

Purappāṭu : The Transforming Scene of Kūṭiyāṭṭam's Śikṣā in Kerala

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*Purappāṭu*¹: The Transforming Scene of Kūṭiyāṭṭam's Śikṣā² in Kerala

A Master Speaks

One evening, I was at the Śrī Rāma temple, Vellarkad, to watch an artiste's (Respondent 7*, personal communication, 20 December 2019) traditional performance of the Cākyars, the *Angulīyāṅkam*.³ After the performance, he generously offered to drop me at my temporary residence near Kerala Kalamandalam. On the way, he congratulated me on my short performance and complained that I had not invited him. I explained that as a novice in the field, I wanted to perform for my own experience and not put learned spectators through an amateurish performance to which he replied, "So you took six months to learn *Pūtana Mōkṣam*?⁴ I would have taught you in five days." Astonished, I awkwardly giggled and asked him, "How?" He said, "Kūṭiyāṭṭam is similar to any other theatre in the world. There is nothing about the art which makes it

greater than any other. The reason people are not attracted to Kūṭiyāṭṭam is because of the misbelief that its learning has to be arduous." Such an affirmation runs counter to the conventional wisdom that Kūṭiyāṭṭam training requires ten to fifteen years of rigorous training and has expectedly invited criticism from the fraternity.

Arduous or not, its training has undergone tremendous transformations in the contemporary times. By exploring these transformations from early medieval to the twenty-first century, this study demonstrates the shifting institutionalization of Kūṭiyāṭṭam training from the family structure to governmental and private organizations/institutions open to non-Cākyār and non-Nampyār students, altering the training from a family vocation to a scholastic matrix.⁵ Drawing from the data collected from my pilot study in 2017, fieldwork (June-December 2019), and brief training in Naṅṇyārkūttu,⁶ the study also discusses the pedagogical

1 *Purappāṭu* means to "set out" but here, the author has used the term metaphorically, to illustrate 'setting out' to learn. (Note on Conventions: In this article, diacritics have been used for art forms, Malayalam, Tamil and some Sanskrit words, names of historical figures, historical geographical locations, names of languages, texts, and names of temples. There are no diacritics or use of italics for current geographical locations, or for Sanskrit words, such as Mudra, Abhinaya, Guru, etc., which appear in the Oxford Languages dictionary, and have therefore passed into the English language. For Sanskrit and Malayalam words, the standard schemes of diacritics based on ISO 15919 have been followed. Names of artists/ respondents have been changed or withheld as per research ethics and * this symbol has been used to denote the same. In parts of the article where names have been revealed, due permissions were sought from the interviewee. Structured and semi-structured interviews were carried out in Malayalam with Kerala-based artistes and scholars, which were later translated by the author.)
2 *Śikṣā*, usually translated as "education", refers here to the teaching by the Guru and the learning by the disciple or student.

3 "The Act of the Ring", i.e., Rāma's ring that Hanuman brings to Sītā in her captivity in a garden of Lankā.

4 The Salvation of Pūtana.

5 Both Cākyārs and Nampyārs belong to the Hindu fold. Traditionally, Cākyār men were a community of actors, and Nampyār men were a community of instrumentalists who played the *Milāvu*, the pot-shaped copper drum. Here, non-Cākyārs and non-Nampyārs include people from the Hindu fold not belonging to the Cākyār and Nampyār communities.

6 The wives of the Nampyār men were Naṅṇyārs who played the female characters and performed the solo Naṅṇyārkūttu or Naṅṇyārammakūttu (translated as performance or play by Naṅṇyār).

strands in Kūṭiyāṭṭam, and focuses on the “intergenerational transmission” across traditional, semi-traditional and non-traditional milieus. It also explores the present Kūṭiyāṭṭam scene, fraught with tensions regarding access to repertoire and textual sources, performance opportunities, patronage and even the art’s journey to posterity. While analysing Kūṭiyāṭṭam’s pedagogical scene through the tradition-modernity framework, this study derives a core-periphery model underlining the convergence of the core (Guru-Śiṣya traditional training) and peripheral (semi-traditional and non-traditional training) pedagogies that shape the Kūṭiyāṭṭam training scene in the contemporary times.

Kūṭiyāṭṭam’s “unbroken tradition” of pedagogy and performance may be understood through the meaning of tradition argued by scholars, Glassie (1995) and Shils (1981). Tradition is that which is transmitted from the past to the present, and considered normative in its acceptance and practice: “it [tradition] is as vivid and as vital to those who accept it as any other part of their action or belief. It is the past in the present but it is as much part of the present as any very recent innovation” (Shils, 1981: 13). Here, those who accept a tradition can either be receivers or custodians; as insiders, they do not always recognize the minute changes within a tradition, so much so that they consider the practices central to the tradition as an unchanged inheritance from the past. Traditions, in other words, are far less fixed: as Glassie (1995: 405) argues, tradition’s innumerable subtle changes “provide an illusion of stability”. It is through these subtle changes that one may bring out the workings of modernity, as a “narrative category,” and a “rewriting” of the past narratives and a bringing to light of new narratives ... “a twofold movement, in which the foregrounding of continuities, the insistent and unwavering focus on the seamless passage from past to present, slowly turns

into a consciousness of a radical break; while at the same time the enforced attention to a break gradually turns the latter into a period ... bringing in a “new kind of time line” (Jameson, 2012: 24, 35). Modernity, in other words, always happens. If we are to bring together Jameson’s concept of modernity and Milton Singer’s argument of India’s modernity that fleshes out “the continuing coexistence and mutual adaptations of India’s cultural traditions — Great and Little — and modernity”, the “break” generates a “cultural symbol” that could be either accepted or rejected. Thus, when “the enforced attention to a break gradually turns the latter into a period in its own right”, the Indian tradition, through its “adaptive mechanisms” accepts or rejects innovations by traditionalizing or archaicizing these changes or innovations (Singer, 1972: 399-400). In the context of this study, we will see individuals bringing about transformations that will alter the collective narrative of the art.

