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**The Ritual of Beginning.
The *Purappāṭu* Segment of the Kūṭiyāṭṭam Theatre Tradition**

*Pantu vo nārasimhasya nakha-lāṅgala-koṭayaḥ
Hiraṇyakaśīpor vakṣaḥ-kṣetrāṣṭk-kardamāruṇaḥ.*¹

Abstract

The Kūṭiyāṭṭam theatre of Kerala has developed its own rules for staging Classical Sanskrit dramas. The very initial segment of the complex Kūṭiyāṭṭam performance is a *purappāṭu*, or ritual of beginning. It marks the formal commencement of the performance of many days.

The Kūṭiyāṭṭam theatre of Kerala (South India) is the only surviving form of classical Sanskrit theatre. For centuries confined to the temple premises Kūṭiyāṭṭam developed its own peculiar rules of stage techniques and presentation. Undoubtedly, some of them are due to its temple context and the fact that a performance of the Kūṭiyāṭṭam theatre tradition² is a part of the prescribed temple ritual activities (*kriyās*). The initial segment – *purappāṭu* – of the complex Kūṭiyāṭṭam performance of many days represents a concept of *pūrva-raṅga* (preliminaries) declared in the *Nāṭya-śāstra*.³ In the course of time, it has been enlarged and is repeated during the performance. Hereditary Kūṭiyāṭṭam artists

¹ *May Nārasimha's plough-sharp nails protect you,
[the nails that] made Hiraṇyakaśipu's chest dirty with blood.*

This is the first benedictory stanza of the *Bālarita-Sūtradhāra purappāṭu* constituting a debut performance of a Cākyār boy.

² The term “Kūṭiyāṭṭam theatre tradition” also includes the *kūttu* (solo) performances of Naññyārs and Cākyārs, respectively Naññyār Kūttu and Cākyār Kūttu, being in close relation with the tradition of staging Sanskrit dramas, if not a part of it.

³ For the *Nāṭya-śāstra*'s *pūrva-raṅga* and Kūṭiyāṭṭam tradition, see Rajagopalan 2000: 27-54.

belong to two communities – Cākyārs (actors) and Nampyārs (musicians) with their female folk (Naññyārs) being actresses and support musicians. Both communities are a part of the vast social group of the temple servants – Ampalavāsis.

In a technical sense the *purappāṭu* is the formal entry of a drama character, his/her first appearance on the stage. A complete presentation of a drama text (an act only) has to begin with the *purappāṭu*. The enacting of a drama text must be preceded by two segments (often multiplied), that of the *purappāṭu* of the character and then his/her *nirvahaṇa*, or a flashback recalling past deeds of the character up to the moment the story of the drama text to be enacted begins. With the first act it should be a *purappāṭu* of Sūtradhāra, a figure who is the essence of *nāṭya*, definitely an architect of (the art of) theatre in a very broad sense. If any subsequent act of the drama is staged, the performance opens with the *purappāṭu* of another drama character who is granted such an entry according to the tradition. Unfortunately, the Sūtradhāra *purappāṭu* can already be treated as a practice of the past. At present in the temple theatre (*kūttampalam*) we may observe only the *Mattavilāsa*-Sūtradhāra and *Bālacarita*⁴-Sūtradhāra *purappāṭus*.⁵ The latter is an extraordinary piece since it constitutes the initiation performance (*araññēṇṇam*) of a Cākyār boy.⁶ Moreover, it is not followed by the presentation of a drama text proper. There is no doubt that in the past the first act of any play began with the Sūtradhāra's formal entry as is stated in some preserved manuals of acting (*aṭṭa-prakāra*) and play production (*krama-dīpikā*). Though the practice has gradually ceased, however, in a symbolic way, we may consider every complete performance of the Kūṭiyāṭṭam as a ritually approved continuation of the *Bālacarita*-Sūtradhāra *purappāṭu*, the debut performance of a Cākyār that authorises acting and enacting.

