

## **Rahul Koonathara**

*Tholpavakoothu is a shadow puppet play of Kerala, South India, performed in Hindu temples in specially constructed puppet playhouses called koothumadam. It narrates the whole Kamparamayanam, the Ramayana text by the twelfth-century Tamil Poet Kampan (1180–1250 CE) to mother goddess Bhagavathy (also Bhagavati). From January to May every year, the tale of Rama and Ravana's fight is presented through songs and dialogues by puppeteers using leather puppets. Performances start each night after a set of opening rituals and go on till early morning. These performances are highly spiritual and done as an offering to the mother goddess. This paper will discuss the tradition of tholpavakoothu emphasizing the contemporary changes while preserving the tradition, including use of new narratives, new technology, and incorporation of women performers. Artists' self-reflexiveness in sustaining the art helps it reach both community and global audiences.*

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## **Introduction: The Shadow Puppet Theatre of Kerala—Tholpavakoothu**

Shadow puppetry is widespread in India, but is most popular in southern states where the flat puppets are operated against the rear of a tightly stretched white cloth screen.<sup>[1]</sup>

The puppet material can be leather, paper, or palm leaf and the image will often have a handle formed by a piece of split bamboo attached vertically to the center of the figure. This is the case in Kerala, where the central rod will be held with one hand, while the puppet's arm, manipulated by an even thinner rod, is held in the manipulator's other hand.

*Tholpavakoothu* has strong roots in ritual and Hindu belief. A shadow puppeteer in Kerala is known as *pulavar*, a scholarly title, who is a master in Vedas, Epics, Upanishads, Astrology, myths, and legends the ruler awarded in times past. The art is orally passed from generation to generation, and a puppeteer is a highly skilled craftsman who gives life to the object by manipulating the figure and speaking for the character (Ramachandra 2013, 110).

Shadow puppetry storytelling is unique in Kerala for having its specially designed puppet theatre called *koothumadam*. These playhouses, constructed on temple grounds specifically to accommodate *tholpavakoothu*, were a site for common people to access spirituality, while only the higher castes could access the whole temple. The puppet theatre is only operative during the temple festival, when ritual, music, and sacred story prevail. Truly appreciating this space requires seeing beyond the screen and the silhouettes; the performance is a unique storytelling and spiritual journey because the temple premises are considered sacred spaces; similarly, the *koothumadam* is treated as sacred space, and the puppets are seen as gods. *Tholpavakoothu* has ritual requirements and has to follow the epic text of the *Kamparamayanam*. Still, the narrative in *tholpavakoothu* accommodates a deeply felt spatiality to improvise the present-day, real-life situations into the traditional performance. The puppet theatre becomes a special place for a particular time when spiritual benefits can stream into real life. After the performance, the theatre becomes an empty shell until a festival performance comes around again.



Figure 1. Kavalappara Ariyankavu Temple playhouse in Kerala in 2012. (Photo: Rahul

Koonathara)

The Bhadrakali-Darika myth lies behind performing *Ramayana* tales in these *Bhagavathy* (Mother Goddess) temples of Kerala.<sup>[2]</sup> When *devas* (gods) and *asuras* (demons) fought, the former prevailed. Due to the prolonged battle, only four women (Dhanapathy, Dheenapathy, Vanika, and Maneeshika) remained alive. Before this war, the creator, Lord Brahma, had blessed an *asurasthri* (demoness). Due to this boon, Dhanapathy gave birth to a demon son, Darika, who constantly pestered the gods and *maharshi* (sages). The hermits asked Lord Shiva for help, so Shiva created Bhadrakali from his third eye. After a fierce battle, this warrior goddess was *en route* back to Mount Kailasa, Shiva's abode, and filled with pride in her victory for taking the demon's head. But all the people were praising another war: that between Rama and Ravana. Bhadrakali was distraught that she had not witnessed the fight between Rama and Ravana. But Shiva said, "Don't worry, my dear; you go and sit in the holy place of Kerala; you can see the Rama-Ravana fight through shadow puppets" (Rahul Pulavar 2021: 33). Thus the goddess is said to be pleased to watch the show and bless her devotees (Ramachandra Pulavar 2013, 18).

