

PROMOTION OF PERFORMING MARTIAL ARTS BY THE RULERS OF TAMIL NADU

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When Tamil Country was ruled by Chera Kings, folk performing arts such as *Chakyarkoothu*, *Nangaiyarkoothu*, *Thalaikol*, *Sathir*, *Santhikoothu* and *Chokam* were at the pristine height in the Royal courts and in temples. Even though there is no direct inscriptions in this district to reveal this fact, some inscriptions found in the temples of Tamil Nadu point out that these performing arts had occurred up to the Pandiya and Chola Kingdoms; so, the regions included in present Kanyakumari district would be no longer the exception to these arts. One interesting point to be noted here is that an aberrant version of *Thalaikol*- a way of dancing around temples by keeping a colourful umbrella in hand - has been followed during temple festivals in Kanyakumari district and Kerala. It was once executed around the Royal Palace when the King goes a round around the palace on the day of cultural importance; while the dance was going after the King, this event mimicked the marching of the King after defeating the enemy King. Now, this performing art is known as *Aaraattu* and it is performed in almost all the temples managed by the devaswam board.

However, real credit goes to the Maharajas of Travancore for the preservation and promotion of Keralite folk performing arts in the whole of the Travancore State, in which Kanyakumari district seemed to be a part, as they were serious devotees of Gods and cultural traditions. The Maharajas had encouraged the specialized artists in folk performing arts by inviting them to perform those arts in the special stadium of the Royal Court and by offering gifts either in the form of meals or money or both. In the Travancore state there was tradition of giving globules of boiled rice called *Undaikkatti* every day to the artists and money called *Padipanam* every month, for which the artists needed to show their performance regularly before the Royal family

and in temples. In temples at Suchindrum, Padmanabhapuram, Kumarakoil and Thiruvattar, there was a separate theatre called *Koothambalam*TM to execute such performing arts before the audience and devotees who arrived to worship the God. *Devadhasis* were chief dancers in the *Koothambalam* while their brothers or sons were playing musical instruments for the dance. The Maharajas of Travancore were talented artists: the Raja Ravi Varma was the most renowned painter and the Swathi Thirunal Maharaja, who was an eminent scholar and instrumentalist, had composed several musical notes for some devotional songs written by himself to propitiate the God *Ananthapadbhanaba* at Thiruvananthapuram. Therefore, they ordered to execute folk performing arts such as *Kathakali*, *Koodiyaattam*, *Chakyarkoothu*, *Kuthiyottam*, *Krishanattam*, *Nangaiyarkoothu*, *Sathir* and

Mohiniyattam in the temples so as to bring out a spiritual mood inside the temples. In 1926, when *Devadasi* system was abolished in Travancore through a Royal Proclamation, such dances were stopped in temples and *Devadasis* were sent out of the temples. As a consequence, folk performing arts were conducted only during temple festivals to entertain the people. In 1930, with the intension of promoting Keralite folk performing arts throughout *Malayaladesam*, the *Kerala Kala Mandabam* was established at Trichore by the Mahakavi Vellathol with the financial assistance of the *Muhunda* Raja of Mannakulam, which was one of the small kingdoms under Travancore; in the subsequent year its branch was started in Thiruvananthapuram The Kerala Kala Mandabam has been teaching the folk performing arts to thousands of students, irrespective of their caste, and encouraging all the artists capable of showing their artistic talent on stages. Artists trained from the *Kerala Kala Mandabam* used to go to other villages on request and performed in the villages. Thus it opened a way for those performing arts which were performed only in temples to the stage before the public for their entertainment. After the separation of South Travancore from the Kerala State in 1956, no special interest was given to preserve the Keralite folk performing arts

Kanyakumari district by the local as well as State Governments. Therefore, many Keralite folk performing arts were forced to the threat of extinction.

From the field visits to different villages of Kanyakumari district, it is clear that much impetus has not been given for promoting the Keralite folk performing arts in this district because of the fact that Malayalee population is low in this district, and that those Keralite arts which are concerned with the worship of deities in temples have alone sustained here rightly for the devotional purpose associated with some entertainment during the festival occasions. *Kuthiyottam*, *Thiruvathirakali* and *Margam Kali* are exclusively performed by folks in villages as thanksgiving to the deities for getting their urges fulfilled while *Koodiyaattam*, *Chakyarkoothu*, *Pulavapattu*, *Thiyaattu*, *Kaakkassi Kali*, *Chavittunatakam* and *Avaiyarkali* are performed by artist who specialized in them to propitiate the deities as well as to entertain the people crowded before the temples on the festival occasion. The other folk performing arts of Kerala have hardly seen elsewhere in Kanyakumari district either in social and cultural rituals or in temple festivals. However, it should be noted here that the tribes of Kerala have all these folk performing arts alive in their folk tradition which is eco-friendly and based on natural customs that remain unaffected by the effect of modernization and sophistication we have enjoyed here in everyday life.⁶

