

Circumscribed by Space and Time: An Assessment of the Popularity and Impact of Traditional Dance-drama *Krishnattam* in the Twenty-first Century¹

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Abstract

Temple art forms in South India form a unique site for conglomeration of art, culture, historicity and belief systems, and are indicative of the underlying social reality. Kerala, the southernmost tip of India, is perhaps one of the very few states where 2000-year old Sanskrit dramas are still performed in a conventional manner within the premises of the temple. *Krishnattam*, a form of dance-drama which depicts the journey of Lord Krishna in eight stages from *avataram* (birth of Lord Krishna) to *swargarohanam* (renouncement of the human form), is performed in temples like Guruvayoor.

Despite all the technological advancements in and around the temple premises, *Krishnattam* has maintained its sanctity and authenticity, from the musical instruments played to the selection of artists for the performance. People still throng to book a performance of *Krishnattam* six months in advance. Our area of focus in the *Krishnattam* performance is the spell and impact it creates amongst the audience who are not performance critics, literary critics or aesthetic theorists – the majority of them being simply devotees or pilgrims who come to visit the temple. Our argument here is that the popularity of *Krishnattam* lies not just in the fact that it occupies a sacred space in the public imagination due to its undiluted ritualistic mores and highly stylised dance techniques but also due to the recuperative impact it has on the audience witnessing various episodes like *avataram*, *rasakreeda*, *kaliyamardhanam* or *swayamvaram*. Every spectator's interpretation of *Krishnattam* helps to construct a new meaning and the impact also varies according to the needs and desires of the audience.

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Keywords

Krishnattam, Guruvayoor, *Krishna Geeti*, Manavedan, *Avatharam*, *Rasakreeda*

Kerala, which is on the southernmost tip of India, has a rich history of diverse art forms and theatrical performances. Though the state has felt a strong communist presence in government since 1957, many of the traditional art forms still retain their authenticity. Amongst these dramatic conventions, dance-dramas are the most popular. *Krishnattam*, *Kathakali*, *Koodiyattam*, *Chakkiyar Koothu* and *Nangiyar Koothu* are some of the dance-drama forms which originated or were revamped in the 16th century. In fact, *Koodiyattam* is one of the oldest living Sanskrit theatrical traditions. Many of these art forms, closely guarded by groups of people belonging to particular castes, have served as repositories of ancient learning and practices.

Natyashastra, the ancient treatise on dramaturgy, classifies performances broadly into two traditions, namely, classical (*natyadharmi*) and folk (*lokadharmi*). Amongst the temple based performances *Theyyam*, *Mudiyettu* and *Padayeni*, which essentially represent the primordial energy (primarily in the form of goddess Kali) destroying the evil forces which obstruct and tyrannise the believers, are classified as *lokadharmi*. Whereas the finely chiselled and stylised traditions like *Krishnattam*, *Koodiyattam* and *Kathakali* fall into the category of *natyadharmi*. These have been patronised, performed and religiously handed down the generations by the upper caste members of society, namely the Namboodiris and Nairs. *Krishnattam* is a temple art form and it has remained closely guarded, being performed mostly within the precincts of the Guruvayoor temple⁴ since its inception. Although both *Kathakali* and *Krishnattam* were conceptualised around the same time, *Krishnattam* never gained the popularity of *Kathakali*, which soon became a cultural and identity marker of the state. With great persuasion from *Krishnattam* artists and manager A.C.G. Raja, there have been a few performances in Bombay and London. But largely, innovations have failed to penetrate the domain and themes of *Krishnattam* due to the “wish-granting capacity” associated with this dance form. Most of the performances are votive offerings made by devotees to Lord Guruvayoorappan and are enacted as a token of gratitude for fulfilling their wishes. *Krishnattam* is enacted over a period of nine days; the dance drama is based on several themes like birth, childhood pranks and various deeds depicting the victory of good over evil.

