night curtain around; the anti heroine appearing in frenzy mood is lead to the smiling mood. Along with the mental change of the heroine, the nature, the black colour of the curtain and even the mind of the spectators together undergo to that smiling mood – expecting a better and auspicious atmosphere.

**Keywords-** *Bhairavi Kolam, Epic drama, Trtaditional ritual, Thullal, Vinodam*

Kerala- the 'God's own country' is a birth place for innumerable art forms filled with life and social values. In addition to the level of worship or artistic presentations, they have the flavour of life of old generations. These older generations are intelligent in finding art in their professions and are able to do their work artistically. Un fortunately, the arrival of external cultures, their influences and the developments of new trends destroyed the identity of the real tradition to a large extent. The net result is the disappearance of several art forms. Many were in the situation of deformation. Some are misinterpreted or unable to get the real flavour and beauty. Hopefully, like glittering stars, some are still alive and active as the carriers of the real culture and tradition. Such a remarkable and peculiar form is 'padayani'- the well-known ritual tradition of central Travancore in South Kerala.

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Just as other art forms, Padayani cannot be considered as a single art form with a given frame. It is the name for a set of rites like 'oorali thullal' (a form of worship to please 'maladeva' - the hill god, oorali is the priest of maladeva) 'Vellamkudi' (the ritual to please departed souls) and village festival conducting annually in sacred groves as Bhagavathy temples. Thus it is a group of rites and arts coming under are cultural flow. It is flourished and popularised on the bank of the sacred river 'Pampa' in south Kerala. Still it is active at this area and is mixed with the village life thus it is an evident of the great 'Pampa River Culture'

The term 'Padayani' has several interpretations. One is that it is the representation of a battle array. It is connected with the march of 'Kali' for the fight against the devilish king 'Darikasura' the item 'Thavadi' in padayani can be attached to this argument. Another one points out that the festival sprang up from the meeting of soldiers at the intervals of battles for time pass. They used witty remarks and humorous shows. To an extent it can be linked to the stires of padayani called 'Vinodam'. The third argument it in the sense of creativity. It opines that everything in padayani is related to the mighty creation. There are several factors supporting this idea firstly, according to the belief, it is performed to cool down the furious Kali. It is an escape from destruction and formation of the normal life. Secondly this festival motivates complete purification of the village. There is the cleaning of air, water, sky, earth and ultimately the human mind for getting healthy generations, Thirdly, it is an agro-festival conducting at the interval of harvest and next seeding. It is thanking the mother for providing good harvest and a pray for prosperity in future. There is a process of awaking the earth to receive seeds for next harvest is going through the festival. The relevance of creation lies in these situations.

Apart from other rituals, padayani has a different structure. When other forms concentrats mostly to the shrine, padayani brings the deity outside from the shrine or the sacred grove to the middle of the society. Performances are the correct mingling of the deity with the people without a priest or mediator. Padayani culture believes that the performances are to show the mother goddess by the total village. It brings padayani to connect with the concept of total theatre. The belief is that the mother is everywhere and she join with the people when they call.

This festival survives as part of mother culture. In older times women have super position and they are the rulers. This is a custom practiced by the living beings. The social orders of honeybee is the best example, human societies also followed this system. Padayani is a continuation of it. People believe that the mother is the protector and at the same time destructor also. Destruction is the result of mistakes. To overcome this, she must be pleased. They found padayani as the solution for this.

From the oracular dance of the tribal priest to the bidding farewell ceremony of the mother, the plot is developed through a number of short and independent scenes.

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An underlying thread is kept throughout connecting these apparently independent scenes. Every scene is complete in itself as a particular drama. At any time, the audience can go out; at any time they can come in. This is so because the only question annoying the spectator is not what? Or why? But how? All the scenes are traditionally presented. At appropriate times the spectators are fully set free from the serious tempo by supplying the comic relief properly. The Drama Ends, subjecting the tribe to a total, chemical transformation. Thus a theatre!- a theatre of the tribe – for the tribe – and by the tribe. A Tribal Epic Theatre! For ages to come! As we know, the present is the contributions of the past. As and when it deviates from the expected correct path, the eternal supreme power of the past will emerge suddenly to direct the present in the correct way. That is why such a theatre exists.

The profile and the body works of the characters of this Tribal Epic Theatre may seem to be so ugly for the present generation. But their warning- how far and more ugly is your profile than mine? - cannot be negated by them.

A catharsis happens here, removing the ugly and dirty remnants of the undigested material of yesterday and supplying a total energy to face today and tomorrow. A loose motion! An unremarkable sense of relief!-spreading beyond the body–mind–intellect tracheotomy of the society. This Epic Theatre thus acts as a purgative to this generation; it will be so for tomorrow also.