## ***Tholpavakoothu—A Ritual Performance***

The screen is illuminated by twenty-one lamps made from coconut shells provided with cotton wicks and filled with coconut oil. These flickering lights (thought to help bring luck to the site) are placed equidistant from each other on the *vilakku-madam* (wooden beam) behind the screen. The puppet theatre is forty-two feet in length, eight feet in height, and twelve feet in width. The screen is tied tightly inside this puppet house and resembles a modern white screen. When the puppet performance happens, the puppet theatre is a sanctum sanctorum full of rituals and worship. These sacred performances are enacted in Bhagavathy temples of the north Malabar region of Kerala from January to May (*Makaram* to *Medam* are the Malayalam months) and are scheduled, depending on the temple's wealth, for seven, fourteen, twenty-one, forty-one, or seventy-nine

successive nights from 10 pm to 5 am.<sup>[3]</sup> Each day is designated for narrating one specific episode for instance, the first day is Lord Rama's birth which tells that story. The belief is that the mother goddess watches the performance, so it is mandatory to continue to present it for her annually. This belief had supreme power in the community, ensuring the survival of the art, and so it has continued for generations with its set rituals in which the whole community participates with performers receiving donations by the temples and from individual viewers seeking blessings. The temple oracle, the *velichappadu* (literally, "revealer of light"), is a related figure. He/she can dance, go into trance, and is considered the real representation of a goddess. He/she will give feedback to and bring blessings to the puppeteers, inspiring them to enrich their performances.

In times past, the material used for the shadow figures was deer hide (spotted deer [*Axis axis*], sambar deer [*Rusa unicolor*], and antelope) (Pillai 2021, 47). But since these endangered deer are now protected, water buffalo or goat hide is now used. The puppeteer treats the hide with ash and water, dries it, and removes the hair. He carves the puppets with a specially made iron chisel: every pattern has a specific meaning. An abstraction, akin to modernist painting, can be seen in the traditional craft style of these images. Paints come from natural/vegetable sources, with black from soot mixed with gum. For other colors, different tree barks are collected and boiled in water for many hours. When the material is reduced and the color right, the paint is directly applied to the puppet.

About 160 puppets are used for the complete version of the *Kamparamayanam*, representing about seventy-one characters. Figures are in four primary action categories—*nirthu* (standing), *iruthu* (sitting), *nadathu* (walking), and *yuddha* (fighting). Special puppets can depict nature, battle scenes, or ceremonial parades. As mentioned, *tholpavakoothu* puppets are traditionally created with deer hide, but for contemporary productions, puppeteers use goat hide due to the availability of the material and transparency of hide. Contemporary stories, discussed below, borrow patterns/ideas from traditional puppets but require new variations. For example, a Christian nativity

play needs a stable, and, while Joseph and Mary's images may reflect a refined hero or heroine from the *Ramayana*, they will not wear the Indian crowns and ornaments. Puppeteers may be inspired by the representation of characters from popular culture and improvise new painting styles for the contemporary puppets. These significant changes have impacted size, structure, painting, carving, and manipulation techniques.

Each performance uses around eight artists: five to manipulate the figures; two to sing/narrate; and one to play musical instruments including *ezupara* and *chenda* (drums), *ilathalam* (cymbals), *shankh* (conch), and *chilanga* (ankle bells). Today the training is not confined to the families of *pulavars*, but the effort remains intensive: all puppeteers must study all branches of knowledge as well as being able to improvise and bring in present events and ideas. Pillai reiterates some of the requirements:

The oral narrations of *Kamparamayana* verses and related subjects, other ancient texts like *Puranas*, *Upanishads*, *Tharkas*, *Vedas*, Sanskrit *Shlokas* and *Ithihasa*, use Sanskrit, Malayalam and Tamil languages and study the various disciplines mentioned above. They [puppeteers] were trained in the traditional knowledge of the art of puppet making, preparation and storage, puppet manipulation, *koothumadam* [theatre] preparation, traditional lighting traditions, musical accompaniments, pre-performance rituals and performance traditions. (Pillai 2021, 60).

