

# PAVAKATHAKALI

Study and Documentation of  
Kathakali Puppets

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Animation & Film Design  
Guide: Prof. Sumant Rao

IDC, IIT BOMBAY

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## APPROVAL SHEET

This Design Research Seminar Project entitled “Pavakathakali- Study and Documentation of Kathakali puppets” by K Abhilash, 09634001 is approved in for the partial fulfillment of the Masters Design Degree in Animation and Film Design.

Project Guide:

Chair person:

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Date:

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## DECLARATION

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## ABSTRACT

“Pavakathakali”- Kathakali puppets is a traditional puppet theater of Kerala which existed side by side of the Kathakali- the larger counterpart of the traditional theater. The puppet form was extinct by the later part of the 20th century. With the efforts of a group of artists this puppet theater is revived into its original and complete form. This report is an effort to understand the process by which the features of an dominant form of art were efficiently combined into a miniature form in our traditional story telling medium and also throw light on the methods of revival, preservation and propagation of the traditional storytelling mediums in the modern days.

## INTRODUCTION

“Pavakathakali” is the traditional glove puppets of the state of Kerala in Southern India. This puppet form has existed and prevailed during the advent of Kathakali- the traditional theater of Kerala.

Though it seemed to have existed much before the advent of Kathakali in the second half of the 17th century, the Kathakali art form was efficiently adapted to the puppet form and prevailed as an independent art form.

The make up designs were adapted into the wooden carvings, the costumes were proportionally decreased in size, the story and the music were adapted as it is but eliminating the intricacies and elaborate expressions due to the constraints of the miniaturized medium.

The highly accepted social status of the traditional puppet artists led way to its development into a sustainable independent art form.

The period of Indian independence struggle and the aftermath led to the disintegration of this art form but the larger Kathakali theater survived. The puppet form was extinct by later part of the 20th century.

A group of artists lead by Sri G Venu, under the directions of Smt Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay took the initiative to revive this art form. With extensive survey, research, study and practice, this art form is brought alive as its earlier form and successfully performed and propagated.

A brief life sketch of the practicing puppeteer, Sri G Ravi throws light on the journey from the discovery and the revival of this art form.

## HISTORY OF PAVAKATHAKALI

The traditional glove puppet theater of Kerala is “Pavakathakali”. “Pava” - means puppet, “Kathakali” - means story play. Therefore “Pavakathakali” literally means puppet story play. This form of puppet theater in its native form existed in the northern district, Palghat, in the state of Kerala. Paruthypally village in Palghat is where the traditional puppeteer families called as *Andi Pandaram* existed. The *Andi Pandarams* migrated from the neighboring district of Andhra Pradesh and settled in Palghat. The descendants of this families now speak a mixture of Malayalam, the native language of Kerala and Telugu, the native language of Andhra Pradesh.

As they migrated they seemed to have brought their art practices along with them and gradually mingled and settled among the natives. The Aryamala puppet is the evidence of an earlier puppet form existing even before the advent of Kathakali. This puppet is nearly 400 years old.

The *Andi Pandarams* were fortunate to enjoy a higher social status. They were worshipers of God Subrahmanya, one of the important deities worshiped in southern India. The dominant native families invited the *Andi Pandarams* to conduct the ritual worship of God Subrahmanya. They were sumptuously rewarded for their service. This shows that the main profession of the *Andi Pandarams* is ritual worship of God Subrahmanya. When there were no invitations for ritual performances they went about the neighboring villages with the puppets to perform shows. This indicates that the main source of income for the *Andi Pandarams* was from the ritual worship and the puppet show was just an additional source from an past time activity.

With the advent of Kathakali in the 17th century and its spread to the northern parts of Kerala, naturally the *Andi Pandarams* came in contact with the new art form which was gaining importance and wide acceptance.



A Minukku puppet belonging to the 18th century

The Andi Pandarams witnessed Kathakali performances and imbibed its features into their puppets. Thus the puppet form could gain sustenance and flourished side by side of the Kathakali theater. Hence a new and independent puppet theater evolved from an earlier form which came to be called "Pavakathakali". The fig. shows a 18th century puppet with the features of a Kathakali character with Pacha make up.

The Andi Pandarams were invited for Subrahmania worship mainly in the months of December, January and February. Worship being their main occupation they were sumptuously rewarded for that. Apart from this, during the rest of the part of the year they were given alms each month from specific households. When there were no worship from any family they traveled to neighboring villages showcasing this art of "Pavakathakali".

Noble families invited *Andi Pandarams* for puppet performance in their houses. Their troupe consisted of six artistes. At the beginning of the performance a lamp is lighted at the eastern courtyard of the house, before which they sang in praise of their Lord. The people of the house asks them to present a story which they gladly accept and present it. Usually the performance were for one to two hours but on special occasions like festivals of *Shivaratri* and *Tiruvatira* they gave night long performances. They are rewarded with a good fee called *Arangu Pananam* or stage money. The master of the house presents the leader of the house with a brocaded dhoti called *Kasavumundu*. The audiences also gave gifts and money called *Poli Panam*.

They performed episodes from *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and a Tamil story called *Aryamala Natakam*.

The puppet show was in great demand in the areas of Tirur, Kottakal, Valancheri, Desamangalam and Guruvayur. Some of the late Pavakathakali artists are Andivelan, Kuttiyappu Velan, Karappan, Raman, Chinnan, Thengara, Chami Velayudhan, Chamu and Veeran.

With the progress of the Indian Independence struggle and the disintegration of the noble joint families which were the patrons of this art, the demand drastically came down. The artistes who performed in troupes went scattered in search of other sources of livelihood. The only few left wandered all alone in the villages. The performance grew less attractive with only one artist handling the puppet and singing. Gradually their condition became worst with the dying art reduced to the means of begging for alms to the artists. Thus Pavakathakali fell into decay and became almost extinct until the efforts of an organization called Natanakairali- Research and Performing Centre for Traditional Arts, lead by the efforts of Sri G Venu that this art form is revived and performed around the world.



Various puppets belonging to the 18th century



A photograph of Chamu Pandaram with Aryamala puppet

Chamu Pandaram's Aryamala puppet in the nearly 400 years old, in the collection of G Ravi.



## KATHAKALI- AN UNDERSTANDING IN BRIEF

Pavakathakali is the puppet form of Kathakali, adapting most of it. Therefore it is necessary to understand the important aspects of Kathakali.