Through research and our perspective as observers of this dance form, we wish to propose that the popularity and relevance of *Krishnattam* as a dance form lies not just in the fact that it occupies a sacred space in the public imagination as

⁴ Guruvayoor Sri Krishna Temple is located in the town of Guruvayoor in Kerala, India. It is dedicated to the Lord Krishna (a reincarnation of the Lord Vishnu) and is one of the most important places of worship for Hindus of Kerala.

a result of its undiluted ritualistic mores and highly stylised dance techniques, but also in the recuperative impact it has on the audience witnessing various episodes.

Historical Background of *Krishnattam*

Krishnattam is a dance-drama in eight episodes compiled in 1650 by Prince Manavedan, the nephew of Zamorin. It originated in Guruvayoor, one of the most popular and well-known Krishna temples in India. The prince, who was a staunch devotee of Guruvayoorappan himself, choreographed it by absorbing many elements from the Sanskrit theatre form *Koodiyattam* and various other classical dance forms. Until 1958, this ritualistic dance drama was patronised by the Zamorins of Calicut; later, when they faced the issue of insufficient funds, they handed it over to the Devasom Board.⁵ Even today this is the only troupe in the world that performs *Krishnanattam*.

The basic text for *Krishnattam* is *Krishna Geeti*, a version similar to Oriya saint Jayadeva's *Geeta Govinda* composed in the twelfth century. Prince Manavedan, who was a great devotee of Lord Guruvayoorappan (who is none other than Lord Krishna), was eventually inspired to create a dramatised version of Krishna's life. The Zamorins had a unique and strong emotional attachment to Lord Guruvayoorappan which remained unwavering and unscathed even in the most turbulent situations. The profound writing and reflections of people from the royal families like Prince Manavedan and the King of Kottarakara who created *Ramanattam* (popularly known as *Kathakali* now) show the influence of the Bhakti movement and the value attached to pan-Indian mythical figures during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

The main purpose of the conception of this dramatic version of Krishna's life was to move the temple visitors to a higher spiritual realm or evoke the *rasa* of *Bhakti* (devotion) rather than making it entertainment-oriented like *Kathakali* or *Ottam Thullal*.⁶ Hence the appeal to emotions other than *Bhakti* is secondary. The themes chosen are not loud, glaring or violent as those of *Kathakali*, nor extremely erotic like *Mobiniyattam*. The selection of the themes of *Krishnattam* reflects on the gentle disposition of Prince Manavedan who wanted to shun violence and the participatory practices followed by indigenous natives. It is divided into eight major episodes:

⁵ The Guruvayoor Devasam Board takes all important decisions and looks after the day-to-day administration of the temple. It also takes care of the salaries of all employees including the maintenance of the *Krishnattam* troupe. The managing Committee includes the Zamorin Raja.

⁶ *Rasa* according to the theory of Indian aesthetics, connotes an ancient concept about the aesthetic flavour of any visual, literary or musical work, that evokes an emotion or feeling in the reader or audience.

- 1) *Avatharam* (social conditions before the birth of Lord Krishna, followed by the birth of Lord Krishna)
- 2) *Kaliya Mardhanam* (killing of the tyrannical serpent Kalia)
- 3) *Rasakreeda* (Krishna's amorous play with Radha and other milkmaids known as *gopikas*)
- 4) *Kamsa Vadham* (killing of his tyrannical maternal uncle Kamsa)
- 5) *Swayamvaram* (marriages of Balarama and Krishna. Krishna getting married to Rukmini and Sathyabhama)
- 6) *Bana Yudham* (killing of the demon Narakasura and Krishna's encounter with Bana)
- 7) *Vividha Vadham* (killing of Vividha, a monkey who was the political minister of the demon Narakasura)
- 8) *Swargarohanam* (Krishna renouncing his human form after accomplishing his mission)

A *Krishnattam* performance never stops with the *swargarohanam*, the 8th episode, however. Instead it includes a re-enactment of the *Avatharam* episode, which gives hope to the audience that Lord Krishna will come back in yet another form or *avatharam* whenever *dharma* or righteousness is challenged. This is clearly explicated in one of the shlokas of the philosophical discourse of *Bhagavad Gita*:

*Yada Yada hi dharmasya glanirbhavati bharatbab
Abyuddhanam adharmaasya tadadmanam srijjamyaham.
(Bhagavad Gita 201-03)*

(Trans. Whenever, O descendant of Bharata, righteousness [dharma] declines and unrighteousness proliferates, I manifest myself)

Krishnattam typically functions on the exposition of the four *Purusharthas* (the four esteemed Goals of Life), namely *Dharma*, *Artha*, *Kama* and *Moksha*, thereby upholding “*Dharma*” in each stage of life.⁷ If Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda* valorised Radha's emotions and sacrifice, in Prince Manaveda's *Krishna Geeti*, Krishna is the unchallenged hero who succeeds in carrying out his role as an ideal son, leader, astute politician, compassionate friend and overwhelming lover.

From a postcolonial perspective, *Krishnattam* as a dance form emerged during a very crucial political juncture which signified resistance against the foreign powers who ruthlessly usurped and threatened their freedom. The dance-drama unobtrusively sent a strong social message to the subjects under the Zamorin's regime that whenever *adharma* or injustice becomes rampant, God himself will

⁷ According to Vedic texts, a human being should strive to achieve four goals in life which are broadly known as *Purusharthas*. They are *Dharma* (righteousness), *Artha* (wealth), *Kama* (desires) and *Moksha* (liberation).

descend for the purgation of the evil forces. The historic past of the Zamorins was replete with long and bitter power struggles between them and three major colonial powers – the Portuguese, Dutch and British – warring for monopoly over the spice trade. The feud started with the Portuguese landing on the west coast of Malabar in 1498, followed by the Dutch VOC and the British in the later centuries. After a bitter feud with the Portuguese, the Dutch came to power in 1716. They not only raided the Guruvayoor temple and looted its wealth, but also burnt its western *gopuram* (the ornate monumental tower normally found at the entrance of a south Indian temple) and stripped the flagstaff or the *kodimaram* of its gold. Anthropologist Pepita Seth in her book *Heaven on Earth: The Universe of Kerala's Guruvayoor Temple* (2012) notes:

Although by 1747, all the traces of Dutch vandalism were removed (by Zamorins), the temple was again seriously threatened in 1766, the army of Haider Ali, the ruler of Mysore, swept down through Malabar. Calicut falls in the hands of Haider Ali, the ruler of Mysore and the ruling Zamorin, distressed by his failure to protect his kingdom and his subjects set fire to his palace and committed suicide. (Seth 29)

All these events created a colossal sense of uncertainty and insecurity amongst the subjects of Malabar and eventually the pilgrims stopped visiting the temple, tenants ceased paying their land rents and the transport of rice became almost impossible. The repeated defeats and losses made them sceptical about the capabilities of the rulers who were supposed to protect them and the kingdom. The selection of themes of *Krishnattam* was strategically used by the then rulers and the upper caste society in the past to tilt the public imagination towards certain hegemonic ideologies which were aimed at regaining the confidence of the people.

Themes like *Vividha Vadham*, *Bana Yudham*, and the *Kuchelavratam* episode reinforced the divine status of the king, his nobility and compassion towards his subjects. On stage, when Krishna, the epic hero who belonged to the royal dynasty, struggled hard to win his battle against evil in the form of *Poothana* or *Kamsa* or *Narakasura*, it was an unparalleled victory of good over evil, of *dharm*a over *adharma*, of just rulers against unjust rulers who trampled ruthlessly over the cultural heritage of the land. Noted author V.V. Haridas in his book *Zamorins and the Political Culture of Medieval Kerala* (2016) draws attention to the fact that forms of art have always been regarded as a powerful medium of channelling opinion and, therefore, the state invariably tried to mediate and regulate its activities (234). Thus elite dance forms like *Krishnattam* succeeded in creating an unobtrusive binary or dichotomy between the indigenous rulers (us) and foreign invaders (them) in the public imagination in a bid to camouflage successive political failures.

