

From Ritual to Stage: Kerala's Shadow Puppetry in Urban Spaces

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Abstract

Tholpavakoothu is a temple-based shadow puppetry art from Kerala, India's southernmost state. As part of the annual celebration, the performing art is an offering to the mother goddess Bhagavathy. Kerala's shadow puppetry is distinguished by its core context-based performance. This art form is regarded as both performing art and a spiritual rendering to meet the needs of individuals and society. This paper looks at the remediation of traditional shadow puppetry into a new visual media, specifically the abridged performances for urban spaces, using an overhead projector, and incorporating new narratives.

This predominantly ritualistic performance has gone through a paradigm shift in its dramaturgical structure, altering the public image of the art form itself. The case studies include the abridged Ramayana performance, Jesus' performance, and Panchatantra performance. The paper will look at the Koonathara troupe as a case study - artist's history, analysis of their production, breakdown of the characteristics of their creative process and aesthetic choices and documenting their techniques to adapt Tholpavakoothu to a changing society, as well as the sociological and historical processes involved.

Keywords: Shadow Puppetry, Remediation, Dramaturgy, Rituals & Performance

Introduction

This study examines the evolution of shadow puppetry in Kerala, India. Shadow puppetry has been used for storytelling and entertainment for more than 2000 years in Kerala. The puppets used in Tholpavakoothu are created using deer skin, buffalo skin, bamboo sticks and the fixed screen which is 41 feet in length and 12 feet in height illuminated with 21 oil lamps. The tholpavakoothu puppeteers are highly accomplished craftspeople who bring an object to life by moving it and articulating the voices of the characters it speaks about. They are taught from a very young age.

Shadow puppeteers of Kerala are referred to as Pulavar (Scholar), an academic title originally conferred by the king. Tholpavakoothu is a shadow puppet show that has been passed down through the generations. A Koothumadam is a specially built permanent puppet theatre structure, which differentiates shadow puppetry of Kerala from other 5 states of India where traditional shadow puppetry is practiced. The playhouses were created specifically for Tholpavakoothu performances and is intended to facilitate the community to offer their prayers to Goddess Bagvathy. The puppet theatre is only open for the duration of the annual festival and is closed after the performance. This empty performance space is transformed into a sanctum sanctorum through a series of rituals. A skilled sense of space requires seeing beyond the screen, puppets, silhouettes, or even gazing away from them.

Every year from January to May, Tholpavakoothu is performed outside Goddess Bhagavathy temples in Kerala's northern Malabar region. Each temple distributes the performances for 7, 14, 21, 41, and 79 consecutive nights based on the instruction of the temple committee, with performance beginning around 10 p.m. and lasting till the early morning hours. These rituals are performed with a belief that the mother goddess is watching, and it is obligatory to continue the practice every year. Everything is validated and exercised for centuries based on this belief system. Tholpavakoothu performance includes various rites in which the entire community participated and practiced their roles. Oracle gives the Goddess's accurate depiction and provides puppeteers with comments and blessings before each performance, allowing them to improve their performance. (Sinha, 2020)

Adapting to diversification

Folklore is the body of culture shared by a particular group of people; it encompasses the traditions common to that culture, subculture, or group (Jordan, 1985). Shadow puppetry performance in Kerala had strong roots in temples that helped the art form to sustain. Scholarly puppeteers have excellence in narrating songs and meanings with arguments and counterarguments. Puppet performances also had a scholarly audience who enjoyed the performance and considered these performances as a medium of knowledge.

By the late 19th century, Kerala was a place in India where revolutions started at their peak, and mass movements against the caste system, gender inequality, etc. This was quickly mirrored in shadow puppetry and other cultural forms. Society is constantly evolving, and traditional performances must adapt to live alongside modern interpretations. Folklore, particularly oral traditions, is dynamic and does not have a written rule of conduct.