### A BREIF HISTORY

Kathakali can be said as the most advanced modern theater of Kerala. Its roots can be traced back to 17th century, where in South Travancore district, the Raja of Kottarakara devised a theater form called *Ramanattam*. This included plays from the epic Ramayana. As *Ramanattam* spread with the efforts of Raja of Vettathunadu of North Kerala and Kottayam Raja, various stories from the other epic Mahabharata also came to be played. In course of time this theater form came to be called as Kathakali which literally means story play.



## THE ORIGIN

The dance movements, music and make up of Kathakali are adapted from various other art forms which existed a very long time back in Kerala.

The art forms which made dominant contributions to Kathakali are :-

### 1. KUTIYATTAM

Kutiyattam is the most ancient Sanskrit theater of Kerala. It presented the Sanskrit dramas written by Bhasa, Harshavardhana, Shaktibhadra, Kulasekhara, Mahendra Vikrama and Nilakantha, all ancient authors in Sanskrit. The costumes resemble Teyyam and Tirayattam- the folk and the ritual art form. The acting techniques of Bharata's Natyashastra is incorporated. The stylized body movements, hand gestures, movement of eyes and eye brows are unique to this art form only. No play is presented fully from beginning to end. Only selected portions are elaborately presented.



## 2. NANGIAR KOOTHU

Nangiar Koothu is a solo dance form presenting Sanskrit dramas by women. This form is specialized presentation of the part of the female characters of the Kutiyattam. Nangiar Koothu presents the eventful story of God Sri Krishna.



### 3. MOHINIYATTAM

Mohiniyattam is presented as a solo performance by women. This dance form specializes in presenting the feminine nature with tender, graceful movements and erotic sentiment called as the *Sringara Rasa*, mostly adopted from the *Kaisiki* type from Bharata's *Natyasastra*.



#### 4. KRISHNANATTAM

Krishnanattam is again a Sanskrit dance drama based on the poetic composition called Krishna Geeti by Manavedan of the Calicut Zamorin Royal Family. It presents the story of Sri Krishna for eight nights with eight plays from the birth to the death of Lord Sri Krishna. It lays great emphasis on the devotional sentiment called as the *Bhakti Rasa*. The costume and make up are adopted from Kutiyattam, Nangiar Koothu and Mohiniyattam with an exception of elaborate wooden masks for certain characters.



## 5. KALARIPAYATTU

Kalaripayattu is the martial art form of Kerala. The various dynamic movements in this martial art are incorporated in Kathakali. The strenuous training methods for this art form has also being adopted for the training of Kathakali artists.



## KATHAKALI COSTUME AND MAKE UP

The characters to be enacted are from the Puranas. Most of the Puranic characters are super human in nature. They are gods, demons, witches, men of great strength and power. All of them possess capabilities beyond normal human beings. These characters are categorized as per their nature or quality which in turn determine their make up.

### **The Costume**

The costume of Kathakali is a common feature in characters irrespective of the make up with some variations. There are exceptions which come under the category of special characters.

The common features of the costume of a male character are

#### ***Kirita***

This is the head gear or crown. This is made of wood, with carvings, adorned with glass pieces, pea-cock feathers and sometimes the shell of beetles and painted in vibrant colors of red, green and gold.

#### ***Kazhutaram***

These are necklaces of gold color plated beads of aluminium. They almost totally cover the neck hanging down up to the abdomen. These are worn over a full sleeved velvet jacket which covers the torso.

***Uttariyam***

These are strips of folded cloth worn across the shoulder hanging down forward. At the end of this is a bell shaped tuft of velvet which encase a round mirror.

***Uduttukettu***

This is the long bulging skirt. The size of the head gear determines the size of the skirt. The lower end has a bands or stripes of different colors.

***Andipattuvaram***

This the band or strip of cloth that hangs down on the either side of the skirt.