## **Kolam Thullal**

Kolamthullal is the most spectacular item that makes Padayani an ecstatic experience. To pacify Kaali to get rid Kavilamma of the ill effects of wicked deities such as Pishachu, Madan, marutha, Yakshi etc. and thus to protect the folk people from calamities, persons disguised as these spiritual forces (Kolam) should perform dances in tune with kolappattu and thappumelam.

## **Kalan Kolam**

Kalan Kolam enjoys kingly status in Padayani. Only a master artist can perform Kalankolam. Crown shaped kolam has three or five faces. Charcoal paste on the face, Kannum kuriyum, protruded teeth, Tender leaf skirt over red silk skirt, Kachamani on legs. cascade of hair covering the backside, sword in the left hand' are the features of this kolam. A long cloth fastly tied to Alaku (dry areca tree pieces, Base frame of kolam) is drawn through armpits of performer tied behind him. This arrangement is to keep the kolam in right position.

A number of strides such as otta, iratti, mukkanni, valyamukkanni, thettineekkam, vettimattom, chavittiyirakkam, chavittikkalayam, kothukal, porukal; kalayams such as Ottakalayam, Irrattikkalayam, Murikkalayam, Chadikkalayam, Odikkalayam, Panthakkalayam etc. and nottams such as Nilanottam, Kutharinottam etc. are employed in kalankolam. 'Markandeyacharitham' is the theme of kolappattu sung for Kalankolam. In certain places sung Ajamilamoksham and Sivamahathmyam are sung. Another Character controls these

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kolam and forcefully takeout sword and torch from the hands of kolam artist. though this character has no adornments or special decorations, he attracts the attention of ierr because of his physical strength and artistic awareness. Thullal adverse through Slokas and songs in Thom thiminthaka Thalam and adantha single style. In the cause of dance the kolam is made forcibly seated on an ural (grindstone placed in the kalam) places in the kolam. The thullal artist, at certain other occasions jumps directly backward and climbs the Ural and there he takes several foot steps. A scene with beginning, middle and end in unison is enacted in the spectacle of KaalanKolam, which is based on the legend of Markandeya. KaalanKolam (Effigy representing eternity) relates duration or time in its specific purpose. The mask used by Shiva denotes past, present and future. The actor performs many characters at the same time. There are elements of the physical theatre in it. The same actor performs the roles of Chitraguptan, Bhooths, Kaali and consorts. It is almost like a total theatre. These elements spring from the tribal culture, as is evident from the Padayani performances.

## **Marutha Kolam**

Mother goddess marutha is worshipped as deity of small pox. Marutha concept varies as Easanthan Marutha, Neelakeshy Marutha, Pandara Marutha, Pacha Marutha, Anamarutha etc. Marutha kolam is staged to eradicate small pox. Anger of marutha causes a number of physical disasters like incurable white discharge, high body temperature, aversion to eatables, unbearable thirsts, swelling on body parts in addition to smallpox. Kaali killed Darika, Darika's wife Manodari sow seeds of smallpox on Kaali as a revenge. Manodari was later transformed to Marutha.

## **Characterization with Masks**

The rural technique works "inside-out" in a kind of effort that makes our guts "turn into sheer nerves" and modifies our behaviors from within. The Mask proceeds at the place where the group has settled its belief. It works out from there, and from there it can influence the community. Over time, the worshipped spirit creates "a space of its own". Ashans call it a territory (the spatial expansion of the entity in rural tantras). Spirit is designing a territory; that means it anchors its power into that place. On rural stage, at the moment of trance, everything the group is doing becomes emotionally charged - the cult is alive, for performers and the assembly; from feet to head, all senses awakened, "spirit is fully coming to life, and in a flash, it disappears."

Mask is "creating reality- its reality" with a sense of diversity, and it goes on doing so, incorporating the complexity of relations between partners, including the audience perception. Spirit, the leading force in the dance, is meant to drive the people's mind - spirit is a dance force that federates vision, and if dance "wants to tell a (mythic) story" it fails for structural reasons. No one knows what is going to happen on a rural stage; one thing is sure, what happens is truly unprecedented.

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All this features in Padayani brings a new kind of dramatic culture. The folk tradition in combination with aesthetic art put forward a new Indian Epic Theatre. It not only poses the features of Epic Drama but also is a mix of different concepts and art form. One may feel at glance that the process of Padayani is simple, direct and too transparent. But at the second surely we will realize that it is complex oblique and too concealed. Padayani is regional but universal, periodic but continual. This universal nature helps us to make a comparison of Padayani with Brechts Epic Theatre and Aristotle's Catharsis.