The *purappāṭu* has its own defined structure, mostly the same for all the characters presenting it.⁷ Generally speaking, it contains various choreographic sequences accompanied by appropriate musical patterns and songs invoking gods (*akkittas*). All *akkittas* are sung by a Naññyār (occasionally two) who also keeps the rhythm by playing the *tālam*. She sits on the stage to the right. Certain arrangements of steps and gestures supported by songs of praise are called *nitya-kriyās*, meaning “acts that are always done” or “rituals that are always done”. Let me stress the word “always” (*nitya*), since it explains the constant as well as indispensable presence of these elements in the *purappāṭu* giving it a ritual significance. They must be performed in a defined way and order leading successively

⁴ *Matta-vilāsa* by Mahendravikrama Varman and *Bala-carita* by Bhāsa.

⁵ Still outside the temple we can occasionally see the Sūtradhāra *purappāṭu* of the *Bhagavad-ajjukā* (by Bodhāyana). Sūtradhāra also appears in new productions of *Śakuntalā* and *Vikramorvaśī* (by Kālidāsa) – a kind of experimental performances referring to techniques of the Kūṭiyāṭṭam by artists from Irinñālakkuṭā; however, in neither case does Sūtradhāra present a proper *purappāṭu*.

⁶ For a detailed description of the *araññēṇṇam* performance of a Cākyār boy, which is always a *purappāṭu* of the *Bālacarita*-Sūtradhāra followed by a *nirvahaṇa* describing the *Narasimha-avatāra*'s story, see Śliwczynska 2007: 103-116.

⁷ The *purappāṭu* of female characters contains an additional *akkitta*. A character of a demonic nature (Rāvaṇa) presents a *purappāṭu* slightly different in structure and contents, after all no one expects Rāvaṇa to extol the gods he is so proud to have conquered. The Vidūṣaka's *purappāṭu* is of his very own.

to the closure of the *purappāṭu*. Other segments constituting the complex Kūṭiyāṭṭam performance may follow only when the first *purappāṭu* is completed.

The first *purappāṭu* of the performance or cycle of performances⁸ must take place in the morning and is always preceded by a short *pūjā* offered to Lord Gaṇapati, the divine remover of obstacles. The *pūjā* is conducted by a temple priest on the stage just in front of the lamp whose three knots have already been lit by a Nampyār with a light brought from the *sanctum sanctorum*. This is the only moment when the *pūjā* officiated by the temple priest can be performed on the stage and the priest, a member of the Nampūtiri Brahmin community, can enter the stage proper.⁹ When the Gaṇapati *pūjā* is finished, other prescribed stage activities may follow.

The Sūtradhāra *purappāṭu* is exclusively marked with an important ritual piece absent from the formal entries of other *dramatis personae*. Having completed customary actions behind the curtain (*maṛayil-kriyās*), and after removing the curtain, Sūtradhāra greets the audience and begins his stage presentation with an element called *tēvaram*, or worship. He pays homage to the god Brahman, and sitting on the stage in front of the lamp he enacts his morning *pūjā* in detail (including the preparatory arrangements). Respective sequences of the *pūjā* are multiplied to conclude it with the offering of the *prasāda*, which Sūtradhāra's wife is to receive. Her presence is enacted. Subsequently Sūtradhāra shows his happiness and satisfaction with the day when the stage performance is to commence. Thus Sūtradhāra re-creates on the stage a ritual that a Cākyār (now the stage *Sūtradhāra*) performed in the privacy of his house some hours earlier on the same day. Both, the stage and non-stage, realities are symbolically combined in the Sūtradhāra-Cākyār concomitance.¹⁰ After all, the figure of Sūtradhāra as such is of an ambiguous nature, living within (drama/stage) and beyond.

All the *nitya-kriyās* are intended to invoke and please the gods. The incessant praising of the divine is the substance of the *purappāṭu* segment. Asking for the gods' blessings starts at the very beginning of the *purappāṭu*, from a *goṣṭi* element that is initially an instrumental prelude (the *miḻavu* drum joined by the *tālam*) meant to get the audience to assemble, and then concludes with singing the first *akkitta* of 14 stanzas lauding Gaṇapati, Śiva and Sarasvatī. This opening *akkitta* is the only one that is not accompanied by ritual steps since it is sung before the character appears on the stage. At the very moment the *akkitta* is completed, before a drama character enters the stage, a Nampyār appears

⁸ The complex Kūṭiyāṭṭam performance can be preceded by a series of solo performances – Naññyār or Cākyār Kūttus. The last great cycle of performances is still held in the Vaṭakkunātha Temple in Triśśūr. It opens with a Naññyār Kūttu of seven days followed by forty one days of the Cākyār Kūttu. Only after the completion of the Kūttu performances may the enacting of a Sanskrit drama in full display begin. The *purappāṭu* with a prelude of the Gaṇapati *pūjā* is the *purappāṭu* of Ceṭī (Maid, a female attendant of Subhadrā) on the first day of the whole cycle.