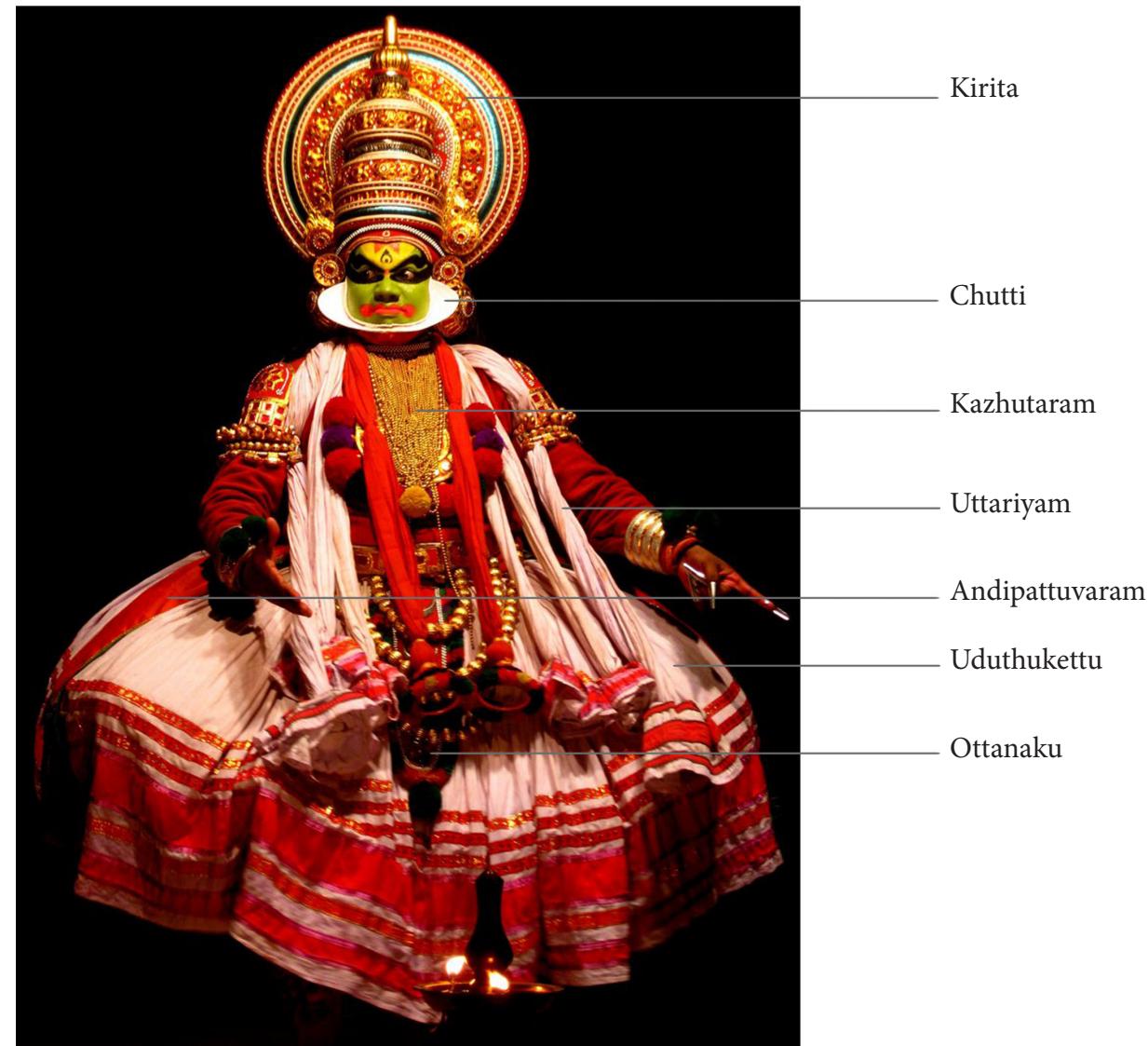
***Ottanaku***

This the strip of cloth that hangs down from the middle of the skirt. This often are gilded with a shape of moon called as Chandrakala and stars called as Nakshatram.

The female characters wear a red jacket along with a white *saree*.

Most commonly male actors play the female roles. They have false breasts called *Mulakollaram* and forehead is covered with a long scarf which rests over the head.

## The Male Costume



## The Female Costume



Konda

Mulakollaram

Saree

## MAKE UP

The characters are broadly divided into three groups according to their nature and quality. They are :-

*Uttama*- The godly and heroic characters

*Madhyama*- They are heroic but still lay by the side of unrighteousness.

*Adhama*- They belong to the lowest groups who are demoniac and vile.

The above said qualities broadly define the nature of the make up of the characters with some exceptions for special characters.

*Chutti* is a series of white ridges built up from the chin to the either side of the cheek marking off the face and a frame within which the emotions are expressed. This is a common feature in all the types of characters again with some exceptions.



The Chutti artist fixing the Chutti

### Pacha

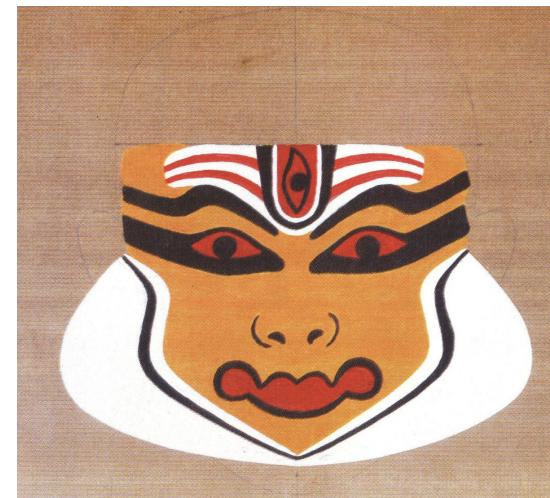
This make up comprises of green color for the face with large black markings around the eyes and eyebrows, the sacred mark of Lord Visnu in a large yellow patch with red and black design within it. They have red color around their mouths and *chutti* with smooth edge. The crown is also called *Kesabharam kirta*.

Characters of *Uttama* nature fall under this make up. Incarnations of Lord Vishnu such as Rama, Krishna , Rama's brother Lakshmana, Lava and Kusa, Arjuna etc. The character of Krishna has a kirta which is silver colored vase with pea-cock feathers arranged top of it called as *Krishnamuti*.

Balarama, Brahma, Siva and Surya characters have the same features except the face is painted orange instead of green. This makeup is called *Pazhuppu*.



Pacha



Pazhuppu

### Katti

This make up comprises of *chutti* and *kirita* as the Pacha characters with green colored face, a shape of up turned moustache or resembling a knife which is painted red within white colored borders on either side of the cheek. The forehead is painted with patterns of red and white in dominant patch of black. They have a white knob on the tip of their nose and forehead which is called *chuttipu*.

The characters in *Madhyama* nature fall under this category. They are born high in status but are demoniac in deeds. Ravana, Kamsa, Sisupala, Duryodhana and Keechaka fall under this category.



### **Tadi**

This is a broad category divided into three sub categories. *Tadi* literally means beard. These are artificial trimmed beards which cover the neck.

The sub categories are

#### **Chuvanna Tadi**

“Chuvanna” means red. The term means red beard. The upper half of the face is painted black, all around the eyes and forehead. The lower half is painted red. The *chutti* rises above their cheeks and and between the eyes and the nose. The edges are finished with teeth like sharp edges. A white ball is fixed on their forehead and nose which is larger than that of the Katti make up. He wears a hairy red jacket of wool and a crown much larger than the Pacha and Katti. The size of the *uduthukettu* is appropriate the size of the crown.

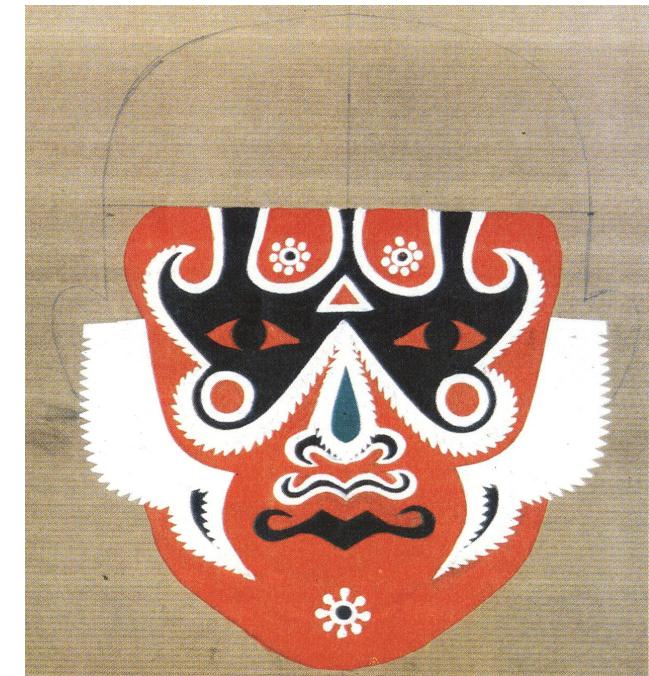
The characters of cruel and demoniac in nature which fall under the *Adhama* nature. Baka, Bali, Dussasana, Sugriva, Trigartha fall under this category.



