

## The Kerala *Talas* and Their Usage in Kavalam Compositions

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### Abstract

*Padmabhushan Kavalam Narayana Panikkar was a poet, fundamentally and a rare personality who is equally gifted with fields of music and theater. In addition, he was a scholar of Sanskrit, instrumental music, law, and folklore. He also had a sound knowledge of the Puranas and Ithihasas. Kavalam as a theatre director and musicologist has realized the importance of indigenous tala as a key constituent of Kerala performing arts tradition. He penned many compositions which are aligned to Kerala talas, ragas and also specialized style of music rendition. According to him, music suggests movements. He used indigenous Kerala Talas to bring in the aboriginal flair and flavor of the native land. His music not only suggested the movement but highlighted them in perfect blends. He penned more than a hundred items specifically for Classical Dance form of Mohiniyattom.*

**Key Words:** Kavalam, Kerala, Tala, Mohiniyattom, Kunchan Nambiar, Thullal, Kathakali

According to some ancient Indian theorists *vachika* occupies the first a place in a play, because all other branches of *Abhinaya*, namely, *Angika*, *Aharya* and *Satwika*, depends more on it than it does on them<sup>1</sup>. *Vachika* is the expression through speech and songs. It is obviously more used in drama; but also in music in how this singer expresses the emotion through his singing. Words, in form of verses and lyrics, in music also come under this category of *Abhinaya*. Many forms of Indian performance do not fit neatly into western categories. Music and bodily movements are requisite parts of any performance. The individual performer in an ensemble may be a specialist in music or acting – dance, but each specialist also must have an intimate knowledge of the other arts necessary for the successful performance. Actor-dancers will be required to possess as part of their embodied performance, knowledge of the rhythmic patterns of the music which they must perform. Instrumentalist or vocalist will just as assuredly be immersed in the patterns of movement, stage conventions and other methods of character creation used by the actor-dancers<sup>2</sup>.

*Vachika* plays a vital role in taking the *bhava* to its zenith. Kavalam brings *Satwika bhava* in *vachika Abhinaya* through befitting dialogues and poetry. This is evident in the tribal life. A particular message is communicated to far-off hills through specialized tonal modulations. Kavalam applied this *thirodhanakriya* in his theater productions. A particular *raga* is sung or played to create a particular *bhava* suited for the scene. Later the *raga* is

slowly taken out from the scene. But the *bhava* stands still for some more time even in absolute silence.

### **Regional *talas* bring Regional Moods**

In his Mohiniyattom compositions, he has used this extensively while penning for *mukhachalam*<sup>3</sup>. The mood or the *bhava* stands still even at the instances of absolute silences until slowly and skillfully shifted to the next *raga* for creating another *bhava*. According to Kavalam, a particular *raga* is not any geographic region's private property. There is nothing called Hindustani *raga* or Karnatic *raga*. The same *raga* when applied to different *talas* the mood that the *raga* creates will also be different. It is the *tala* that decides the *bhava* of a *raga*. According to Kavalam, Kerala *tala* plays a vital role in creating the best suited *bhava* which is innate to Kerala. The same *raga* sung in *Chembada*<sup>4</sup> and *Adi*, though both are having the same structure academically, but gives two distinct moods in effect. This is because of the *tala* that regulates and controls the disposition of a particular *raga*. The *ragas* like *Begada*, *Charukesi*, *Vrindavana Sarangi* etc, if closely looked upon, has the roots leading to north of India. However, the very same *ragas* treated with Kerala's regional *talas* give rise to a mood or *bhava* which is organic to the geography of Kerala.

Holistically, like *ragas*, the *talas* are also universal in existence. But the regional treatment is what matters in bringing an organic flavour to it which is innate to a particular region. The *raga* rendering and its development differ from region to region. The elaboration of a *raga*, by a Kathakali vocalist is different from the way a Karnatic vocalist does it, so is the mood or *bhava* emanated out of such renditions. Technically, the *talas* *Chembada* and *Tripata* of Kerala are similar to *Adi* and *Misrachapu* of Karnatic music but, the difference lies when a vocalist attempts them. He is bound to apply pose and elaborations according to the disposition of a particular *tala*. This is how the regional styles are taken shape.