Śikṣā in the early medieval and medieval eras

The learning of Kūṭiyāṭṭam can at first be traced from its literary sources. The first hint of an emerging system of pedagogy comes from the eleventh century Cera king Kulaśekhara Varman (978-1036 CE), who enriched the performance of Sanskrit dramas, and whose two composed plays, *Subhadrādhanañjaya* and *Tapatīsamvarṇa*, are still performed. The tradition of performance implied in his plays and their staging would not have been possible without a well-established system of teaching and learning by the then community of actors. While this system is not explicitly documented, it is fair to assume that it was based on the Guru-Śiṣya mode of transmission. *Naṭāṅkuśa*, the fourteenth-fifteenth century critique of Kūṭiyāṭṭam’s prevalent dramaturgical techniques, offers further testimony to this Guru-Śiṣya tradition (1994: 187), which will continue well into the twentieth century.

By the 16th century, or possibly earlier, we see the appearance of *Kramadīpikas*, stage manuals written in Sanskrit and Malayalam, and *Āṭṭaparakārams*, production manuals in literary Malayalam, both of which become essential tools in the art's pedagogy and contribute to its formalization. Each Cākyār family has a unique and distinct *Kramadīpikā* for every play, which they religiously follow to this day that would have resulted in the family's distinct style of teaching and performing. The elders guarded the Kūṭiyāṭṭam knowledge system unique to one's family (Ammanur Madhava Chakyar in Pisharoti, 1996: 27). Towards the early 1900s, however, we find there were transformations in the Kūṭiyāṭṭam pedagogy, where different Cākyār families were coming together to gatekeep the caste's knowledge base.

It is clear that institutionalization of Kūṭiyāṭṭam teaching and learning had already crystallised in the early medieval era through the Cākyār and Nampyār family structure. In the decades that followed, Kūṭiyāṭṭam's institutionalization embraced new meanings with newer participants and training spaces.

Śikṣā in the pre-Independence era

While the different avenues of Kūṭiyāṭṭam training in the early twentieth century were accessible to the young boys of the families, daughters were often home-trained, giving a peek into why female characters were either absent or underrepresented on the Kūṭiyāṭṭam stage.

The Kūṭiyāṭṭam stalwart Ammannur Madhava Chakyar (1917–2008) in his essay, “My Training, My Gurus” (1994: 141–146) reminisces on his *Vidyārambham* or initiation to knowledge that took place when he was three, in accordance to the family tradition; by the age of seven, he started his training in Sanskrit and Kūṭiyāṭṭam. If his Guru, the maternal uncle, was unavailable,

his grandmother or eldest uncle taught *Ślokās*. In such a traditional learning environment, knowledge of the art flowed from every side. His Guru instilled fear in students as part of the training process: if the taught lessons were not repeated correctly by a student, the latter would be beaten, or if there was “slightest slackness or lack of attention”, the student may not be given food. Further, performing minor characters also ensured *Rangaparicaya* (stage experience). In addition, watching Kūṭiyāṭṭam performances after thoroughly studying the play was another important aspect of the learning process. His uncle used to watch performances by the revered Rama Chakyar of the Kidangur family and would later on teach those performance portions to his students. Besides, training was occasionally imparted to the Ammannur Gurukulam students by artistes from the other Cākyār families, such as Kidangur Rama Chakyar and Painkulam Narayana Chakyar (Senior), particularly on annual festivals.

Royal spaces were also centers of Sanskrit learning for several Cākyār students. For instance, Ammannur Madhava Chakyar joined the members of the Kodungallur palace who were experts in the Sanskrit language, *Āyurveda*, *Jyotiṣā*, *Yoga*, music and *Nāṭyaśāstra*, immensely benefitting Chakyar. He also further studied Abhinaya from Bhagavatar Kunjunny Thampuran, erudite in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (Chakyar, 1994: 144–145). Thus, the pre-independence era witnessed a transformed participation of the teachers and students who belonged to other Cākyār families, underlining the changing narrative of keeping the knowledge system within the close boundaries of individual Cākyār families.

The variety of training spaces for male Cākyār performers, however stood in stark contrast to the Nāṇṇyārs, the women performers from the Nampyār community who were trained within

the family spaces and “... when nangiar travelled to a temple, where they would often stay for an extended period of time, they were chaperoned by their uncles, brothers, and cousins” (Daugherty, 2017:174-175). Kunju Kutty Nangiaramma (1915-1991) started learning in a matrilineal system and staged her debut performance at the age of 10. Like her mother and grandmother, she continued performing and teaching well into her senior years. Though young girls were taught in this social context, only a few continued performing as an obligation to their lineage, partly because of the reforms imposed on the system: in 1933, the colonial government passed the Madras Marumakkattayam Act, which led to the “division and partition of the matrilineal tharavadu”⁷ (Arunima, 2003: 2); still, the system by and large persisted in practice until 1976, when the Kerala Legislature completely abolished the matrilineal system, causing many Naṅṅyārs to leave their natal households. Therefore, Naṅṅyārs received comparatively less attention towards their training which must have hindered their creative pursuits, on-stage innovations, and largely female representation on the Kūṭiyāṭṭam stage.

Eventually, announcing significant changes in the art’s transmission, Guru Mani Madhava Chakyar decided in the 1950s to train his own children. Since he was married to a Naṅṅyār, P.K. Kunjimalu Nangiaramma, and they followed the matrilineal system, his children were considered Nampyārs, who were supposed to be trained as *Milāvu* artistes, not as actors. The episode upset the Ammannur Cakyar family who “stopped inviting him to their Kutiyattam performances in Thrissur’s Vadakkunathan temple” (Lowthorp, 2016: 102) highlighting how the art was adapting to the dawning era.