### Vella Tadi

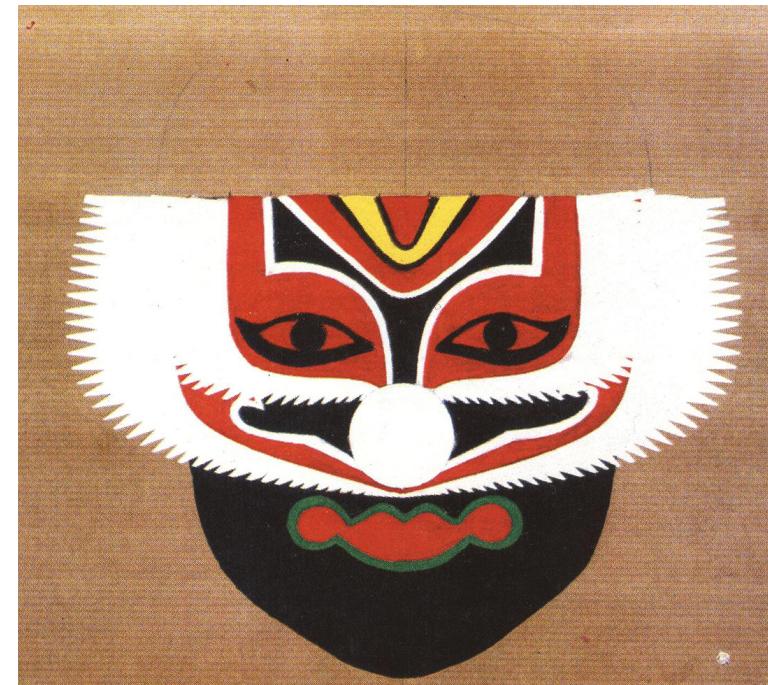
“Vella” means white, therefore the term means white beard. The face is painted dominantly red with black and white patterns. The *chutti* comprises of teeth edged bits of paper of different shapes and sizes fixed over the cheek and from the edge of either of the eyes extending to the upper cheek and rising in between the eyes. There is green marking with white border which signifies *Uttama* nature.

With special shaped cap like white crown called *Vattamudi* which is wide brimmed with silver dangling, the character wears a white hairy jacket. These characters are *Uttama* in nature but animal in origin. Therefore it is usually assigned to Hanuman Nandi and Vivida.



**Karintadi**

“Kari” means black, so the term black beard. With a black beard the costume also is dominantly black in color. They are wicked in nature. The character of Kali in Nalacharitam is assigned to this makeup.



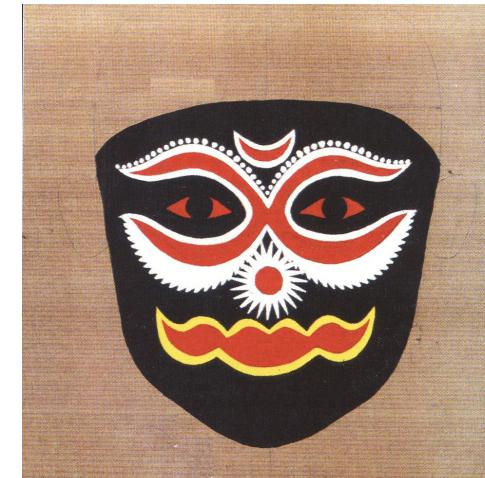
**Kari**

“Kari” or black is the dominant color. The male kari characters are called Ankari and the female counterpart is Penkari.

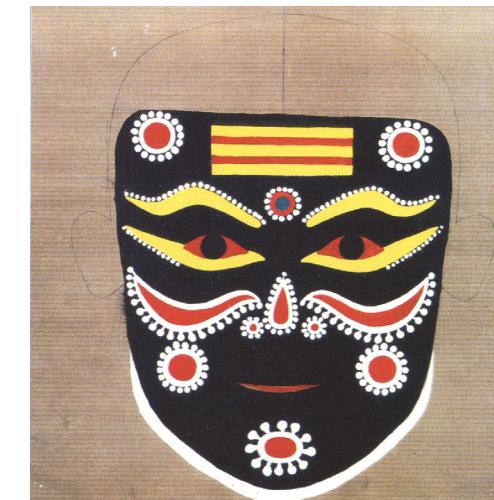
The Ankari has designs drawn in red and white around the eyes. A flower like pattern is fixed to the nose with bits of paper suitably cut. A black beard covers the neck, wears a black jacket and black *Uduthukettu*.

The crown is bucket shaped with pea-cock feathers.

The Penkari has crescent shaped designs of white and red over the cheeks and other designs on the forehead and chin. Artificial wooden breasts are worn. The forest dwellers and the demonesses are assigned this makeup such as *Kattala* or forest dwellers in *Nalacharita* and *Surpanakha* in *Ramayana*.



Ankari

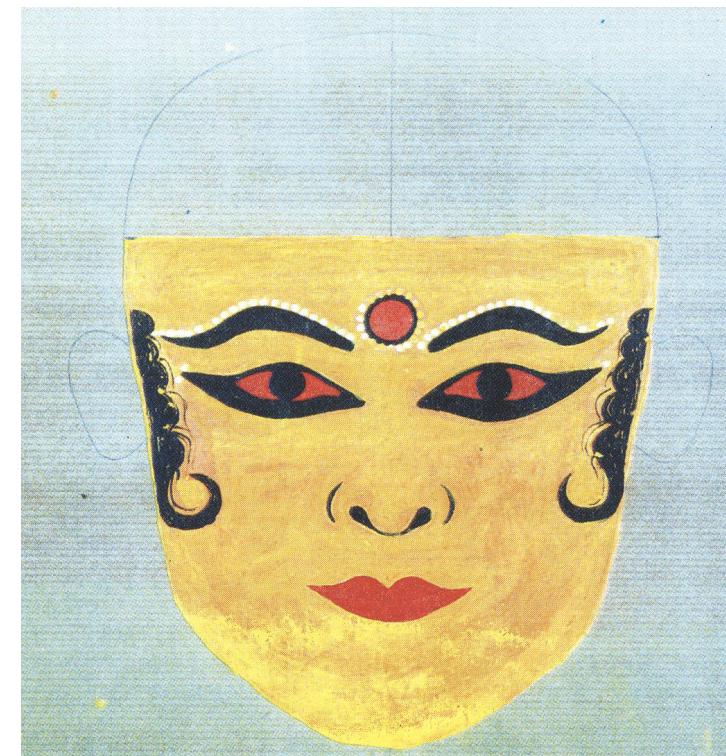


Penkari

### Minukku

These are painted mainly in yellowish orange with darkened eyes and eyebrows. They do not have *Udutthukettu* but just wear long cloth wrapped around the waist. The Brahmins, the sages and the female heroines, messengers, charioteers, carpenter and wrestlers fall under this category. The sages wear a white beard and tie bunch of hair on their head and a painted white moustache. The wrestlers, messengers and charioteers wear turban. The female characters cover their head completely wrapping a cloth around their fore head, a *Konda* or tuft of hair tied and knotted towards the side of the head. A long cloth floats down over the *Konda*. They wear special jewels and ornaments, *saree* and artificial breasts.