Mapping the Paradigms of Space

The spatial element is crucial to any performance. An ideal space for performance heightens or elevates the aesthetic experience of the audience and makes it memorable. It is very interesting to note how *Krishnattam* performances are held within the ritual space of the temple. The performances within these spaces are consecrated as *sacred*, which adds to the *bhakti* atmosphere of the performance. *Natyashastra*, an ancient text on performing arts, devotes a full chapter on the dynamics of construction of *natyamandapa* (theatres) whose aim was directed towards facilitating better engagement of the audience with the thematic concerns of the play/dance and dancers who enact the specific roles. The architectural design and ornamentations, geometrical patterns, floral motifs and abstract designs all aim at heightening the aesthetic experience of the audience.

Every performance of *Krishnattam* begins with a Brahmin priest coming and lighting the brass lamp, which can be seen as an invitation to the audience to engage fully with the performance. In the culture of southern India, a brass lamp signifies prosperity and almost every Hindu household welcomes the goddess of wealth or Mahalakshmi by placing a lighted brass lamp in the courtyard during the evening. Similarly, every *Krishnattam* performance would have a colossal brass lamp on the stage, symbolising and reminding the audience that *Krishnattam* is no ordinary performance loaded with slapstick comedy like *Koodiyattam* or *Ottam Thullal*, which is a parody of the four *Purusarthas*, but a performance which would elevate them from their miseries.

As *Krishnattam* was patronised by the Zamorins, it also used to be performed in Zamorin palaces called *Samoothiri Kovilakam*, which had a specific area for performances called *natappura*. These were strategically designed to provide the Zamorin or his family a clear view from his private space in case of their inability to come to the *natappura* to witness the performance. Thus from the very beginning, *Krishnattam* enjoyed a privileged status because of the spatial context it was enacted in.

Training and Austerities Followed by the *Krishnattam* Performers

The selection and training of *Krishnattam* performers are uncompromising and rigorous. The training is divided into two sections; one for *Vesham* (actors in *Krishnattam*), and the other for *Chutti* (artists who apply make-up on *vesham* artists). Training for the musicians for *Krishnattam* troupes happens simultaneously. *Vesham* involves ten years of training and *chutti* involves a five-year training process. There is an age variation in terms of selection of candidates for *vesham* and *chutti* as the candidates selected for *vesham* can be as young as seven and cannot exceed ten years of age whereas the *chutti* candidates can be taken in even after fourteen years of age. These training sessions for actors involve learning the basics of *kalaris* (martial arts of Kerala) along with hand, eye and foot movements and gestures. In fact, most of the elements are borrowed from *Koodiyattam* which

in turn was borrowed from Bharata's *Natyashastra*, the manual on theatre dance written by Bharata between 200 BCE and 200 CE.

The performers who perform *Krishnattam* practice severe austerities in terms of food and other pleasures while playing or enacting their specific roles. For example, during the day of performance, the performers eat only vegetarian food (Bush 85). According to ancient Vedic traditions, a vegetarian meal produces more *satvic* energy as compared to non-vegetarian food, which produces more *tamasic* energies like dullness and inertia.⁸ By the same yardstick, the person who would play the role of Lord Krishna would consume one meal a day and the one who would play the part of Lord Vishnu in *Swargarohanam* episode will just have a snack – in other words, would forgo his meal of rice. For most South Indians, rice is the staple food and any meal without rice is considered grossly incomplete. Similarly, the make-up of the *vesham* performers begins only after each of them has prostrated before a garlanded picture of Guruvayoorappan. In a personal interview, Mr. Krishnan Namboodiri, a leading *Krishnattam* dancer and exponent, expressed with great pride that the dancers believe that Krishna or Guruvayoorappan himself comes to witness *Krishnattam* and therefore all the players enact their roles or do their duties with utmost sincerity and enthusiasm. Thus, all these ritualistic codes of conduct elevate the performance atmosphere, equip the performer with the requisite energy and make him more confident for the role he is going to play.