The powerful Bhakti movement, which is believed to have gained strength from the Eighth Century onwards in various parts of India, is perceived as a form of social protest against the orthodox religion's class and caste divisionism. The communist government in Kerala has strong intentions to develop the society for both rich and poor (Parayil & Sreekumar, 2003). In Kerala, the low caste people were not allowed to enter temples, so reformation and many movements were led by leaders to demolish that rule. Similarly, they studied many similar situations and asked for equal rights. That helped tholpavakoothu attain new heights and adapt new narratives in their performances. (Manmathan, 2013)

The emergence of globalization in the 1990s due to unprecedented advancement in communication, transportation and information technologies have immensely affected many traditional performing art forms. In India, mass media developments such as television, radio, and other technologies have overtaken the traditional form of entertainment. Many folk forms were on the point of extinction because of this, and many have no takers anymore. (Chatterji, 2020)

Folklore is not a relic of a distant past. Folk media based on mythologies is a living culture in India, particularly in rural regions, where it is woven into people's daily activities and responsibilities. This is mirrored in all Hindu folk traditional media, where it is customary to worship Lord Ganesha prior to every folk theatre performance. All Hindu folk traditions in India have their origins in the epics and puranas, as evident by the fact that recitation is a key element of all traditional shadow puppetry forms in India.

According to Schenhner (1985), all performing arts forms evolve naturally from rituals to theatre.

The enactment of rituals prior to conventional shadow puppetry for an urban audience could be considered as an example of 'restored behavior,' as defined by Schenhner. He says that replicating a ritual may not be missing anything, even if the collecting and staging process is re-contextualized depending on the audience. The ritual performed for the urban audience is the new form of expressing the tradition which helps to know the context of the performance it is associated with.

Because of their self-existentialism, artists have implemented significant innovations to their performing arts to accommodate or compete with emerging technologies. This was initially difficult, and many artists were opposed to the changes; they wanted the art to remain static and not adapt to new changes. The concern was that these new alterations would diminish the performance's traditional aesthetic. Globalization has introduced both reasons for consistency and diversification. The arts currently offer a wide range of cultural ideals, institutions, and opportunities.

A Paradigm Shift

While these performances have been popular for generations, there is a need for a paradigm shift in the dramaturgy for urban spaces. With the increasing urbanization of Kerala there is a growing demand for performances in public spaces such as parks, malls, and streets. However, the traditional dramaturgy of Tholpavakoothu is not suited for these spaces.

To address this issue, there needs to be a paradigm shift in the dramaturgy of Tholpavakoothu performances for urban spaces. This could involve the incorporation of contemporary themes and stories that are relevant to urban audiences, the use of modern technology such as projections and soundscapes to enhance the performances, and the exploration of non-linear narrative structures that can engage audiences in new ways.

Traditional shadow puppeteers have just recently begun this process, but the next generation of traditional puppeteers are ready to resuscitate and infuse their lineage with new notions and stories.

It's an art form in transition, looking for new patrons and creating new stories to connect with a new generation of urban audiences, as well as revitalizing the art form with new ideas. The first change made by the traditional Tholpavakoothu puppeteers was to shorten their traditional performance, which used to last from twilight to dawn, to around an hour. These shortened performances made the artists and audience accept this art form as an entertainment and knowledge production. In the 21st century people want to watch such shortened performances. The ritual itself is self-changing with respect to time in order to the ease of life. Likewise, in Shadow puppetry to accommodate the urban spaces the timing of the ritual and performance has changed so that the audience can come and watch for a certain period. The new experiment in the rituals made people follow in the following years and now that is a ritual accepted with satisfying minds. These changes in rituals allow more urban people and spaces to participate in those rituals as in histories.

Krishnan Kutty Pulavar from the Kunathara Family learned Tholpavakoothu from his father Lakshmana Pulavar. He was the first tholpavakoothu artist to create a condensed version of Ramayana to perform outside the ritualistic space, his troupe performed at various festivals in Delhi, Bangaluru, Sweden, Spain and Japan. K.K. Pulavar even documented verse and prose used in the ritualistic performance of goddess Bhadrakali and published a book called Ayodhya Kandam. Annamala Pulavar was also a great Scholar and practitioner of Tholpavakoothu, his son Sadananda Pulavar is continuing his legacy (Venu, 1990). Bequest of K.K. Pulavar has been taken forward by his sons; Ramachandra Pulavar, Vishwanatha Pulavar and Lakshmana Pulavar. Their sons are still practicing the tradition and experimenting with numerous novel themes on Tholpavakoothu.