Other than these main categories of make up there also special make ups for characters such as Narasimha the anthropomorphic character of lion's head and human body which is an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, Hamsa or the swan, Jatayu, the vulture and Garuda, the eagle have suitably painted faces and wooden beaks tied.



Minukku, female make up

## MUSIC

### Instruments

The musical instrument used in Kathakali are *Chenda*, *Maddalam*, *Chengila*, *Elattalam* and *Sankh* or Conch shell.

***Chenda*** is drum held vertically and struck by two slightly bent sticks.

***Maddalam*** is another kind of drum held horizontally. The right side of it is struck with fingers covered with caps made of cloth smeared with glue and the left side of it with the palm.

***Chengila*** is a circular gong about eight inches in diameter and made of bronze.

***Elattalam*** is a pair of cymbals made of bronze.

The singers are two in number, each of them playing *Chengila* and *Elattalam* respectively.

### Songs

The songs sung are called as *Padams* which were sung in a style called *Sopana* which was a style of singing confined to the temples. This style employs mainly plain notes accompanied by a hour glass shaped drum called the *Edakka*, in its original form. This is sung by male singers.

In the later years the Kathakali Padams are slightly modified with the influence of Carnatic music.



Chenda



Maddalam



Elattalam



Chengila

## LITERATURE

The literary compositions designed especially for Kathkali are called *Attakatha* which literally means dance story. These are stories written in phrases, not in prose and set to specific ragas to be sung. Raja of Kottarakkara wrote the first *Attakatha*. The language used is Malayalam and Manipravalam which is a mixture of Malayalam and Sanskrit. The literature was later enriched and developed by various scholars such as Rama Varma Maharaja, Aswati Tirunal, Unnayi Warier, Irayimman Tampi, Vayaskara Moossu and Kilimanoor Koil Tampuran. Unnayi Warier's *Nalacharitam* is acclaimed to be one of the best *Attakathas*.

## PERFORMANCE

The Kathakali performance starts at the dusk, extends throughout the night and ends at day break. The stage for Kathakali which is nothing but a raised platform with a roof is called *Arangu*. A lamp is lighted at the beginning which is called as *Nilavilakku* which is about four feet high, filled with coconut oil and thick wicks dipped into it which will burn through out the performance providing light and a symbol of sanctity. Sometimes torches are also lit to provide additional light.

The performance proceeds in various stages which is dealt briefly in the following. The performance starts with the announcements, proceeding to the showcase of singing, playing the drums in separate sessions and in specific details. A curtain called *Tirassila* is raised by two men holding either side of it. Before the actual play begins there are short performances behind the curtain. After the specific performances of the drummers and the singers the play actually begins lowering the curtain slowly.

The actors performance is a combination dance and drama. The drama portion with hand gestures called *Mudras*, the facial expressions and body movements are called *Nritya*. The pure dance portions that interlude the performance is called *Nritta*. This is an important factor where the character sets himself to pure dance movements to add grace, beauty and lay emphasis on the emotions. These pure dance movements in Kathakali is called *Kalasha*. The dialogues in Kathakali are called *Padams* which occur at the end of a phrase. The *Kalasha* is performed after this to round off that story portion. There are types of *Kalashas* with varying time and tempo which the actor executes as suitable to the context of the story. The male part of the dance is called *Tandava* which includes movements of masculine nature. The female portion is called *Lasya* with gentle and graceful moves. Even the male actor executes *Lasya* moves to portray love scenes.



The actor behind the Tirassila

## ADAPTATION OF KATHAKALI IN PAVAKATHAKALI AND ITS UNIQUENESS

### Making of puppets

The puppets are made of wood. The height of the puppet varies from one to two feet. The head and the arms are made of light wood from a tree called *Kumbili* in Malayalam. They are carved hollow and then tied and stitched to a sack through which the palm is inserted and the fingers, the thumb, the middle finger lead into the hollow spaces of the arms and the middle finger into the head. Earlier the natural colors used for Kathakali make up were used for the puppets too but later acrylic paints were used to avoid discoloring due to the collection of dust. They are beautified with small and thin pieces of tin, the hard carpasses of big bees, transparent corals, the stem of the feathers of the pea-cock. The palm is carved in the gesture as *Gnana mudra* so that apart from its symbolic significance it can also hold props like weapons and flowers.

Considering the whole design of the puppets, the exact features of Kathakali make up and costume are adapted. Since the height of the puppets range from one to two feet, the exact proportion of the Kathakali costume is maintained within the constraints of the size. The *kirita* or the crown is painted in red, white, golden and green in color as in Kathakali. The hair is off the same material used in Kathakali where a bark of a tree is soaked in water and its strands are removed dried and colored.

The *Kazhuttaram*, the *Uttariyam*, *Uduttukettu*, *Andipattuvaram*, *Ottanaku* and the jacket are the common elements in the costume. While the Kathakali costume has much ornate elements such as blobs of velvet tied, or bordering or hanging over different parts of the costume has been eliminated in the puppets due to the size constraints which might make the appearance too heavy

and loose attention to specific details. Also the beautification should be just enough not to obstruct the free movement of the puppet. A string is tied to the head gear to have extra control over the head movements.

The make up is almost exactly adapted as the Kathakali. The *Chutti* been one of the most important element in Kathakali, it is modified in size and fine detail. If the exact proportion of the *Chutti* is adopted the face could lose its attention and the details because of the miniature form.