## Modernization in *Tholpavakoothu*

The troupe I represent at Koonathara village was founded generations ago and then revitalized by my grandfather, the renowned *tholpavakoothu* artist Krishnan Kutty Pulavar (1925-2000).<sup>[4]</sup> Tholpavakoothu & Puppet Centre, a non-profit headed by Ramachandra Pulavar and including his disciples, is now the only surviving puppetry community in Kerala, preserving the art form, training new artists in the traditional repertoire, and innovating new productions. Continuing with the tradition after my grandfather's passing, the team is led by my father Ramachandra Pulavar (b. 1960). He

is a winner of the Padma Shri, the fourth highest civilian award from the honorable President of India. He has begun presenting modern puppetry with contemporary stories in secular spaces. The geopolitical situations of the society in which *tholpavakoothu* is performed today means the listener is no longer familiar with the mixture of languages important in the traditional Kampar text (Tamil, Sanskrit), and so Ramachandra and my brother Rajeev Pulavar started a linguistic and literary revolution in the narrative songs. They have created Malayalam, Tamil, Hindi, and English versions of *Ramayana* as an hour-long performance, making the twelfth-century Tamil text more accessible. In addition, stories not normally part of the repertory like *Gandhikoothu* (Life of Gandhi, 2006), *Jesuskoothu* (Life of Jesus, 2012), *Mahabharatam* (Mahabharata), *Ayappacharitham* (Story of Ayappan),<sup>[5]</sup> *Mahabalikoothu* (Life of Mahabali),<sup>[6]</sup> *Pennpavakoothu* (on women's issues, 2021), and *Chandalika* (Tagore's tale of an untouchable woman), have been presented. Socio-political and awareness campaigns (HIV-AIDS, COVID-19, gender equality) have been topics. Modern media has also helped us popularize this puppetry in Kerala, for example the logo of the International Film Festival of Kerala is based on the style of *tholpavakoothu* puppets. Govindan Aravindan (1935-1991), a major film director, seeing *tholpavakoothu*, adopted the female figure of Lanka Lakshmi for the logo. The original new puppet remains safely preserved in a wooden box with the Ramachandra Pulavar's family, stored along with traditional puppets.

Our first contemporary production in *tholpavakoothu* style was in 2006 and has been staged for 220 performances. This was *Gandhikoothu*, directed by Padmashri Ramachandra Pulavar and written by Nandan Edappal, with music by Ranjith Sukapuram, and puppeteers Rajeev Pulavar, Lakshmanan, Somasundaran, Rahul Koonathara, Manoj, Arunkumar, and Krishnadas. Crossing borders to tell Gandhi's life, this production went to the soul of storytelling. It was a novel experiment—using traditional-style shadow puppets to portray Indian freedom fighters in modern dress and riding in automobiles. The performance requires eighty puppets, including Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Vallabhai Patel and other nationalists, as well as British officials and police officers. Props include a spinning wheel and modern weapons

for the war sequences. This hour-long performance with songs depicts the common man's life and modern Indian history with its joy and turmoil. The self-discipline of Gandhi's life, his punctuality, vegetarianism, and non-violence, are clear. The play starts with a song in Malayalam, the local language, making the ideas immediately accessible to listeners. The use of the vernacular and a departure from opening rituals garnered criticism from conservatives. But we, as practitioners, were recognizing the changing times and hoping to uplift the tradition with contemporary themes. No culture is static. *Gandhikoothu* begins with that local language song and is entirely different from our traditional text.