Adapting new narratives

In recent years, there has been a shift in the dramaturgical practices of Tholpavakoothu towards the use of contemporary themes and issues in the storytelling. This can be seen as a response to the changing social, political, and cultural landscape of India, as well to make the art form more relevant to contemporary audiences.

Some of the key developments in the new dramaturgical practices of Tholpavakoothu include:

Exploration of contemporary themes: Tholpavakoothu artists are now exploring contemporary themes such as environmental degradation, family planning, and political issues in their storytelling. This has enabled them to connect with younger audiences who may not be familiar with traditional stories from Indian mythology and folklore.

Use of multimedia elements: In order to make the performances more engaging and immersive, Tholpavakoothu artists are now incorporating multimedia elements such as music, over-head projections, and animation into their performances. This has helped to create a more dynamic and interactive experience for audiences.

Collaboration with contemporary artists: Tholpavakoothu artists are now collaborating with contemporary artists such as musicians, filmmakers, and visual artists to create new works that blend traditional and contemporary elements. This has helped to bring new audiences to the art form and has also helped to create a more diverse and inclusive community of artists.

Overall, the use of contemporary themes and issues in Tholpavakoothu storytelling has helped to breathe new life into this traditional art form and has helped to make it more relevant to contemporary audiences.

The artists were able to incorporate numerous contemporary secular narratives to their performances, while maintaining the unique aesthetics of Tholpavakoothu. By experimenting with electric lighting, puppet manipulations, and music, the temple's classical performances were altered to tell new stories. Gandhikoothu directed by Ramachandra Pulavar was the first modern shadow puppet show to be produced in Kerala borrowing aesthetics from Tholpavakoothu and creating a new dramaturgical structure to cater a new generation of audience. This performance is an hour long and has songs that represent a setting where everyday life in India is celebrated. The performance establishes Gandhi's timeliness, demonstrating how strict he was with punctuality and his beliefs of vegetarianism and nonviolence. The Gandhikoothu production inspired koonathara troupe to come up with new productions such as: Mahabali Koothu, Panchatantra stories, Jesus Koothu and Chadalabhikshuki.

Traditional puppeteers were comfortable with the avatars of Rama and Ravana, but this new endeavor yielded figures of Indian freedom fighters who also suited the narrative. The significant part is that traditional puppeteers, who are well-versed with epic narrative, utilized their skills to construct and manipulate the Indian liberation movement's nationalistic ideal figures crafted out of animal hide borrowing the aesthetic from the traditional repertoire. This production enhanced the puppeteers to explore more.

Likewise, many new contemporary productions used narrations based on modern poetry and text to be showcased through shadow puppetry. Dramaturgical practices were experimented to exhibit more expressive performances with new practices explored by shadow puppeteers of Kerala that had generated a sustainable living by preserving the tradition. By utilizing the opportunities of urban spaces the dramaturgical practices attained a space for entertainment and as a pedagogy for educational puppetry.

One of the key developments in the new dramaturgical practices of tholpavakoothu is the use of contemporary themes and issues in the storytelling. While traditional stories and epics continue to be performed, puppeteers have also started incorporating current events, social issues, and environmental concerns into their performances. This has made tholpavakoothu relevant and

engaging to contemporary audiences, while also highlighting important issues and promoting social awareness.

Tholpavakoothu has also been used as a pedagogy for educational puppetry, with puppeteers and educators using the art form to teach children about various topics. The visual and interactive nature of tholpavakoothu makes it an effective tool for teaching, and its cultural significance and artistic value make it a valuable addition to educational programs.

During 2012 Ramachandra Pulavar collaborated with Abia tours and travels, Kochi to create two short advertisement films both less than a minute in duration. These were shot on video while manipulating the puppets, music and graphics were added in the post production. Character of a western tourist with a hat carrying a backpack, camera, a small bag in the hand was crafted out from goat skin, a puppet of a boatman rowing a boat, a board with 'smile for miles' written on it, trees and plants, a bell boy, pillars, a motel and logo of Abia were all custom made for one of the short films. The second short film uses the same background with a puppet of a female character in Andhra style and four animal characters: deer, bird, squirrel, and a rabbit.