Hollow wooden head and hands



The head and the hands stitched to the sack

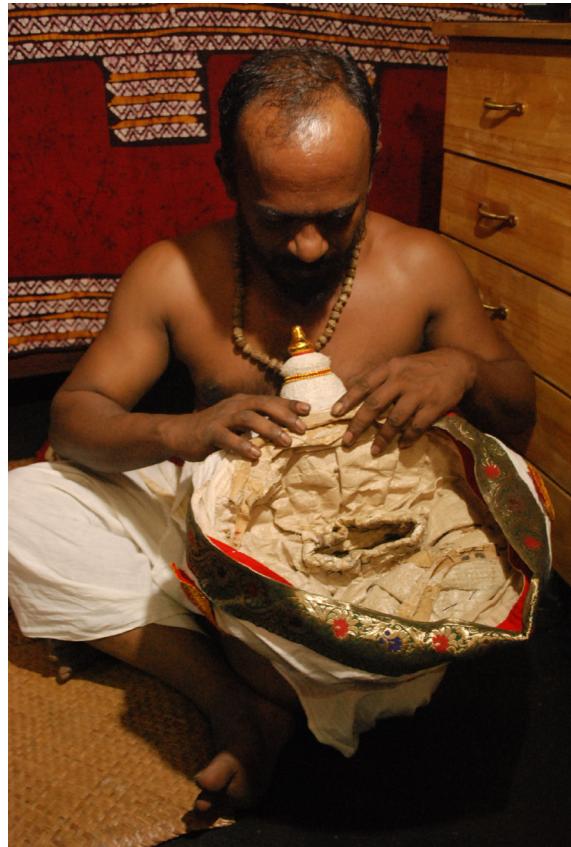
## A COMPARISON OF MAKE UP



Kathakali- Chuvanna Tadi



Pavakathakali- Chuvanna Tadi



The sack into which the palm is inserted is stitched to the costume



The front and back of Vella Tadi puppet



The Krita, in this case called as Vattamudi

The Vella Tadi

Kazhutaram

Uttariyam

Andipattuvaram

Uduthukettu

Ottanaku



## The Stage

The stage elements of the puppets also share some common elements with that of Kathakali.

Instead of a raised platform usually a mat is spread. A small lamp is lighted in front. If there are many characters in a scene other than the main characters, stands are kept to keep them supported, where as in Kathakali there are wooden stools are used where characters are seated. A miniaturized *Tirassila* or the curtain is held tied to a string on either sides before the performance begins and also when there are changes in the scenes. At the end of the performance another stage element called as the *Thoranam* made of colored pieces of cloth usually triangular in shape decorated with glasses and shiny materials and tied to a string or an decorated arch is held over in obligation to the Lord.

## The Music

The instruments used in the puppet performance are *Chenda*, *Chengila*, *Elattalam* and *Shankh* except the *Maddalam* used in Kathakali. In the early days even *Maddalam* were used in the orchestra. In a troupe of six there is a *Chenda* player, 3-4 puppeteers and a singer who plays the *Chengila* simultaneously. The *Attakathas* and *Padams* are sung in the same style as Kathakali suitably adapted to the shorter time period of a play.



The stage for the Pavakathakali performance

## The Performance

As a miniature form of Kathakali it has adopted most from the dominant art form. The performance is the portion which stands very much unique to itself. The time taken for a Kathakali performance is enormous, beginning at the dusk and ending at dawn. Here in the puppet performance the time is condensed into about thirty to forty five minutes in the puppets. The performance begins with the lighting of *Nilavilakku*, a lamp used primarily as a symbol of sanctity and the main source of light. The artists start their invocation prayer to Lord Subrahmanya, the key deity of worship for the *Andi Pandarams*. After the artists settle down for the performance, the small *Tirassila* is held before the characters are introduced. The singer starts singing the *Padams* along with playing the *Elattalam*.

Kathakali artist has an enormous range of expressions, body movements and hand gestures to communicate the story. While the puppets are made of wood. They cannot change emotions as the story progresses, they cannot communicate using *Mudras*- the hand gestures. The face is painted with an idea of the dominant emotion that the character is to portray. As in the characters with Pacha make up the dominant emotion is a pleasant, the Chuvanna tadi has cruel emotions etc,. The hand has no joint to be bent and is carved with only one symbolic gesture called as the *Gnana Mudra* so that it can also holds props such as weapons and flowers.

The puppeteer uses his three fingers, the thumb and the middle finger for the hands and the index finger for the head. These three fingers has very limited range of movements when using all together and also very simple. The puppeteer has to hold the puppet using the arm which is to be held straight and stiff most of the time during the performance. The puppets being quite heavy the arms can stand the weight of them not longer than thirty to forty five minutes. The stage is not set to hide the puppeteers and the musicians,

one can see all the movements of the puppeteers, changing the puppets, holding the *Tirassila*, blowing the conch shell etc,. With these high range of limitations compared to Kathakali, still the puppets are to be brought alive playing their parts. As in Kathakali only two characters play each scene. The puppets appear to float on air moving around the stage as they do not have legs but the *Uduthukettu* swaying in beautiful patterns as the puppets moves. The puppeteer's space ranges as per the range of arm movements and also the limited range of his torso when in seated position. There are sudden movements across this space rising and falling low to the floor.

The male characters are moved rigorously with sudden changes in movements as adopted from the *Tandava* nature of choreography in Kathakali and the female characters are move smooth and rhythmic manner reflecting the *Lasya* mode of dance.

Puppeteer's perfection lies in the experience gained by controlling the manipulations of the puppet with fluent rigorous movements to almost static yet delicate movements. He being the puppeteer he also has to live the character that has to be enacted. This brings out the emotions in him which gets naturally transmitted to the hands holding the puppets. The hands are one of the parts where most of the emotions gets transmitted immediately as we see in our day to day life. This faculty is put the maximum in both Kathakali and the puppets.

The Pacha character as in Kathakali does not open his mouth throughout the performance while the characters of Chuvanna tadi produce roaring sounds reflecting their nature. The same is adopted in Pavakathakali too where the puppeteer can produce sounds corresponding to the character.

The performance ends with a obligation prayer to Lord Vishnu.

The play is performed usually in the late evenings. The *Nilavilakku* is the main

source of light. Sometimes corresponding to the turns of the story torches are used on which inflammable powder is thrown giving rise to a ball of fire and smoke rising up in the air. Such a practice also exists in Kathakali. This adds to special effects and drama of the story.