⁷ *Tharavādu* or *taravātu* means “ancestral residence of landowners” or “house, chiefly of noblemen” (Gundert, 1962 :434)

Thus, we observe the movement of Kūṭiyāṭṭam Śikṣa spaces from the well-knit family structures to *Maṭhams* or *Gurukulams*, and even palaces, where students from different Cākyār families were trained together, because specialized training at home had mostly disappeared.

The 1960s: Role and impact of governmental institutionalization

Alongside with these first attempts to depart from orthodoxy in pedagogy, traditional methods have persisted to this day. At the same time, winds of change blew in the post-Independence decades, affecting the way most Indian performing arts were taught and transmitted. Much of the change was triggered by trends of documentation, preservation, and institutionalization. As a case in point, Lakshmi Subramanian (2008: 112) fleshes out the trajectory of Carnatic music from an orally transmitted knowledge system to a vocation taught at organizations, where students would have to pass examinations to obtain their degrees; this meant training in all aspects of musicology in a formal context.

The shift in the institutionalization of Kūṭiyāṭṭam and the changing trends of patronage led to the emergence of a semi-traditional mode of Kūṭiyāṭṭam training, where training spaces, the training process, and its participants were undergoing a transformation, underlying a paradigmatic shift from a familial Kūṭiyāṭṭam learning to an academic setup. In addition, the semi-traditional learning and teaching started replacing the former traditional mode of teaching.

Kerala Kalamandalam

In Kerala, the feudal system of governance started breaking down in the early twentieth

century; the resulting shift of patronage from palaces to Central and State governments did not however happen overnight. This vacuum in patronage initially caused performing arts like Kathakali and Mohiniyāṭṭam, among other classical arts, to sharply decline. The Malayalam poet, Vallathol Narayana Menon, with his friend, Manakkulam Mukunda Raja, established in 1929 the Kerala Kalamandalam at a patron friend's residence in Thrissur. Its mission was to teach and thus revive declining classical performing arts of Kerala.

Kūṭiyāṭṭam's revival journey vis-à-vis Kerala Kalamandalam, however, came much later. In 1943, Joseph Mundassery, a social reformer, literary critic and politician, convinced Painkulam Rama Chakyar that keeping Kūṭiyāṭṭam under wraps — that is, limited to the temple space — would eventually lead to the art's destruction (Gopalakrishnan, 2011: 69-70, translating from Paulose). Eventually, in 1965, Painkulam Rama Chakyar, after consulting Mani Madhava Chakyar and Ammannur Madhava Chakyar, established a Kūṭiyāṭṭam department at Kerala Kalamandalam into which, amidst vehement criticism from members of his own community, he admitted a few young non-Cākyārs and non-Nampyārs as students. This series of events marked the entry of Kūṭiyāṭṭam on the public scene, witnessing a movement from the familial to the non-familial spaces of training.

The new department was started with one Guru (Painkulam Rama Chakyar) and six new students. Three students, including a girl, belonged to the Cākyār and Nampyār families, and the others, including two girls, to other castes (such as, Mūsad and Nāyar). Out of them, five artistes were, after the completion of their course, recruited by Kerala Kalamandalam as teachers to train newly admitted *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* students. While Mani Madhava Chakyar had created a "break" in the training narrative of

the Cākyār/Nampyār equation, the actions of Painkulam Rama Chakyar dismantled the Kūṭiyāṭṭam training narrative itself with a complete reorganization of both the Guru(s) and the disciples. The break(s) eventually led to a renaissance of the Kūṭiyāṭṭam's training scene.

The curriculum for Kūṭiyāṭṭam was planned and designed by the Guru himself, creating an "institutionalized *gurukulam*" (Moser, 2007: 209). It was structured into a six-year diploma course followed by a one-year post-diploma course; the *Milāvu* training into a four-year course and an additional one-year post-diploma course. Students were trained in dramaturgy and given Sanskrit and Malayalam lessons (Gopalakrishnan, 2011: 130, 131) from the crack of dawn to well into the evening hours.

However, the rigorous schedule underwent changes after the 1990s when Kerala Kalamandalam introduced a scholastic setup so art students may be exposed to subjects taught in "regular" schools. As K.G. Paulose told me (Respondent 30*, □, personal communication, 2019), school education in Kerala Kalamandalam was an initiative to prepare students face an English-speaking, globalised world. As a result, afternoon training hours transformed into classes in which students were taught mathematics, sciences, Hindi, English, and social sciences, etc. In the 2000s, it became mandatory for art students to obtain an Art High School Leaving Certificate, which would enable them to pursue higher education elsewhere if they wished, either to other art schools or to completely different disciplines. In 2007, the University Grants Commission recognized Kerala Kalamandalam as a deemed University, upon which it introduced an undergraduate course in Performing Arts, as well as postgraduate courses and a PhD programme in Kūṭiyāṭṭam. Further changes