Figure 2. A scene from *Gandhikoothu* in 2014—Gandhi at his spinning wheel. (Photo: Rahul Koonathara)

When directing contemporary productions, our creators practice continuous analysis and group discussion about which traditional elements to keep and which to change. The *Gandhikoothu* songs attracted the common folk and allowed us to do performances in secular spaces outside the temple calendar times. Scholars have praised our artists' efforts to meet modern times:

They attempt in a more hybrid style to keep their ritual form of puppetry intact, continuing those annual performances associated with temples while exploiting their skills in carving, performing, and storytelling in various new ways outside the temple grounds. (Orenstein 2014, 213)

Under Ramachandra Pulavar's leadership, crafting and developing new puppetry has accelerated. He performed shadow puppetry at a crafts fair in Jerusalem, Israel, in 2007: exposure to the city and the story of Jesus Christ inspired him to do *Jesuskoothu* in shadow puppetry. Ramachandra asked Professor V. A. Varghese, a retired professor and an art historian, to write a script bringing all sequential events of Jesus Christ into a

one-hour piece. A mix of traditional *tholpavakoothu* and stylized dramatic theatre dialogue in Malayalam language resulted. The 120 goat-hide figures for *Jesuskoothu* are semi-transparent and brightly-colored in contrast to the traditional figures using the natural dyes. Tholpavakoothu & Puppet Centre worked for three months crafting these characters. Some post-traditional puppetry has been catalyzed by collaborations with agents coming from outside of traditions (Cohen 2014, 178). The modern media influences and new narrations inspired the puppeteers to do these experiments in *tholpavakoothu*.

Religion still had a vital role in the *Jesuskoothu* production. In the traditional *Ramayana* performance, the first scene includes praying to the elephant deity Lord Ganesh for a successful performance and four Brahmins who worship from four directions in India appear. In *Jesuskoothu*, the first scene shows four prophets (Abraham, David, Mosa [Moses], and Ishak [Isaac]) worshiping the Lord. This performance includes locally important cultural features, like the arrival of St. Thomas, the apostle who brought Christianity to Kerala and founded our Indian church. The movements and songs of *margamkali*, an ancient round dance of the St. Thomas Christian community performed in Kerala churches and for celebrations, were incorporated into this shadow puppet show. The visit of the Three Kings to baby Jesus (coming from India by following the star), the baptism of Jesus, the wedding feast at Khana (Cana), the Good Samaritan, the dance of Salome, the Last Supper, Pontius Pilate washing his hands, and the Resurrection of Jesus are visualized in this one-hour performance. It even includes a Santa Claus and the song "Jingle Bells." Ramachandra and his puppeteers worked with Dr. Eva Sol Rothlauf, a European opera artist then researching at the Tholpavakoothu & Puppet Centre, to blend Western opera elements in the singing style for *Jesuskoothu*. After watching the rehearsals of *Jesuskoothu*, Dr. Rothlauf suggested portraying the *vidushaka* (comic) character in *Jesuskoothu* as a human actor in front of the shadow screen to summarize the sequence.

In *Jesuskoothu*, the *vidushaka*, as an actor and not a puppet, was a new adaptation. Dr. Rothlauf choreographed the *vidushaka* character in the scene of the Three Kings from



India traveling to Jesus's birthplace once they have heard that Jesus has been born. The Three Kings were on the shadow screen, and the *vidushaka* character appeared in front of the screen and narrated where they traveled and what would happen next. The performer of *vidushaka* was a trained shadow puppeteer, but incorporated some dance movements with dramatic vocal narration to make the character more appealing. Traditionally, *tholpavakoothu* uses Sanskrit, Tamil, and the Malayalam dialect in narration with songs wherein each word is in a specific rhythm and sound is stretched, which makes for a uniquely stylized rendition. A life-size human actor/narrator in a puppetry performance, speaking understandable language, was very new to the audience since in Kerala the puppeteers are rarely visible. Having an intermediary between the audience and the shadows through the *vidushaka* character narrowed the distance between the story's ancient timeline and the present: the *vidushaka*'s actions and dialogue were related to present day situations. Actors performing in front of the screen can easily explain subjects, comment on the figures, share culture-specific information enlightening contemporary (and sometimes international) audiences with a mix of humor. The *tholpavakoothu* puppeteers took joy in narrating as, for the first time, they could directly see the faces of audience members. Innovation is not tradition's opposite; it is vital in promoting the art form. *Jesuskoothu* helped preserve the tradition into the future. The company has presented *Jesuskoothu* in English and Hindi and has played in over twenty-five churches with 200 bookings (Pillai 2021, 108).