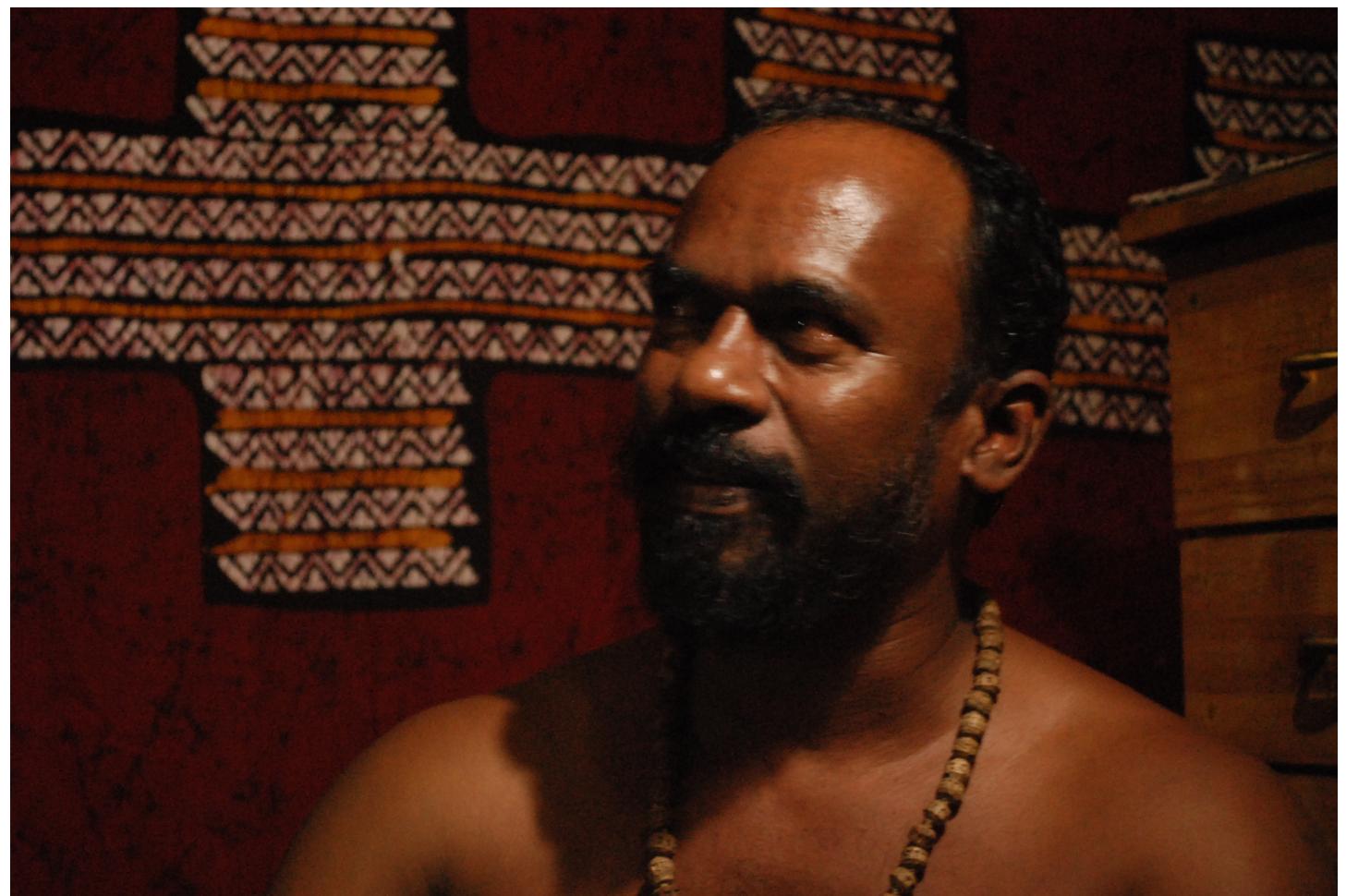
The storytelling aspect of Pavakathakali is same as in Kathakali where the same *Attakathas* are used as the basis and rendered in different stages as the story progresses excepting the detailed elaborations of the Kathakali, condensing the time taken for a whole performance.

With these limitations Pavakathakali has risen to its uniqueness of the medium bringing its elaborate and larger counterpart- The Kathakali in a condensed yet rich form. The witnesses of Pavakathakali performance can get the gist of an entire Kathakali performance in a short yet enthralling performance.



G Venu and K C Ramakrishnan performing Duryodhanavadham,

## A BRIEF LIFE SKETCH OF SRI. RAVI GOPALAN NAIR AND HIS ENDEAVORS IN THE REVIVAL OF PAVAKATHAKALI



Ravi Gopalana Nair is a puppet maker, puppeteer, artist, and a photographer. He was born to Chittore Gopalan Nair and V. Sumathy Kutty Amma in Thiruvananthapuram. Chittor Gopalan Nair was an artist and ran a black and white photography studio. He had a special attitude towards study of art forms. He was a part of the first ever animation film project in India, around the year 1945-46, under the banner of AVM Productions, but unfortunately the project was abandoned abruptly. He was a major inspiration as he always spent whatever earned to gain and spread the knowledge of art. He let his children make independent choices and as G Ravi quit schooling early he joined to practice photography at his father's studio. Meanwhile one of his elder brother G Venu, very well trained in Kathakali at a very early age was traveling around the country in an quest to gain knowledge of many traditional art forms by meeting their masters and encouraging the young generation to take up the art forms. His letters describing the travels along with sketches gave an insight into the world of art beyond the boundaries of his native state. After the advent of color photography, G Ravi quit photography. When G Venu started studying and reviving the various traditional art forms of Kerala, in 1981, Smt Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay requested him to revive the Pavakathakali art form. Thus under her directions G Venu started his one of his greatest endeavors in reviving this art form and G Ravi actively accompanied his brother.

In their first search of this art form, they came across K V Ramakrishnan belonging to the Andi Pandaram community, the bearers of this art form by heredity. He had two old puppets in possession and used to wander from house to house performing at houses for few minutes. He performed alone singing which often had no relation with the puppets and their meaning was not clear enough.

Later the Sangeet Natak Academi sponsored scholarship under a scheme to appoint six students to learn to perform and make puppets and three teachers to teach them. Thus they picked three students from the native village of this art form and another three students of Kathakali. Kalamandalam Surendran was appointed to teach Kathakali Padams and a student of the institute to teach chenda.

They stayed in Kathakali schools for a long time witnessing the performance and making a study of them. They interacted with Kathakali artists and sought their knowledge in the manipulating the puppets and also in making them. They came across Thotacheri Narayana Namboothiri, from Thiruvalla, a Kathakali exponent and chutti artiste who agreed to make puppets.

Then G Ravi set out with a camera to document the available old puppets with an objective to design and make new puppets. He met Chamu Pandaram, an old puppeteer who had in his possession, puppets which did not resemble Kathakali characters. He learnt from him that there were puppet even before the advent of Kathakali. Those were puppets from a Tamil drama called as Aryamala Natakam. Chamu Pandaram was eighty six years old then and had only two puppets in possession. He lost the rest and some were taken away by travelers. When G Ravi returned later after so many years he learnt that Chamu had no children and bought the puppets from his wife. Chamu Pandaram had passed away.

G Ravi continued traveling documenting puppets and collected almost all of them except a few which were bought by foreign travelers.

Looking at the history of these puppets collected it was clear that for about eighty years there were no new puppets produced. The independence struggle and its aftermath where many families who were the patrons of this

art disintegrated. The puppet troupe also disintegrated with no income to support their livelihood. The troupes were now reduced to one or two artistes and they were left wandering around the villages begging for alms. Thus the art form decayed and was almost extinct whilst the larger counterpart, the Kathakali theater survived and grew popular into much refined art form. Therefore a decision was arrived at to base the designs of the new puppets on Kathakali.