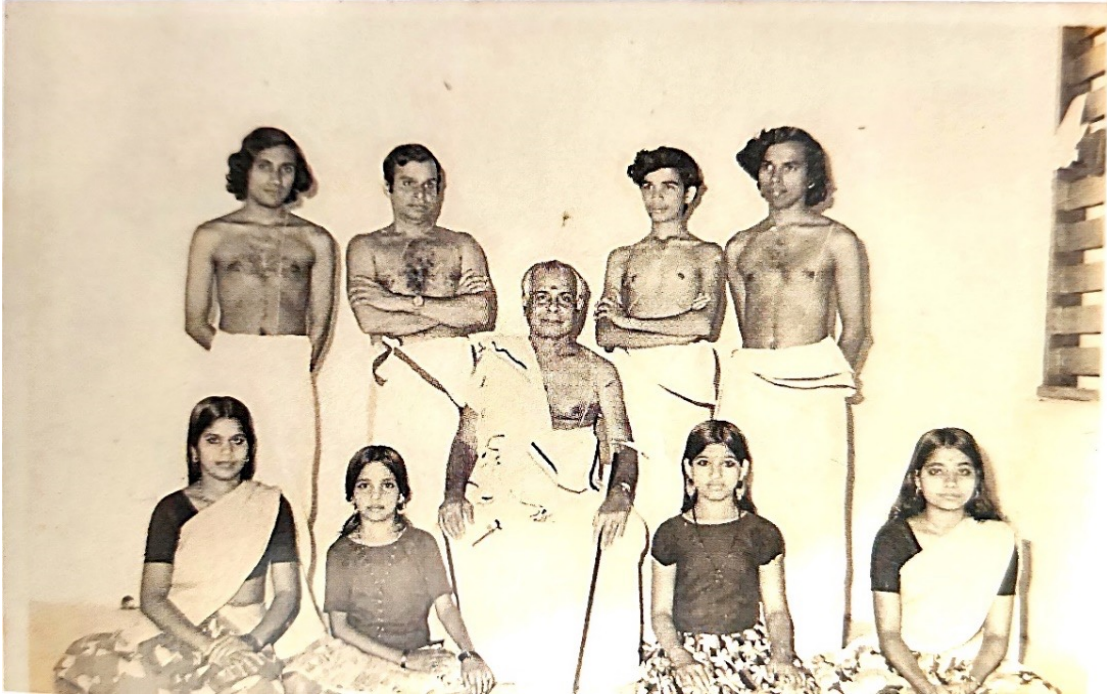


Figure 1. Guru Painkulam Chakyar with his first batch of Cākyār and Non-Cākyār students in the 1970s .

Standing from left: Kalamandalam Sivan Namboodiri, Painkulam Damodara Chakyar, Painkulam Narayana Chakyar, Kalamandalam Rama Chakyar
Sitting from left: Kalamandalam Girija Devi, Margi Sathi, Guru Painkulam Chakyar, Kalamandalam Devaki, Kalamandalam Shailaja (Courtesy: Śivakālam, 2015)

included the addition of integrated courses in Multimedia, Cultural Studies, Women Studies, Cultural Journalism, Mass Communication and Documentation (Gopalakrishnan, 2011: 137). Such programmes have been open to student-artistes from other institutions/organizations.

These changes did not go without criticisms. For instance, Margi, an organization dedicated to the revival of, and training in, Kathakali and Kūṭiyāṭṭam, noted in its fortieth Annual Report:

The main drawback of the time-bound course, as experienced in premier institutions like Kerala Kalamandalam, is that, on the completion of the course, the artistes have to fend for themselves to remain in the profession. Junior artistes are seldom offered stage venues, and thus most of them have to earn their livelihood from other jobs (Margi, 2010).

A Cākyār artiste trained at Kerala Kalamandalam (Respondent 7*, personal communication, 7 and 8 October 2019), told me that he had proposed to the Kerala Kalamandalam authorities to remedy this situation by admitting students every few years instead of every year, so they may end up forming a team of actors, instead of batches of individual actors with less specialized training. However, his proposal was never made functional.

This vast change introduced by the creation of Kerala Kalamandalam was especially impactful for the female students of the art, who could now freely enter this new learning space with new innovations in the Kūṭiyāṭṭam repertoire and costume, when they were earlier largely confined to private teaching in traditional homes.

With regard to shifting patronage from courts and temples to governmental initiatives, Sangeet Natak Akademi, India's national

academy for music, dance and drama, in the 1970s, rolled out schemes and financial aids for Kūṭiyāṭṭam students and artistes. Following UNESCO's 2001 recognition of Kūṭiyāṭṭam as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity, the academy created in 2007 Kūṭiyāṭṭam Kendra, a center for the "preservation and promotion" of Kūṭiyāṭṭam, which started funding old and new Kūṭiyāṭṭam training institutions, organizing monthly performances and annual Kūṭiyāṭṭam festivals. Eventually, in 2017, the Kerala Government rolled out the 'Diamond Jubilee Fellowship for Young Artists' scheme that financially supported several Kūṭiyāṭṭam artistes, enabling them to teach students going to regular schools in their post-school hours, especially for the preparation of inter-school art competitions, popularly called Youth Festivals.

The Kerala Government initiated Youth Festivals for secondary and higher secondary students in 1956 to promote art education among school-going students; participation and winning these competitions meant extra scores that would aid their admission to state universities. In this regard, a Cākyār artiste (Respondent 7*, personal communication, 7 and 8 October, 2019) presents us with a unique approach to pedagogy. Now in his sixties, every year he trains many non-Cākyār and non-Nampyār students across Kerala for these Youth Festival competitions, who flock to his home from faraway districts of Kerala, where this art was not popular or even known. His objective, as he told me, was to create, if not practitioners, at least knowledgeable spectators for the art. Since each performance in these competitions is given a strict timing of twenty minutes, the training does not always involve the traditional rigour; neither are the expectations from these performances of a very high artistic calibre. Despite these limitations, an artiste's hope is that a few students, at least, will pursue their training beyond these competitions. Students

also approach non-Cākyār and non-Nampyār artistes for training for these Youth Festivals. A few Cākyār and Nampyār artistes are critical of these competitions though they are cognizant of the economic benefits that come in the form of tuition fees from the students (Binoy, 2019; Observational Fieldnotes, 2019).

Initiation and training

Through an analysis of the structured and semi-structured interviews with a few Kūṭiyāṭṭam students, I argue that specific training centers, largely comprising of non-Cākyār/non-Nampyār teachers and students have generated a non-traditional mode of teaching, where training spaces have remained intact with a transformation of the training process and its participants.