Figure 3. The puppet of Jesus for *Jesuskoothu* production in 2017. (Photo: Rahul Koonathara)

Other efforts have included incorporating modern technology. Online platforms allow communication across the globe. German Professor Heinz Johannes Paul created the first website for our *tholpavakoothu* artists, so that we could connect and collaborate nationally and internationally through it. *Tholpavakoothu* practitioners started utilizing Internet technology to promote the tradition—websites, blogging, and social media handles. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we shifted from temple rituals to offering

virtual performances on Zoom and Google Meet. Modern technology, in this pandemic case, promoted and represented the ritual tradition. These are examples of a transformed tradition, resulting from what Shils calls “endogenous factors,” which include explorations by tradition bearers of new possibilities within the form, radical rejection of selected precepts, and bringing in of other cultural forms and values (Shils 1981, 213–239; Cohen 2014, 179). *Tholpavakoothu* puppeteers’ innovations are experiments arising from their self-reflexiveness as practitioners and their struggles for the continued survival of the form.

Gender diversity has been recalibrated as well. In Kerala, only one rod puppet form, *nokkuvidya pavakali*, sanctioned women as puppeteers. Every other puppet tradition prohibited women from performing. A belief in the “impurity of menstruating women” caused the community and male puppeteers to ban the involvement of females in traditional puppetry. Menstruating women are traditionally barred from entering temples and so women could not enter the puppet house. *Tholpavakoothu* did not even allow women to touch the puppets. But Ramachandra and Rajeev Pulavar revolted against this gender inequality. They involved Ramachandra’s wife, Rajalakshmi, and his daughter, Rajitha, in first making the puppets and now performing. Women’s empowerment was the strongest reason for the change. Female presence now enhances the tradition. So, traditionally women could not even enter the puppet house (*koothumadam*), and there continue to be restrictions against them performing at temples. But now they perform in non-temple venues and even create their own projects. With support from the Department of Handicrafts, we have been giving design workshop camps to people of all genders and castes to develop puppetry skills.

Tholpavakoothu & Puppet Centre has trained more than 120 people of all genders and statuses to carve traditional shadow puppets and/or contemporary designs. On 22 December 2021, an all-women puppetry team led by Rajitha Ramachandra Pulavar presented a one-hour production of *Pennpavakoothu*, which was a narrative of social-political women’s issues like dowry, ragging, sexual abuse, caste division, and gender division. *Pennpavakoothu* is just a beginning, paving the way for more participation and

new ideas from women puppeteers. The women puppetry team aims for full equality with male puppeteers and will collaborate in promoting the rich tradition. Rajitha has faced many challenges in developing her career given the traditional ban on females. So, it is an accomplishment for her (and for other women) to perform the *Ramayana*, much less to develop shows on topics she chooses.

As *tholpavakoothu* practitioners, our group continues to perform within the tradition, but according to current society's needs. We are incorporating multiplicity. Arya Madhavan (2015) writing as a scholar of women's performance and a *koodiyattam* (Kerala temple dance-drama) artist has discussed the efforts to modernize the tradition-bound arts of our region. She describes the process of unlearning or relearning to place women in history and see their role in theatre. Shadow puppetry lost its former place as village entertainment in the twentieth century when confronted with the emergence of modern media technologies. However, it was still needed for community belief and ritual. Now it is moving forward, reinventing shadow puppetry for future generations. Kathy Foley, discussing the Burmese marionette theatre, writes about how two seemingly contradictory influences—preserving tradition and responding creatively to global influences—creates a “neotraditional” genre, operating quite differently from the historical form of the past (Foley 2001, 79). This neotraditional work is what we undertake.