Their second collaboration was with theatre/ film director Saheer Ali in 2013 for his theatrical production Nadinakam Nadakam (2013-14); they performed around sixty shows in Kerala between the years 2013-2014. This performance dealt with story of a tholpavakoothu artist and shows contemporary issues faced by him. He has two sons a politician and a soldier, at the very end of the show the puppeteer while he is performing for the goddess Kali he get the news of son's death at the battle field, in a state of shock he starts performing aggressively. Their third collaboration was for a song in Pathi a 2016 film Directed by Saheer Ali, where Rajeev Pulavar and Rahul Pulavar used shadow puppets to depict the scenes required in the song. The change to acquire mass media screens allowed the practitioners to gain widespread popularity.

An overhead projector was employed as a source of light and all the backgrounds were projected using an overhead projector in Rajeev Pulavar's Panchatantra show 2015 and Kerala Election 2016 (a brief performance about the present political environment in Kerala). Evan Hastings presented an Over Head Projector to the Pulavars of Krishnankutty Pulavar memorial Tholpavakoothu & Puppet Centre in 2013 this intervention acted as a seed to experiment with new visual structure in performance commenced.

Traditional puppetry has evolved over time, and the pace of movement has changed as well. Over the previous three decades, the number of moving parts in a puppet has risen, giving it a more realistic dynamic movement.

The Ramayana was performed virtually during the Covid 19 pandemic. Many sponsors who could sponsor temple performances in the temple came up to view this temple performance with

their family and friends via virtual mode during the annual season. During the series of nationwide lockdowns, performing in front of virtual platforms has provided numerous opportunities. The puppeteers were able to rehearse and improve traditional puppetry acts, songs, and narrations, which inspired the children to learn songs from the Kamba Ramayana. These circumstances encouraged younger generations to participate in traditional and modern performances, as well as scholarly discourses, through temple puppetry performances.

The dramaturgical altercations helped the puppeteers to perform in urban spaces to narrate contemporary stories like Panchatantra. Panchatantra is a collection of ancient Indian fables that are often used as a source material for puppetry performances. These stories with animal stories were well accepted by children. Urban spaces became the performative spaces for these contemporary performances which use the modern adaptive technologies and narrate the stories with traditional techniques and aesthetics.

In the process of adapting newer technologies come in play various negotiations and many advantages too. Clark (2005) claims that a pre-recorded soundtrack diverts attention from the immediacy of the theatrical experience, even though this decision could be influenced by a variety of factors, including the cost of travelling with the complete troupe, fiscal limits, and aesthetic preferences. The use of a pre-recorded soundtrack could potentially be a dramatic choice, depending on the show's narrative structure or genre. The need of the hour is to examine traditional puppetry in a global perspective, catering to a broader range of culturally varied audiences and establishing a conversation between contemporary and traditional.

Another important aspect to consider is the involvement of local communities in the performances. In traditional settings, Tholpavakoothu performances were often performed by members of the Pulavar community, who were the custodians of the art form. However, in urban spaces, there is an opportunity to involve members of the local community in the performances, such as young artists, performers, and students, which can help to create a more inclusive and diverse cultural experience.

Conclusion

Urban audiences' interest in traditional forms of art has grown, and the Indian government's initiative to move folk and traditional forms out of their limits to demonstrate their heritage to other countries has gained traction, providing a new platform for artists. IGNCA (Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts), CCRT (Centre for Cultural Resources and Training), Cultural Resource Centers, NGO's, and UNIMA's (Union Internationale de la Marionnette) India chapter have all worked relentlessly to educate and train traditional artists, puppeteers, teachers, children, and professionals. New explorative performances have resulted from unique collaborations between contemporary and traditional artists, creating a blend of new and old.

In conclusion, the traditional shadow puppetry performances of Kerala, India are an important cultural heritage that needs to be preserved and adapted for contemporary audiences. A paradigm shift in the dramaturgy of Tholpavakoothu performances for urban spaces can help to ensure the longevity of this art form and keep it relevant for future generations.

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