Non-Cākyār and Cākyār students at Kerala Kalamandalam

Kalamandalam Shailaja, a non-Cākyār/non-Nampyār artiste, reminisces about her journey through Kūṭiyāṭṭam. She joined Kerala Kalamandalam to learn dance in June 1974 after reading in a local newspaper an advertisement for admission at this institution. Her initiation consisted in receiving at the Mohiniyāṭṭam *Kaḷari* blessings from Kalamandalam Leelamma, a renowned danseuse. Unlike students these days, Kalamandalam Shailaja was at first completely unaware of Kūṭiyāṭṭam. One day, Painkulam Rama Chakyar spotted her and asked her to learn Kūṭiyāṭṭam, telling her that her “big eyes” were expressive. Her former dance teacher added that learning Kūṭiyāṭṭam would mean “learning everything” because *Sūkṣmābhinaya* (subtle acting) was central to this art. She eventually started her training at the Kūṭiyāṭṭam *Kaḷari* with her seniors, Kalamandalam Girija Devi, Kalamandalam

Sivan Nampoodiri, and Kalamandalam Rama Chakyar. Seven students trained together under Painkulam Rama Chakyar. A calm instructor, he used to sit in his chair at the *Kaḷari* and gently instruct the students on body movements and gestures, rarely performing them himself. Though he was responsible for shortening onstage productions, he taught his students the complete production manuals and plays: an unsaid rule was that the training should be complete; a performance could be malleable. While his students performed on stage, to avoid making them nervous he would step away so as not to be visible to them. Besides, Kalamandalam Shailaja fondly remembers how her Guru refrained from praising his students while meeting them alone; yet, to members of the audience, he would freely express his contentment with their performance. He also trained them to create a team of performers: according to Kalamandalam Sivan Nampoodiri, his Guru allotted most of the royal male characters to the young Sivan and the *vidūṣaka* and Cākyār-kūṭṭu portions to the young Kalamandalam Rama Chakyar (Namboodiri, 2016), and created women-centric productions for his female students (Namboodiri, 2013).⁸ Like other Gurus, Painkulam Rama Chakyar employed a mixed pedagogy in imparting the art. Apart from taking his students to his own performances, he would organize and fund his students’ performances, and accompanied them like a caring guardian. After performances, he would playfully point out the corrections to his pupils.

While he sometimes reprimanded his pupils for shaping their behaviour and moral conduct, his commitment towards them was unwavering. Once, a group of temple managers visited the Guru to request a Kūṭiyāṭṭam performance. The Guru happily agreed to perform along with his students. However, the organisers

8 I translated into English these interviews available (in Malayalam) on the Internet.

did not want the young Kalamandalam Sivan Nampoodiri, a non-Cākyār, to perform. Angry, the Guru declined to perform.

As with many traditional arts, there was also constant peer-teaching and peer-learning. Kalamandalam Shailaja also remembers her senior, Kalamandalam Girija, who used to take care of her like a younger sister and treat her with great affection: “Girija Cēcci [elder sister] would always do my make-up before putting on hers. We do not see that these days.” (Respondent 6*, personal communication, 24 July 2019). In the *Kaḷari*, juniors stood behind the seniors, practised with them and learnt from them under the same Guru. The juniors also watched several of their seniors’ *Coliāṭṭams* (rehearsals with the musical instruments), which helped them learn all portions of the play, irrespective of whether the characters were female or male.

This Guru-Śiṣyā bond founded on benevolence continues to positively impact students of the art even today. During a debut performance, at his residence, of one of Painkulam Narayana Chakyar’s (formerly trained at Kerala Kalamandalam) predominantly non-Cākyār and non-Nampyār students, I saw him affectionately greet all of them as well as their parents, eliciting much warmth and support from the audience. When I visited him for an interview, he explained how he had learned from his maternal uncle, Painkulam Rama Chakyar, to be benevolent towards his students, and how he was proud of his students addressing him as “Māma” (or *Amāma* means “maternal uncle” in Malayalam). He would not demand a fee from economically challenged students, who would simply give him what they could. He had also tied a swing to the mango tree in his courtyard, where students would often enjoy themselves after class.

In another instance, senior Guru Sivan

Namboodiri, gulping back his tears, narrated to me an anecdote from one of his classes at Kerala Kalamandalam a few years earlier. During a rehearsal, he was enraged on seeing a non-Cākyār/non-Nampyār female student perform wrongly. He reprimanded her and walked out of the *Kaḷari*, making the student cry. He was scared there would be a student protest. Indeed, a few minutes later, he was summoned back to the *Kaḷari* by the Kerala Kalamandalam authorities. When the student was asked the reason of her sadness, she responded that her Guru was always gentle to his students and she was crying because her negligence had invited his wrath. Sivan Āśān felt pacified as well as humbled, and today, he remains one of most adored Gurus in the Kūṭiyāṭṭam fraternity. Perhaps he had imbibed these values from his Guru Painkulam Rama Chakyar. Irrespective of societal divisions, the Guru-Śiṣya relation and tradition, with its emphasis on love and compassion, has greatly contributed to the continuity of this art and its evolving pedagogy.

A counter narrative, however was brought out when a non-Cākyār/non-Nampyār *Milāvu* artiste (Respondent 23*, personal communication, 20 December 2019) regarded the project of teaching Kūṭiyāṭṭam to non-Cākyār/ non-Nampyār children as incomplete because they are denied access to textual resources like *Āṭṭaparakārams* and *Kramadīpikās*, or to temple playhouses that are considered practice grounds for Kūṭiyāṭṭam by the Cākyārs and Nampyārs. In addition, Kalamandalam Shailaja, a non-Cākyār artiste emphasized the importance of watching performances, an opportunity that non-Cākyār and non-Nampyār students at institutions like Kerala Kalamandalam often lack.

Later on, not all teachers were able to rise above caste discrimination. A few students told me how they sometimes noticed bias in



Figure 2. Guru Painkulam Rama Chakyar with student Kalamandalam Sivan Namboodiri, 1974 (Courtesy: John Steven Sowle collection, via Leah Lowthorp, 2020)

a teacher towards a student of a lower caste, for example by passing more negative or critical remarks on the student during training sessions. However, if a low-caste student was considered “beautiful” according to the performance standards, he or she might receive encouragement and performance opportunities. A few upper-caste teachers have also been noticed shunning lower-caste students, either as actors or instrumentalists (Respondent 31* , personal communication, 26 October, 2019).