### **Incorporation of *Chollus* – Rhythmic Syllables**

The *Chollus* or rhythmic syllables also mark the flavour of a region. It is the language of musical instruments. The *Vaythari* - language of one instrument differs with the other. One can find music in between these *Chollus*. It is the intensity and application of *sabda* that demarcate the *Lasya* and *Tandava* nature of dance. If we examine the percussion instruments, *Chenda* and *Maddalam*, these instruments are capable of demarcating the *Tandava* and *Lasya* respectively. It is the *Chenda* which defines the limit of *Tandava* and also it gives a room for *Maddalam* for its *Lasya* illumination. The *Chollus* of *Chenda* and *Maddalam* or any other instrument are also equally capable of creating more or less 'the same feel' with their *sabda*. That is how Kavalam substantiates the use of *Chollus* in his compositions. He had used *chollus* from different folklores of Kerala such as *Padayani*, *Mudiyettu*, *Theyyam*, *Thira* etc. This *Chollus* gave a unique feel to his compositions and radiates the flavour and smell of the indigenous culture and traditions.

### **Influence of Kunchan Nambiar on Kavalam**

Kunchan Nambiar<sup>5</sup>, as a poet has great significance in literature and socio-political history of Kerala. Nambiar revitalized and re-introduced the indigenous musical and dance traditions. Kerala musical tradition is still vibrant and visible in the Thullal<sup>6</sup> founded by Kunchan Nambiar. We first hear about the Kerala *talas* and *ragas* through his Thullal compositions. Nambiar mentioned about traditional Kerala *talas* like *Roopam*, *Karika*, *Panchakarika*, *Panchari*, *Adanta*, *Muri Adanta*, *Champa*, *Marmam*, *Kumbham*, *Lakshmi* and *Kundanachi* through his compositions.

Thullal conceptualized and practiced by Kunchan Nambiar, represents of the grand legacy of Kerala's performing arts where music, literature, dance, drama etc are blended in perfect proportions. Thullal is rich in *talas*, musical tradition and *vadhya paddati* (drumming techniques) of Kerala. The *talas* compiled, used or referred to in Thullal compositions by the great poet-performer Kunchan Nambiar are *Chembada*, *Pancha Karika*, *Ganapati*, *Panchari*, *Ekam*, *Varnam*, *Pancha Padam*, *Marmam*, *Kundanachi*, *Karika*, *Roopam*, *Lakshmi*, *Khantham*, *Kumbham*, *Adanta*, *Chemba*, and *Chapam*<sup>7</sup>.

The *Sopana Sangeetham*<sup>8</sup> is a specialized singing style of Kerala where predominance is always given to *tala*. It is not the *Shruti* which carry the music forward, but the *tala*. If music is compared to long chain of hollow tubes having definite length, the *Shruti* is its inner diameter and the length of the single tube is the *tala* cycle. When we attach one tube to another, we add one more cycle to the *tala* to accommodate the length of the composition. The *akara alapana* fixed to the *tala* premise is a characteristic feature of Kerala's own style of music rendition. This can be seen in *Kathakali*, *Krishnanattam*, *Theyyam*, *Mudiyettu* as well as in tribal music. This opens up to much large and spacious plane for Kerala's indigenous music. Kathakali music is not something which is developed only for Kathakali. It is only a continuation of a long lived musical tradition.

In Kavalam compositions, the *sahitya* and *talas* are set according to the innate traits, inherent attributes and distinctive movements of a particular character. The *tala* – the rhythm and *kala* – the pace are of great significance in a performance. *Tala* is mainly employed in two ways. One is the *tala* which is clearly mentioned in the script itself and the other is the one which is come across in an attempt to create an imaginative atmosphere which is much above the realistic viewpoints. Kavalam composed many pieces specifically for Mohiniyattom in the Kerala *talas* such as *Chembada*(8 beats), *Ekam* (Single beat), *Karika* (5 beats), *Ayyadi* (*Panchari*)(5 beats), *Navakam* (9 beats), *Chemba* (10 beats), *Kundanachi* (12 beats), *Adanta* (14 beats), *Marmam* (14 beats), *Kumbam* (20 beats), *Lakshmi* (20 beats), etc. The employment of these unique regional *talas* undoubtedly increased the scope for more elaborate and beautiful choreographies.

### References:

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1. Ramdas Sen, *Aithihasika Rahasya* (Bengal), Part II, Second Edition, Calcutta, 1885, p.97
2. Farley P. Richmond, Darius Swann and Philip B. Zerrilie, *Indian theatre; Traditions of performance*, p.5
3. A Mohiniyattom invocatory piece predominant of *nritta* – pure dance
4. A Kerala *tala* having 8 *akshara* (beats)
5. An 18<sup>th</sup> century poet was a court member of Travancore dynasty. He founded the Thullal, a dance form.
6. A dance form conceptualized by Kunchan Nambiar
7. Bhalla Deepthi Omcheri, Dr., *Vanishing Temple Arts (Temples of Kerala and Kanyakumari District)*, New Delhi, Subhi Publications, 2006, p.60
8. The innate singing style of Kerala, where predominance is given to *talas*