Tholpavakoothu & Puppet Centre puppeteers think women performers will open up greater exploration of the many female characters in the *Ramayana*, which male puppeteers have traditionally rendered. If trained women puppeteers are allowed to present, they are likely to narrate and reinterpret sequences and to remold the tales in future productions. The thirty-one-year-old Rajitha Ramachandra Pulavar, assisted by Aswathy Rajeev Pulavar, Rajalakshmi, Nithya, Nivedhya, Manju, Sandhya, and Sri Nandha helped develop our first all-female project. We now have a pool of women puppeteers trained via Rajitha's workshop: a sharp shift from “traditional” to “modern.” Our company supports the use of performing arts for political and social messages, including those advocating change. Our productions (and our analysis of next steps)

should arise from among our performers. Each tradition resides in its artists. Artists are people of their times, reflecting involvement in or detachment from contemporary events.

## Conclusion

Art changes as society changes. The *pulavars* keep the tradition alive in its temple premises. Our worldview makes us keep the ritual in temples with relative purity. *Tholpavakoothu* is both continuing the traditional aspects and mixing things up with modern media, folk media and digital media. Different approaches can meld as we present our identity as artists in society. With social media platforms, we update daily program details and overcome communication barriers of distance, language, and cultural dissimilarity. Sustainable growth and change is implemented with reasonable care and discussion. When our Rama mantra are chanted, this art form will continue to perform its socio-religious functions. But, by using secular spaces and opening up to social and digital changes, we make sure upcoming generations will understand *tholpavakoothu's* aesthetic beauty and that new artists will continue to perform this art with passion.

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[1] Shadow puppets are found throughout India. In Andhra Pradesh, shadow puppetry is known as *tholubommatala*; in Karnataka, *togalu gombeyata*; in Maharashtra, *chamadyache bahulya*; in Odisha (formerly Orissa), *ravana chhaya*; in Tamil Nadu, *tolu bommalatam* and *tholpavakoothu* in Madurai district; and *tholpavakoothu* in Kerala. See Foley and Pudumjee (2013) at <https://wepa.unima.org/en/india/> for general information on Indian puppetry. For focus on *tholpavakoothu* see Krishnan Kutty Pulavar (1983, 1987), Seltmann (1986), Blackburn (1996), Venu (1990), Singh (1998, 1999), Bhanumathi (2004), Ramachandra Pulavar (2013), Rahul Pulavar (2021), Pillai (2021). For video documentation see Wadehra and Singh (1998) at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-j8cqPvM9aA>, accessed 30 July 2023.

[2] This section, retelling the Bhadrakali tale and information concerning the making of puppets, approximates the material in my *Puppetry International* article (Koonathara 2021).

[3] See for example the 2007 performance schedule  
<https://www.mykerala.net/puppetry/2007.html>, accessed 30 July 2023.

[4] Born in the Palakkad district of Kerala he is part of a many generational lineage of puppeteers. He trained with his father Laksman Pulavar and won the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award in 1980. He was the first to tour internationally and innovated in moving to shorter performances in a secular space. See  
<http://tholpavakoothu.in/about-us/about-puppet-center/>, accessed 30 July 2023, for information about Krishnan Kutty Pulavar Memorial Puppet Centre activities.

[5] He is a celibate deity and son of Vishnu, born to defeat the buffalo demoness Mahishasura. Ayappan has a shrine at Sabarimala in Kerala, which is a pilgrimage site each December-January.

[6] Mahabali is a demon king banished beneath the earth who is featured in the Onam festival in Kerala. He ruled justly and, for a time, held *amrita* (the nectar of life). Mahabali was tricked by Vishnu in his avatar of Vamana (dwarf) to granting three steps of land. The dwarf, being an avatar of Vishnu, in three steps claimed the heavens, earth, and the cosmos. Mahabali returns to earth once a year for his festival.

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