*Issues of Quality Dilution and Uniformization:
The case of Kerala Kalamandalam*

Over the years, experiences of learning and training underwent a major shift. My late-night return journeys after watching Kūṭiyāṭṭam performances were mostly at the mercy of kind artistes who would offer me a humble dinner and accommodate me in their vehicles. On one such July night in 2019, I was returning from the Ammannur Gurukulam (later called, Ammannur Chachu Chakyar Smaraka Gurukulam) Kūṭiyāṭṭam festival in Irinjalakuda. I keenly listened to the discussions among two *Miḷāvu* artistes and a senior Kūṭiyāṭṭam actor about the changing curriculum of the Kūṭiyāṭṭam department at Kerala Kalamandalam. The two *Miḷāvu* artistes expressed their apprehension towards the dwindling of well-trained *Miḷāvu* students: some senior students concealed their lack of familiarity with the *Āṭṭaparakārams* by playing the *Miḷāvu* with some hesitation and less vigour. In addition, there was a fall in the enrolment of male students, while others dropped the course after a few years of training, perhaps afraid of not being able to make a living from their art. My co-passengers also found that the new Nañṇyārkūttu curriculum lacked depth: a variety of plays and *Āṭṭaparakārams* were omitted from it. A reorganisation and reduction of the Kūṭiyāṭṭam curriculum, together with the

introduction of scholastic learning, not only resulted in a much reduced number of hours of training, but ended up omitting special classes of Sanskrit and Malayalam, a number of plays and *Āṭṭaparakārams*, and also earlier methods, such as the training of female students to play male characters — all of which formed part of the erstwhile curriculum designed by Painkulam Rama Chakyar, modified in the early 21st century.

On the other hand, undergraduate students at Kerala Kalamandalam told me that they were worried and helpless about the allotment of Kūṭiyāṭṭam teachers. Though all the teachers claim to train their students in the Painkulam School of performance, each of them actually has a distinct style and strongly adheres to it. Since in the present scholastic system, students get new teachers every year, they are in effect pressured to learn a new style — for instance, in executing *Mudras* and other *Meys* (postures of the body): a *Mudra* will be essentially the same in two different styles, but not its dynamic execution (Focused Group Discussion 1, personal communication, 4 November, 2019). Unavoidably, this arrangement of different teachers training students every year is a departure from traditional teaching, where a single Guru or a couple of Gurus train students.

Thus, even though the artiste-cum-teachers experiment with dramaturgical styles of other *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* schools, they are expected to teach their students the style of the institution they are working for. As a case in point, Kalamandalam Shailaja told me that her junior, Sathi (later to become a renowned artiste under the name of Margi Sathi), learnt Kūṭiyāṭṭam for nearly eight years at Kerala Kalamandalam. After she started teaching at Margi, her style of Śloka recitation and performance stances completely changed to the Margi style, which was borrowed from the Ammannur School. However, after a few years, when she returned

to Kerala Kalamandalam as a Kūṭiyāṭṭam faculty, she was strictly expected to teach the Painkulam style, despite having experimented and innovated during her public performances before rejoining Kerala Kalamandalam.

We witness here a phenomenon common to institutionalization of most Indian performing art forms, that of apparent uniformization: students emerging from any given institution will have been trained in the specific style taught there. This is, however, compensated by the freedom given to students to innovate in their performances, during their studies or, later, as artistes.

Teachers would often take them around for watching their performances or provide opportunities as cymbalists (only for female students) during performances. However, those performance opportunities are far too few for the number of Kūṭiyāṭṭam graduates and post-graduates, which has been steadily increasing over the years, partly because of the uniform system of admission, and partly because of a corresponding increase in the number of teachers for acting, from a single Guru in 1965 to eleven teachers in 2019, and in the number of *Kaḷaris* (traditional spaces for learning and practising). Separate *Kaḷaris* for every batch of students has therefore led to fewer opportunities to watch senior students perform on a daily basis. Moreover, the process of institutionalization also led to a uniform system of curfew. At Kerala Kalamandalam, female students, unlike their male counterparts, are only allowed to leave the campus for short visits during the day, but have to return before 6 PM. If they wish to watch late-evening performances elsewhere, they have to seek special permissions from their hostel wardens. Yet male students, for a variety of reasons, often fail to take advantage of their freedom to attend as many performances as are offered to them.

All these restrictions end up keeping students away from learning experiences and opportunities, lessening their interest in learning Kūṭiyāṭṭam. Besides, a lack of performance opportunities has also contributed to an increase in the dropout rate of male students before the end of their training period (Respondent 21*, personal communication, 29 September 2019). When I trained at Kerala Kalamandalam, there were, in all, 45 to 50 female students of Kūṭiyāṭṭam, against only 13-15 male students training to be actors. Another challenge thrown up by uniformization is the training of students in every character in the curriculum, which prevents them from acquiring in-depth knowledge and expertise, as a result of which many of them end up receiving hardly any performance opportunities.

While discussing the pedagogical structures of Carnatic music, Lakshmi Subramanian (2008: 110) brings out another dimension of uniformized pedagogy: “The operative features of the [post-Independence] project were scientific theory and systematization - values that derived largely from colonial modernity, and seen as critical adjuncts to any modern system of pedagogy.” Kerala Kalamandalam’s yearly admission system and academic framework was an attempt to build upon this “colonial modernity,” in contrast with the traditional system, which did not rest on any rigidly defined syllabus, did not confer academic degrees, yet was more successful in creating Kūṭiyāṭṭam performing groups. Therefore, in the context of Kerala Kalamandalam, we see a shift from semi-traditional *śikṣā*, where a single Guru or a couple of Gurus trained students from varied social backgrounds, to non-traditional pedagogy, where multiple teachers train students today.