Thotacheri Narayana Namboothiri started making puppets while G Ravi assisted him in its making. By around 1981-83, the design of the present puppets were manifested and the first play was organized which is called *Kalyanasougandhikam*- a story from the epic *Mahabharata* where *Bhima*, one of the *Pandava* brothers, while spending their term in the jungles, sets out to find the *Sougandhika* flower on the bidding of his loving wife, *Draupadi*. This play was set to be performed for about thirty minutes.

After the production of this play the students who learnt this art under scholarship turned away sighting no future for their careers. Then the troupe that remained included Thotacheri Narayanan Namboothiri, K V Ramakrishnan, his relative K C Ramakrishnan and G Ravi.

The first production of *Kalyanasougandhikam* was presented before Smt. Kamaldevi Chattopadhyay who was overwhelmed by the performance immediately recommended the troupe to perform at the Puppet Theater Festival held in Poland, in 1984.

G Ravi had only started performing then, by helping the main artists, playing the puppets of not so important characters and blowing the conch. The troupe's performance in Poland became a huge success with an overwhelming response from the audience, most of them, children.

This early success was a major inspiration for the continuation of the troupe's performance.

After this followed a period of financial crisis. There were not many performances held but Thotacheri continued to make puppets and thus puppets were made ready for the new play called *Duryodhanavadham*. Meanwhile G Ravi studied the art of *Chutti* making and studied the Kathakali costume in detail. After this he learnt carpentry under Eravankad Sankunni Ashan, the master craftsmen and a person of immense knowledge and practice in the *Vastushastra*, *Ayurveda*, a master of the Sanskrit language, *Natyashastra* and *Mantravidhya* including medical treatment.

G Ravi started making puppets by around 1986. Other plays including *Duryodhanavadham*, *Dakshyagam* and *Uttaraswayamvaram* were produced. Another artiste named Sreenivasan from Thrissur joined the troupe in 1991.

G Ravi then slightly deviated his pursuit to join the *PoorTheater* of Grotowsky in France. After three to five years of playing in the theater he returned back to Kerala 1995.

He continued traveling all around Kerala witnessing and studying various traditional art forms such as Theyyam, Padayani etc,. By around 1998 he began fluently performing Pavakathakali. He actively shouldered the responsibility of performance management, lead the national and international tours and continued working on the dramaturgy refining the plays set by his brother G Venu.

The performances held by this troupe are

XI International Puppet Theater Festival held in Poland in 1984, Puppet Carnival held in Japan in 1986, Marionnettes Traditionnelles d Orient et d Occident festival in Geneva in 1987. They also performed in various cities in Switzerland such as Locarno, Lausanne, Basel and Zurich in 1987.

International Puppet Festival in Amsterdam in 1987 and performances in Paris during the same year.

The art form is now protected and propagated by the organization Natana Kairali in Irinjalakuda of Thrissur district, headed by G Venu.

Sri G Ravi continues to perform even today touring national and international festivals. He along with K V Ramakrishnan and K C Ramakrishnan are given the National Award by Sangeet Natak Akademi New, Delhi. G Ravi is also awarded by the organization called Dakshin Chitra for his life time contribution to the field of performing arts.

Sri G Ravi presently lives with his wife Parvathy, a Baul singer and an artist at Chittore House, in Nedumangad, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala.



Smt. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay

G Venu with a Chuvanna Tadi puppet



K V Ramakrishnan with the Viswaroopa puppet



## CONCLUSION

The Pavakathakali and Kathakali is a perfect example for the harmonious existence art forms together, with mutual exchange of design and storytelling methods. Though Pavakathakali may not be exactly called as purely native art form of Kerala, since its origins can be traced to a community of performers migrating from Andhra Pradesh, it could live and flourish because it adapted the features of a dominant and popular art form. The puppet form did not do away with the larger form but acted as a initiative towards the wider acceptance of either forms. This could be done only because the puppet form carefully adopted the features staying authentic enough to the larger form thus forming a true condensed form of Kathakali. There also many other art forms in India and world were a dominant art form has its condensed form as puppets, such as Yakshagana of Karnataka has its puppet form, Kabuki theater of Japan has its puppet form called Bunraku etc,. All of them productively contributing to each other.

The tragedy met by Pavakathakali of mere extinction and its revival is another example which it sets, in the way an extinct art form can be revived to its original form successfully, preserved and propagated. The commendable initiative by a versatile artistic personality of Sri G Venu stands as a perfect methodology of revival of an art form. G Venu is a Kathakali exponent, artist, scholar and now a Kutiyattam expert. He became noted for his study, analysis and practice of art forms very early that brought him to notice of personalities such Smt. Kamala Devi Chattopadhyay under whose directions he set out to revive Pavakathakali. G Venu accompanied by his brother G Ravi actively plunged in the thorough survey, research and study of the earlier form of Pavakathakali that existed. The knowledge and practice of Kathakali itself was a great reward on which the puppet form could be based upon. G Ravi's consistent pursuit in the research and study of Pavakathakali

following which he himself started playing humble roles on stage and then taking its commands to the full is a role model for any keen artist. The whole journey from study to revival took around a decade which shows the persistence of the artistes involved in it. The manner in which the art form was revived is also an example. G Ravi's staunch belief in traditional art forms and its methodologies is a highly contributing factor for the authentic revival of any art form. He concludes that all traditional art forms share high values and methods of practice. Wherever a traditional art form had stopped it is a must to reach upto that point, as a beginning and then uplift it to greater heights. Any attempts to mismatch with the trends of the time will surely result in vandalism. He persists that this art form should remain authentic in times to come and if at all this changes its course successfully it will reach another zenith of advanced refinement or a completely new form will be born out of it.

The presence of supportive organizations such as the Sangeet Natak Akademi are of immense importance to encourage and support activities of revival, preservation and propagation of traditional art forms.

The modern media can also play its part by making the art forms known to the common people but it cannot do away with it by mere adaptations into other mediums as the puppet theater is purely experiential and each experience stays unique to itself and mere reproductions cannot give a enriching experience. The puppet performances have always been dear to children and they are the recipient of this art form. The puppet festivals held abroad always attracted children the most, according to G Ravi's experiences. If children can completely lose themselves in involvement to the performance then it is a major sign of success. Therefore it is necessary to bring children in contact to our traditional art forms especially the puppet theater for imparting values by storytelling along with the successful existence and propagation of the art form.

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