⁹ According to tradition, the Nampūtiri Brahmins are allowed to sit as spectators on the stage during a performance of the Vidūṣaka, or Jester. They sit next to side columns encircling the stage. This particular privilege is especially granted to the Nampūtiris associated with the temple and Vedic mathas. The presence of the Brahmins on the stage is very welcome since they are a part of Vidūṣaka's presentation and the very special object of his sharp wit.

¹⁰ The *tēvaram* element is never enacted by non-Cākyār boys during their debut.

on the stage as a Nāṇḍī-Sūtradhāra¹¹ to perform an *araṇṇutaḷi*, or “sprinkling the stage [with water]”. In front of the stage lamp he recites a benedictory stanza (*araṇṇutaḷi śloka*) credited to the text to be enacted. The stanza is not to be found in the drama text since it is a time-honoured creation of anonymous Cākyārs and Nāṇḍyārs of the past. The *araṇṇutaḷi* verse is the first of the benedictory stanzas of the Sūtradhāra *purappāṭu* (the second benedictory stanza of his is the *nāṇḍī-śloka* from the drama text recited and enacted during his *purappāṭu*) and is the only one of any act staged without Sūtradhāra’s presence. Finally, he consecrates the stage with water, flower petals and blades of grass. Only then does the Cākyār or Nāṇḍyār come to the stage. His/her first lines of the drama text to be enacted constitute the midpart of the whole *purappāṭu*. Usually, after performing ritual patterns of steps behind the curtain, the character greets the audience and then starts reciting and enacting the drama lines. Thus the initial phrases of the drama text are somehow enclosed by quite a vast spectrum of devotional hymns and choreographic patterns, strictly fixed in structure and succession, that verily create the *purappāṭu* segment. The drama character continually emphasises the gods’ presence on the stage and his/her ritual action culminates in a re-creation of the divine *maṇḍala* while praising the guardians of the quarters of the world (*dik-pāla-vandana*). In fact, it is the re-creation of the whole Universe symbolically represented by the *maṇḍala* with Brahman, the Creator, residing in its centre that is the centre of the stage as well. Next, all the inhabitants of the Trailokya (heavens, earth, underworld) are invoked and homage to the presiding god of the temple is paid. The *purappāṭu* is nearly at its close, however there is one more ritual action to be performed – the stage is to be left! The initial *purappāṭu* of the performance (or the cycle), of Sūtradhāra or any other character entering the stage first, is marked with a circumambulation of the temple (*pradakṣiṇa*). He/she worships god in front of the *garbha-grha* and receives the *prasāda* from the priest directly into his/her hands, which is exceptional, since in Kerala only Brahmins are customarily entitled to such a way of getting the *prasāda*. On the *purappāṭu* day the Cākyār or Nāṇḍyār in his/her stage costume cherishes this rare honour. Returning to the stage the Cākyār or Nāṇḍyār formally closes the *purappāṭu* segment with a tying gesture (*muṭippu*).

The unceasing and manifold worship of the gods gives the *purappāṭu* a unique position and significance in the entire process of stage presentation in the Kūṭiyāṭṭam theatre tradition. It ensures an auspicious beginning for the complex *cākṣuṣa-yajña*, or sacrifice pleasing the eyes, as the performance is called. The auspicious entry is multiplied to repeat again and again the moment of beginning.¹²

¹¹ Both elements, singing the Gaṇapati-Śiva-Sarasvatī’s *akkitta* and the *araṇṇutaḷi*, appear only in case of the first *purappāṭu* of the complete performance.

¹² In this article, I refer to observations acquired during my annual Kūṭiyāṭṭam research visits to Kerala from 1998 onwards.

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