The scene is somewhat different in other semi-traditional training institutions, such as Ammannur Gurukulam, Nepathya or Margi,

where students are admitted not on a yearly basis, but with the intention of forming teams where junior and senior artistes join and perform together. Although this is a richer model of pedagogy, Sooraj Nambiar (Respondent 14*, personal communication, 2 November 2019) explained to me it also suffers from a high dropout rate for a variety of reasons, including the non-residential character of these institutions (then, Kerala Kalamandalam is advantaged because a greater number of students are admitted here as compared to non-residential training centres), parallel studies in regular schools outside, the demands of rigorous training, and often an ensuing lack of interest.

To some extent, however, the post-Independence institutionalized avenue of pedagogy offers some compensation in being a better instrument of popularization, with those institutions' ability to organize more popular and academic events (although the semi-traditional institutions now function equally well on this front), in offering access to considerable documentation and archives, inviting and formally hosting researchers, and so on. Another positive contribution of institutionalized pedagogy has been that non-Cākyār and non-Nampyār students have acquired a better perception of Kūṭiyāṭṭam over the years. Initially (after 1965), they generally joined Kerala Kalamandalam for the institution's popularity or to learn Kathakali or Mohiniyāṭṭam, and were ignorant of Kūṭiyāṭṭam, but some of them ended up learning it. About 50 years later, non-Cākyār or non-Nampyār students often claim that they are cognizant of their interest in pursuing Kūṭiyāṭṭam training.

Cākyār and Nampyār students in family-based learning spaces

A few young Cākyār artistes explained to me that they had planned to continue their training

beyond their debut temple performance or even their initial training for varied reasons. A Cākyār artist (Respondent 23*, personal communication, 28 September 2019) told me that he was not initiated into Kūṭiyāṭṭam as a child, as his family members were not performers and followed other occupations; he learnt Carnatic music while pursuing his schooling and a Master's degree in commerce. He started learning Kūṭiyāṭṭam as a teenager but left the training midway. Later, he started learning the *Milāvu* (normally the family vocation of the Nampyārs) out of sheer interest. Today, he works as a *Milāvu* artiste and teacher. According to him, in institutions like Kerala Kalamandalam, debut performances are scheduled as part of the academic curriculum, no longer as a ritual, as was the case in traditional families; he rhetorically asked whether this does not dilute the essence of training in the art.

Nepathya Sreehari Chakyar (Respondent 11*, personal communication, 28 September 2019) told me that his parents had video-recorded him as a little boy imitating *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* artistes. Anxious that the child might imbibe the art wrongly, his parents, both *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* artistes, started training him when he was 7 years old. His imitation skills led to a departure from the tradition of debuting Prabhandhakūttuas an adult: he did so as a child, before his *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* debut — a challenging and enriching journey in stark contrast with the troubled students at Kerala Kalamandalam, who lacked such exposure and opportunities to watch or perform *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*.

The young Kalamandalam Sangeeth Chakyar (Respondent 3*, personal communication, pilot study, 5 June 2017) had a very different reason to learn the art: as the sole male heir in his Cākyār family, giving up this profession would have meant an extinction of this family's style of performance.

Overall, Cākyār and Nampyār students have the advantage of performing in temple playhouses, sometimes entire plays over several nights. In contrast, since most of those temple playhouses are closed to non-Cākyār and non-Nampyār students, those have to fall back on their institutional spaces or invitations to public performances by their teachers, other artistes and organizers. Whatever the value of these criticisms of perceived limitations in the institutionalized space, the Guru-Śiṣya tradition within the Cākyār and Nampyār familial space gradually receded, and is today followed by just a small minority of students.

Kūṭiyāṭṭam's reach to international students

From the 1950s, with increasing performances outside the temple precincts by Mani Madhava Chakyar, Painkulam Rama Chakyar and their respective teams, along with the establishment of Kūṭiyāṭṭam training centres across Kerala, the art gained wider attention among foreign students and scholars of Indian art, and received growing interest from foreigners travelling to Kerala, some of whom came to learn the art under the tutelage of the stalwarts.

Maria Christopher Byrski, a Sanskrit scholar and Polish ambassador to India from 1994 to 1996, chanced upon a performance by Mani Madhava Chakyar in Kerala and started learning Abhinaya and Mudras from the stalwart, communicating through his son, T.K.G. Nambiar, a Hindi teacher; “Byrski, a polyglot, was fluent in Hindi” (Paul, 2021). Later, in 1990s, Tomoe Irino, a Japanese artiste started her journey of Kūṭiyāṭṭam training at the Ammannur Gurukulam. Michiko Uno (Respondent 4*, personal communication, 11 July 2019), another Japanese student of Kūṭiyāṭṭam, told me how Tomoe Irino went on to learn not only Kūṭiyāṭṭam acting but also the *Milāvu* — against conventions, since, owing to its *Brahmacarya* (celibate) status, female

students from Kerala are never taught the *Milāvu*. While she has never played the drum in Kerala, she continues to play it in Japan to accompany performances of other Japanese students training in Kūṭiyāṭṭam. Michiko Ono herself was not initially drawn to Kūṭiyāṭṭam performances; her love for the art grew by watching Tomoe Irino's performances in Japan. This prompted her to travel to Kerala to watch, experience and learn the art, while taking several sabbaticals from her software professional career.

More students-cum-scholars like Heike Moser-Oberlin and Farley Richmond eventually joined the league of earlier scholars John Sowle, Clifford Jones and Diane Daugherty, in documenting and studying the art form. They continue to visit Kerala during Kūṭiyāṭṭam festivals.