The Kerala Government however takes considerable attempts to promote the folk performing arts which are unique to the state. The *Kerala Sahithya Akademi* was established in Trivandrum in 1956 for the promotion of Malayalam literature throughout Travancore princely state even before Kerala was formed on November 1, 1958 The *Kerala Sangeetha Nataka Akademi*, which is an eminent institution for the conservation of cultural heritages of state related to music, drama, dance and folk arts, was established in 1958 and it has been establishing so many cultural programs all over the state and outside, with the collaboration of the *Sangeetha Nataka Akademi* at New Delhi and publishing authoritative books on music, drama, dance and folk performing arts. Every year it provides affiliation to institutions in the related fields, arranges inter-state cultural programs for

strengthening national integration and distributes stipends and scholarships to deserving students. Further, it organizes festivals of light music, *Sopana Sangeetham*, *Mohiniyattam*, *Bharathanatyam*, *Kuchippudi*, *Kathak dance*, *Kathakali*, *Koothu*, *Koodiyattam*, *Kanniyarkali* and folk and tribal performing arts so as to encourage the artists. The *Kerala Folklore Academy*, which was established in 1999 for the purpose of reviving, preserving and promoting folk arts tradition in Kerala, has created an awareness among the people to remember the folk arts tradition of Kerala by establishing a library that contains over 1000 volumes of books on folk performing arts in Kerala to help the researchers and students, and by establishing a museum with over 300 precious objects of folk performing arts such as *Theyyam*, *Padayani*, tribal musical instruments, percussion instruments, *Mangalamkali*, *Gaddika*, *Kaliyoottu*, *Devakoothu*, *Chat*, *Poorakali*, *Mudiyettu* and others. The *Kerala Kalamandalam* that was founded in 1930 for the preservation and promotion of folk performing arts of Travancore organizes international centres for teaching *Kathakali*, *Mohiniyattam*, *Koodiyaattam*, *Ottam thullal* and related musical instruments.⁶

END NOTES

1. Stone inscription of Thiruvottiyoore temple dated back to Rajarajan 111 states that he had contributed 60 *Veli* lands in Mannilikarai village to a *Thalaikoli* and he renamed the Mannilkkarai into Naloor. Another inscription described that Kulasekara Pandiyan had rewarded *Kalingaraya thalaikoli* award to a lady Nakkan Nachiyar and honoured her in his palace. Inscription of Alloor Pancha Natheeswarar temple in Trichy district states that the King Rajakesari Varman had issued the award *Thillai Azhagi Thalaikoli* to Nakkan Vennaaval and donated some lands too. Inscription of Valliyoor temple in Tirunelveli district states that a dancer *Ulagamudiyal* was respected as *Santhikoothi* and *Chokatayandal*. Similarly, inscription of Thiruvittiyoore temple states that three *devadhasis* had performed *Santhi koothu*, *Kunippam* and *Chokkam* for which the lord had played musical instruments. Inscription of Ponamarapathi Sundararaja Perumal temple in Pudukottai district describes about *Sriranganayagi* who was famous for *Sathir attam*. One inscription of the Somanatheeswarar temple in Thiruchendur taluk of Tirunelveli district states that some land was donated to a *Santhikoothan* for performing dances in *Aadal mandapam*. A stone inscription in *Kamarasavalli-Kodaka Eeswarar* temple at *Udayarpalayam* states that *Vikiramacholan* had donated land to *Chakai Marayan* who was a teacher in *Chakyarkoothu*, for performing *Chakyarkoothu* during *Thiruvathirai* festivals in the months of *Karthigai*, *Vaikaasi* and *Markazhi* in Tamil calendar.

2. Mahadevan Pillai (age-56), Kanyakumari District Devaswam Board, Suchindrum, on 17-03-2012.
3. M. Easwaraperumal (age-53), Kanyakumari District Devaswam Board, Suchindrum, on 17-03-2012
4. These events were going on in the Royal Palace in Padmanabhapuram and Thiruvananthapuram. This information was kindly provided by S. Raman Pillai (age-89), near Padmanabhapuram palace, on 13-07-2012.
5. Koothambalam is a special compartment of temple with a small stage erected with stone roof and pillars for the execution of performing arts.
6. Kamalanathan, *op. cit.* p. 73.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid*, p.74.
9. *Ibid*, p.75.
10. S. Alex Paul Raj (age-48), Chavittunatakam performer, Cholechal, on 7-3-2012, states that after separation of Kanyakumari district from Kerala State no body cared of for the promotion of Chavittunatakam, Kaakkarrassi kali and Avaiyarkali in this district.
11. S. Prabhakara Menon (64), retired teacher, Karungal on 14-05-2011
12. KSA, *Handbook on Cultural Institutions in Kerala*, Kerala Sahithya Academy (KSA), Thrissur, 1976, p. 9-10.
13. *Ibid*, p. 11-12.
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid*, p.14.