

Folk Songs of the Pulluvas in Kerala

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Serpent worship is one of the oldest worship in the mankind. In Kerala a cast named “pulluvar” is taking the leadership of these kinds of worships. It has been believed that as per the custom they do this *pooja* by *Kalamezhuthu* and songs. *Kalamezhuthu* is unique form of art. The patterns of snake gods to be drawn and the colours chosen are traditionally stipulated, and the tradition is strictly adhered to. The drawing is done directly with the hand, that is, without using any tools whatsoever. The powders used are all natural (Vegetable or Mineral or combined). The usual items used are: Rice (white), Turmeric (yellow), Charcoal from paddy husk (black), blend of Turmeric powder and Lime (red) and powdered leaves (green). The songs sung by the pullavas is known as “pulluvan pattu”¹. By doing so they are making the snake gods happy. The pulluvas are doing this worship traditionally. They are going to the houses in *Kanni*, *Makaram* (two months in the Malayalam calendar) months and by singing they relieved all the bad things and curses on that family. It is believed to be their right.²

The kalamezhuttu and related rituals done by the pulluvas is known as “*sarppakkalam*”, which will be performed either in front of Nair houses or in temples³. Pulluvas start with the addressing songs to Hindu Gods Ganapathi and Devi. Usually a group containing 5 to 6 members including men and women sing songs for Sarppakkalam. They sing to the accompaniment of Pulluvakkudam (a percussion instrument), Pulluvaveena (stringed instrument), and Ilattalam. Pulluvas sing the songs from “*Asthiparvam*”, in Mahabharata (one of the two great epics in India). *Asthiparvam* is a particular chapter in Mahabharata which mainly contains the stories of snakes and that is why the Pulluvas sing the songs only from this chapter.

The style of rendering of the Pulluvanpattu is different from Thrissur, Palakkad districts and southern districts of Kerala. Pulluvas from Thrissur, Palakkad districts claims that their songs have been composed by Padikkalathra Kunjan Nair (a native of Varavur, Desamangalam). They are also claiming that in ancient times this has been sung as Thottam, a vocal ballad sung just before performing the rituals, rendered without tala.⁴

The comparison of the singing style in these different areas can be described as follows.

In Ernakulam and other southern districts, Pulluva sings in high speed compared to that of Thrissur and Palakkad. They mostly use two different thalas. Also the women and Men are singing on the same shruthi or pitch. They sing to the shruthi of Pulluva veena. But in Trissur

and Palakkad districts, Pulluvan (Man) sings in the shruthi of pulluva veena and Pulluvathy (Lady) sings in the panchama shruthi or Madhyama shruthi or to a shruthi very near to the man sings. It is very rare that both are singing in the same shruthi.

The thalas in the pulluvanpattu are having the same aksharakalas used in Carnatic Classical music .But the same can not be named according to Carnatic Music system. The thalas used by the Pulluvas of southern districts of Kerala are ” Nalam thalam”, ”Therali”, and” Kummi”.The Nalam thalam used by the Pullauvas having the same aksharakala of Misrachappu thala in Carnatic music ⁷ aksharakala in an avartha).Kummi and Therali are the thalas having 24 aksharakalas in an avartha.Chathurasrajathi Triputa thala(Tisragathi) in Carnatic music system having the same aksharakala in an avartha.But, Therali is a thala which is rendered with a higher degree of speed than Kummi.The thalas used by the Pulluvas of Thrissur and Valluvanad area of Palakkad districts are called “Triputa”.They are using the thalas having 7, 12 and 24 aksharakalas in an avartha, and all these thalas arzce commonly called as Triputa.⁵

In the songs of Pulluvas some swarasthanas used in Carnatic Music can be traced out. In some songs, we can find traces of Carnatic ragas like Kalyani, Panthuvrali, Sankarabharanam, Sindhubhairavi etc. But most of the songs of the Pulluvas can't be assigned to a particular raga. Majority is having a limited sanchara of 1 octave .These songs are sung in the same tune from beginning to the end. The songs of Pulluvas are melodic in character and they give expression to their innermost thoughts and feelings.

References:-

1. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W6KWwQOSkkw>
2. Edgar Thurston - “Castes and Tribes of South India”, Cosmo publications, Delhi, 1970.
3. Kavalam Narayana Panikkar – “Folklore of Kerala “, National book trust India, 1991
4. Dr.Rekha.M.Menon-“Folk music of central Kerala with special reference to Pulluvan pattu and Panan pattu”, (Unpublished thesis), University of Calicut, 2009.
5. Ibid