I have also found Art or Humanities students from across the world learning Kūṭiyāṭṭam for their research projects and dissertations (Observational Fieldnotes, Pilot Study, 2017, and 2019). Such short-term programmes for researchers, theatre persons and dancers are either for gaining an emic view of the art or for adapting the unique features of Kūṭiyāṭṭam into their respective fields. For example, Joe*, a male American theatre artiste, learnt the female solo art Naṅṅyārkūttu at Kerala Kalamandalam under the tutelage of my Guru, after conveying to her his precise expectation from the art. This ran against convention on two grounds: first, male actors do not perform Naṅṅyārkūttu; secondly, a student's training is normally at the sole discretion and convenience of the Guru. My Guru acceded to his demands, thinking that perhaps they could have been part of a process of ideation for his own performances in his home country. Such Kūṭiyāṭṭam teaching and learning can be termed non-traditional as they completely depart from the spirit of a Guru-Śiṣya relationship in terms of what is



Figure 3. The author with third-year undergraduate students Kalamandalam Gopika, Kalamandalam Mrunalini and Kalamandalam Kalyani at a Kūṭiyāṭṭam Kaḷari learning Naṅṅyārḱūttu at Kerala Kalamandalam, August 2019 (Courtesy: Kalamandalam Gayathri Devi)

taught and in what time-frame.

Overall, while some researchers and students, irrespective of their ethnic affiliations, come to Kūṭiyāṭṭam for a brief period, others opt to continue or to return to the art as students, professional performers, or loyal connoisseurs. In either case, we see some conventions being broken, though both Gurus and students exert prudence in letting such deviations become the standard praxis. Such reluctance, for instance, is seen in the limited use of electronic gadgets by students: during my Naṅṇyārkūttu training, I was asked by my Guru to learn the prescribed production manual with its Malayalam prose and Sanskrit verses (which are recited in specific ragas); since I was a novice, I audio-recorded my Guru and fellow students reciting the verses, and was allowed to use these recordings back during my homework, a privilege not granted to the “regular” Naṅṇyārkūttu students at Kerala Kalamandalam.

The spirit of the art’s pedagogy

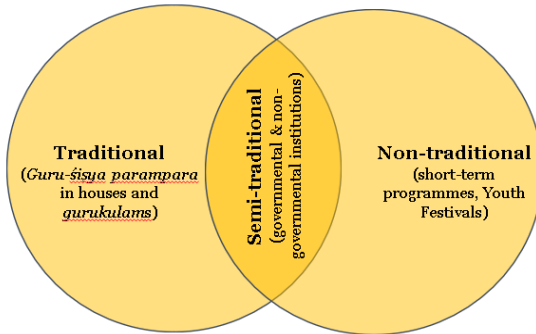


Figure 4. Diagram showing the existing kinds of Kūṭiyāṭṭam teaching: traditional, semi-traditional and non-traditional

Thus, Kūṭiyāṭṭam’s pedagogical landscape consists of four avenues: the purely traditional one, now practised only in very few Cākyār and Nampyār households; the semi-traditional

“post-colonial” institutionalized one; and the non-traditional capsuled training. From my field experience and that of many artistes, the second avenue appears to be, at the present time, the most successful of the three in producing professional performers.

In the above sections, we observed how Kūṭiyāṭṭam was already an institutionalized art with the Guru-Śiṣya mode of knowledge transmission enmeshed within the family structure, which shaped the core of Kūṭiyāṭṭam Śikṣā in the early medieval and medieval era. With the challenge posed by a limited number of experts within a family, Kūṭiyāṭṭam training at households slowly expanded to the system of *Gurukulams* and *Maṭhams* and thus, individual family structures expanded to community structures in the pre-Independence period. Therefore, there was a shift from the old narrative of keeping the family’s knowledge system within the family to a new narrative of sharing the knowledge with the other families of the same vocation; in the process, Cākyār and Nampyār families came together for training their students together.

Eventually, in the post-Independence period, the new developments— the creation of the Kūṭiyāṭṭam department at Kerala Kalamandalam and other organizations— was a process in “rewriting” the narrative of Kūṭiyāṭṭam teaching and learning across different castes. Here, a larger community of students and artistes are exposed to the core of Kūṭiyāṭṭam training but do not necessarily become active participants of the knowledge system. The narrative was further rewritten in the mode of non-traditional teaching: teaching a Kūṭiyāṭṭam production in five days or learning a Śloka through audio recordings. And while such narratives continue to be rewritten, parts of the core of the knowledge system, as institutionalized by the Cākyārs and Nampyārs has remained untouched: “There are a lot of aspects in

the art form that have been preserved within the Gurukulams, which are not shown to the world” (Indu G in Binoy, 2019). This underlines two findings: the core of Kūṭiyāṭṭam knowledge largely remains intact with the Cākyār and Nampyār artistes living in Kerala; secondly, in the semi-traditional teaching process, knowledge is imparted to the non-Cākyārs and non-Nampyārs at the discretion of a few Cākyār and Nampyār artistes. We find that the semi-traditional mode of training is slowly moving towards the core of Kūṭiyāṭṭam Śikṣā, replacing the traditional Guru-Śiṣya training, as there is no student solely learning Kūṭiyāṭṭam without any alternative scholastic learning. This idea is in tandem with the shifting boundaries of the core, semi-periphery and peripheral areas, where the core element loosens up and incorporates the features of the semi-periphery to form the new core (Chase Dunn and Hall, 1991). Therefore, the unchanged core of traditional *Gurukulam* training, semi-traditional training and different kinds of peripheral pedagogies (knowledge transmitted in small packages and capsuled formats, almost in a fragmented fashion; teaching and learning for a few competitions, research papers and independent theatre-dance productions) are woven together in Kūṭiyāṭṭam’s Śikṣā today. The process, then, as suggested by Singer (1972: 399-400), underlines Indian tradition’s, and here, Kūṭiyāṭṭam’s “adaptive mechanism”, that accepts or rejects innovations by traditionalizing or archaicizing these changes or innovations. It is this adaptive mechanism that preserves Kūṭiyāṭṭam despite an evolving periphery. If we are to redefine *Kūṭi-āṭṭam* in the current pedagogical context, we can consider it as an amalgam or “coming together” of different pedagogies — a departure from the orthodox tradition, yet still rooted in it in some ways.

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