The Faith Embedded in the Audience

The temporal experience of perception of the audience is very significant in terms of the meaning-making process. The majority of the audience of *Krishnattam* have a background knowledge of the various mythological characters and epics. Hence they come with a familiarity of the subject which makes the performers more at ease, as they do not have to undertake the extra effort to transact a new idea, theme or character.

The audience watching *Krishnattam* is not just engaged with their aesthetic sensibilities but is constantly trying to decode and co-relate it with the images seen on stage. The experience is very different from watching any other performance based on mythological stories not only because of its unique location and ambience, but also because of the impact it creates on the sensory realm, as it caters simultaneously to multiple sense perceptions of the audience. For example, the colourful costumes, flowers and lighted brass lamps make a

⁸ According to the *Guna theory*, there are three kinds of energy: *Satvik*, *Rajasic* and *Tamasic*. An increase in *Satvic* energy results in cheerfulness, inclination to learn, stability and balance in emotions. *Rajasic* energy is associated with motion, being dynamic, whereas *Tamasic* energy leads to inertia, dullness and non-coherence in thoughts and speech (Ranganathananda 108-19). These energies can be regulated by intake of specific food and by controlling the mind and body. It is believed that a *Satvic* diet can bring grace and devotion in the performer.

definitive visual impact; the scent of the incense and jasmine flowers tantalise the sense of smell; and the lyrical *Sopana Sangeetam* or the indigenous music create an atmosphere of bhakti.⁹

According to the Rasa theory of the *Natyashastra*, entertainment is one of the desired goals of performance arts but not the primary goal. The primary goal remains to transport the individual in the audience into another parallel reality, full of wonder and bliss, where he/she experiences the essence of his own consciousness and reflects on spiritual and moral questions (Schwartz 12-17). After each performance of *Krishnattam*, the audience throng to take blessings from performers who have played the role of Krishna and Lord Vishnu. All these elevate this performance from the ordinary, granting it instead an extraordinarily divine and wish fulfilling status.

Impact on the Twenty-first Century Audience

To further exemplify the impact of each performance on the modern day audience, and to explicate our argument we now turn to two episodes of *Krishnattam*, namely *Avataram* and *Rasakreeda*. We also look at the various reasons why the audience engages in watching and offering the following episodes. The method we have used to further enrich our study is through detailed conversations with several experts. These experts are trained classical dancers who gave us an insight not just into the themes and impact on the audience, but also drew our attention to the nuances of the art form itself.

Avatharam

The first day's episode of *Avatharam* involves the birth of Lord Krishna as a result of the repeated pleas of Bhoomidevi (Mother Earth) to Lord Brahma to redeem her from the burden of unjust people on earth. As a solace, Lord Brahma promises to resolve the matter through Lord Vishnu who in turn agrees to take on a birth or *avathara* on this planet as a human being. This episode involves the depiction of constant pranks of the playful Krishna and Balarama such as refusing to walk, or stealing butter and milk.

The narrative subtly indicates to the audience that child rearing is a complex process which make heavy demands on both parents. In the form of Yashoda, the audience envisages an ideal mother who is compassionate, patient, intelligent and always alert. Devotees sponsor an episode of *Avataram* in the hope of begetting good children or in gratitude for getting their wishes fulfilled. Several people amongst the audience have affirmed that witnessing each of the episodes

⁹ *Sopana sangeetham* is sung by the side of the holy steps (*sopanam*) leading to the sanctum sanctorum of a shrine. It is sung to the accompaniment of the small, hourglass-shaped ethnic drum called “*edakka*” or “*idakka*.” *Sopanam* is traditionally sung by men of the Marar and Pothuval castes of Ambalavasi (semi-Brahmin) community.

is not just an aesthetic experience, but also an elevation of consciousness to something more sublime.