## **Epic Theatre**

Epic Theatre is a theatrical movement arising in the early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century from the theories and practice of a number of theatre practitioners who responded to the political climate of the time through the creation of a new political theatre. Epic theatre is not meant to refer to the scale or scope of the work, but rather to the form that it takes. Epic theatre emphasizes the audience's perspective and reaction to the piece through a variety of techniques that deliberately cause them to individually engage in a different way. The purpose of epic theatre is not to encourage an audience to suspend their disbelief, but rather to force them to think introspectively about the particular moments that are occurring on stage and why they are happening a certain way. Epic theatre was popularized by Bertolt Brecht incorporates a mode of acting that utilizes what he calls *gestus*. One of Brecht's most important aesthetic innovations prioritized function over the sterile opposition between form and content. Brecht discussed the priorities and approach of epic theatre in his work "A Short Organum for the Theatre". Although many of the concepts and practices involved in Brechtian epic theatre had been around for years, even centuries, Brecht unified them, developed the approach, and popularized it.

While not invented by Brecht, the *Verfremdungseffekt*, known in English as the "estrangement effect" or the "alienation effect", was made popular by Brecht and is one of the most significant characteristics of epic theatre. Some of the ways the *Verfremdungseffekt* can be achieved is by having actors play multiple characters, rearrange the set in full view of the audience, and "break the fourth wall" by speaking to the audience. The use of a narrator in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* is another example of *Verfremdungseffekt* at work. Lighting can also be used to emulate the effect. For example, flooding the theatre with bright lights (not just the stage) and placing lighting equipment on stage can encourage the audience to fully acknowledge that the production is merely a production instead of reality.

Padayani as an Epic Theatre assumes that the purpose of a play, more than entertainment or the imitation of reality, is to present ideas and invites the audience to make judgments on them. In *Kalan Kolam* the same actor plays multiple roles, he comes in interaction with the audience and thus breaks the "Fourth Wall". The use of *Chootu* and *Pandam* serves the lighting effects. In Padayani with the help of a ritualistic background the art aims to present Characters who are not intended to mimic real people, but to represent

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opposing sides of an argument, archetypes, or stereotypes. The audience should always be aware that they are watching a performance, and should remain at an emotional distance from the action.

The best part of Padayani is the combination of Epic Theatre and Aristotle's Catharsis. As Alienation Effect is a process introduced to remove the cathartic effect from the audience, here in Padayani the blending of both occurs.

Catharsis, the purification or purgation of the emotions (especially pity and fear) primarily through art. In criticism it is a metaphor used by Aristotle in the Poetics to describe the effects of true tragedy on the spectator. The interpretation generally accepted is that through experiencing fear vicariously in a controlled situation, the spectator's own anxieties are directed outward, and, through sympathetic identification with the tragic protagonist, his insight and outlook are enlarged. Tragedy then has a healthful and humanizing effect on the spectator or reader.

## **Cathartic Effect of Padayani**

Rituals can be a part of spirituo – therapeutic process. Rituals also connect us with the community fulfilling our human need to belong. It also brings an individual to the most personal level, becoming a tool for spiritual, emotional and psychological.

Padayani is an art form that blends music, dance, theatre, satire, facial masks and paintings. It is part of worship of Bhadrakali. While watching Padayani, it stir the deep recesses of the psyche and shine a light into the shadows and hidden places of the heart and mind. Primal levels of passion, rage and fear are encountered. This performance show the deity as wrathful and aiming arrows of enlightenment, raising a trident of justice against the ignorance and prejudice. The wrath they express is aimed at the negative forces that hold the people back, keeping them bound in pain and a state of suffering. Padayani, apart from providing aesthetic entertainment, also result in rejuvenating the people participating and witnessing them. Bairavi Kolam, Marutha Kolam and Kalan Kolam are its perfect examples.

It is our experience, that the embellishing factors such as, the music – vocal or instrumental the rhythmic body movements, the metrical or non metrical verses, the colorful costumes with the natural beauty, the special set up light etc. used to make the visual performance more attractive, create a fascinating dramatic atmosphere. As such without any loss of generality, the term traditional art may be replaced by the term 'Traditional play' or 'Traditional Drama'. It is in this dramatic atmosphere, created by the traditional atmosphere, created by the traditional performances, we come across with a concept of a 'Theatre'. So, 'Traditional Drama is pushed up here, to a higher level, 'Traditional Theatre'. Further the structure style kept throughout by some of our traditional performances actually tempt us even to highlight the term 'Traditional Theatre' to the next higher level 'Traditional Epic Theatre.' The culture and tradition of India is abundant and Padayani is such a maestro artistic form and thus we call it as an "Indian Epic Drama"

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