The pain that Krishna's biological parents Vasudev and Devaki undergo is indicative of how couples often have to undergo great trouble to beget good children. Witnessing an episode of *Avatharam* is said to both sanctify and give hope to childless couples (personal interview with Mr. Krishnan Namboodiri and Mrs. Usha Varma). Many of the devotees sponsor this episode as a votive offering after being blessed with children. The tribulations of Vasudev and Devaki in the episode stand as a harbinger of the fact that despite all odds there is hope. Many of these episodes have a recuperative impact on the audience, and perhaps that's the very reason why performers have stuck to classical forms and themes with hardly any change so far.

Rasakreeda

Rasakreeda, performed on the third night, depicts one night of erotic bliss on the banks of the Yamuna. It's a night of music and dance which makes the heart of Radha and the gopis flutter in delight. The favourite scene of this episode is *Mullappoo Chuttal*, the celebrated garland-dance, where the dancers weave circles and triangles, in twos and threes, around the lighted lamp. Its patterns unfold like petals of blossoming flowers on an endless garland. Krishna dances through, in and out of these changing patterns in charming glitter. He is like a bubble every Gopi wishes to possess and cherish. According to Kalamandalam Vimala Menon, one of the reasons for the incorporation of *Rasakreeda* was to popularise this art form and make it more appealing for the audience. An absence of strong female characters like *Draupadi* or *Kannagi* can be noticed in *Krishnattam* even in a scene like *Rasakreeda* where most roles played by women are secondary or in relation to powerful dominant male characters.

This episode is very significant from a postcolonial perspective too. From the 17th century onwards, the colonisers started conducting extensive research on the family patterns, kinship and social life of the Orient. Of all the practices which existed during this time, they were particularly amused by the *Marumakkathayam*, *Sambandham* and the matrilineal practices of Kerala society. European society which was highly patriarchal in kinship did not relish the system of matriliney (passing down of property to daughters) or power bestowed on women. Many of the practices came under scathing attack from the Europeans. The *sambandham* relationship or the temporary liaisons between the upper caste Namboodiri men and Nair women was one of the aspects most condemned by the westerners.¹⁰ Themes like *Rasakreeda*, where the erotic relationships of Lord Krishna were presented in *Krishnattam*, further legitimised this position in

¹⁰ Kerala society was highly stratified in terms of caste. The uppermost tier was occupied by the Namboodiris, followed by Nairs, Ezhavas and Parayars and Pulayars.

opposition to the scorn of the colonisers. Thus, from a cultural studies perspective, it is interesting to note how this episode sought to democratise and bring together various upper castes like Namboodiris, Nairs and Chakyars as audience to view these performances together in the “Natapuram” (outer open air space dedicated to cultural programmes during temple festivals), thereby secularising and legitimising their ties.

In the modern context, apart from the aesthetic treat it offers to its audience, it is a votive offering for good and happy marriages. There is also a popular belief amongst the masses regarding the *Rasakreeda* episode that witnessing an episode will help couples to overcome the squabbles in their married life. It imparts lessons to prospective brides and bridegrooms to avoid being haughty and possessive in their claims over their partners. The hidden implication of this episode to the devotees is to transcend the physical plane to a higher and more sublime plane such that everything becomes one or *Advaita* (non-dual). Through the episode of *Rasakreeda*, it is depicted that Krishna is everywhere, and it is often due to an individual’s limited and finite perception, made opaque by judgements based on varied categories, that he or she is not able to perceive God in every human being. This episode urges the devotees to remove this cloak of ignorance veiling the divinity and become more inclusive of others.

Thus the audience goes back much unburdened and recuperated. They take with them valuable lessons like: a human birth is bound to be a combination of both joys and sorrows and like Krishna in *Krishnattam*, it is the duty of every spectator to abide by *dharma* whatever the circumstances. To reiterate our argument presented in the earlier part of the paper, the popularity of *Krishnattam* as a dance form lies not just in the fact that it occupies a sacred space in the public imagination due to its undiluted ritualistic mores and highly stylised dance techniques, but also due to the recuperative impact it has on the audience witnessing various episodes. Thus *Krishnattam* can be seen as a form of communication that is expressive and therapeutic; at the same time, it depicts a spectacular and gorgeous aspect of the magnificent and deep rooted Indian dance tradition.

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