

Significance of Mizhavu Vadya in Kudiyyattam (The Age-old Sanskrit Theatre Tradition of Kerala)

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Abstract

Natyashastra deals with four types of Abhinaya (acting) namely Angika, Vachika, Aharya and Satwika. Vachikabhinaya, in addition to the dialogues and songs, also includes the instrumental music within its scope. Mizhavu, the accompanying drum used in Kudiyyattam is the most ancient of all musical instruments that are still in practice and fits into the category of Avanadha vadya. Traditional Sanskrit theatre performance of Kudiyyattam recognized by UNESCO is the only surviving tradition of the ancient Sanskrit theatre with an attested history of over thousand years. Mizhavu is personified as a revered Brahmachari and respectfully treated with utmost reverence. All rituals associated with the life-cycle of a Brahmin except wedding are done to Mizhavu. Age-old pedagogical approach followed in Kudiyyattam demands a percussion artiste of Mizhavu to have a comprehensive understanding of the Theatre form. 'Thouryathrika' cannot be accomplished in the absence of a skilled Mizhavu artiste to accompany a Kudiyyattam performance.

Key Words: Mizhavu, Avanadha Vadya, Natyashastra, Kudiyyattam, Sanskrit Theatre, Kerala, Percussion Instrument

“For an actor who is yet not perfect, the techniques described in the *Natyashastra*, are a means to achieve perfection, enlightenment, *moksha*, and run parallel to reaching this state through yoga or meditation practices”¹ wrote Professor Daniel Meyer-Denkgrafe renowned theatre scholar from Germany. *Natyashastra* (200 BC – 200 AD), written in Sanskrit, is the most authentic of all ancient Indian texts on performing arts. In *Natyashastra*, the *Abhinaya* (acting) is divided into four subcategories such as *Angika*, *Vachika*, *Aharya* and *Satwika*. *Angikabhinaya* is the movement of *angas* or limbs which also includes the expression of the face. *Vachikabhinaya*, in addition to the dialogues and songs, includes instrumental music within its scope. While *aharyabhinaya* deals with costumes, decorations and stagecraft, *Satwikabhinaya* details the techniques of using performers own inner emotions to create *rasa* in the minds of the spectators.

Chapter 28, *Jativikalpam* of *Natyashastra* states that there are four types of musical instruments, namely *Tatam*, *Avanadham*, *Ghanam* and *Sushiram*.² It further elaborates that

¹ Daniel Meyer-Denkgrafe, *Approaches to acting: Past and present*. Bloomsbury Academic.p.79

² ततं चैवावनद्धं च घनं सुषिरमेव च ।

Tata are string instruments and *Avanadham* are the drums covered with treated leather. *Ghana* is made of solid metals and *Sushiram* are the wind instruments.³

Mizhavu – one of the most ancient musical instruments used as accompaniment in Sanskrit Theatre performance of Kudiyaattam. The instrument which is still widely in practice fits into the category of *Avanadha vadya*. *Mizhavu* is the major accompanying instrument in Kudiyaattam. Kudiyaattam is officially recognized by UNESCO as the ‘Masterpiece of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity’. It is the only live and surviving tradition of the ancient Sanskrit theatre with an attested history of over thousand years and performed majorly as a ritualistic offering in many temples in the southern state of Kerala in India.

It is believed that Kulasekhara Kings (800CE to 1102CE) patronized the art-form in a great way and plays such as *Subhadra Dhananjayam* and *Tapati Samvaranam* in Kudiyaattam were written and staged during Kulasekhara rule.⁴ *Chilappadikaram*, one of the *Pancha Mahakavya* of Tamil literature also contains references about *Mizhavu*.⁵ The *Panchamugha vadya* still used in many ancient temples of Tamilnadu has close resemblances with *Mizhavu* in the shape, tone as well as the playing technique and also the rituals, associated with it.

Avanadha vadya (membraneophones) are those instruments of which the body is made up of wood, metal or clay and may have one or more faces on to which treated leather is tightly held using straps. *Mizhavu* is more like a large pot in appearance and is placed in a specially crafted stand called *mizhavana*. The stand looks like a cubicle made of wood and the *Mizhavu* is placed in such a way that it does not touch the floor. In the olden times, the *Mizhavu* was three feet in height and also had an inner diameter of three feet. The mouth measured eight inches and is covered with treated skin of tender calf and stretched tightly with straps. A small hole is drilled on the pot which acts as an air passage which brings about the tonal quality for the instrument. The pot was used to be made of seasoned and treated clay in the past and hence, the instrument weighed heavily. As a result, the transportation of this delicate instrument was a difficult task. May be due to this reason, the *Mizhavus* were seen installed at a prominent spot in the *Koothambalam* where the *Koothu* and *Kudiyaattam*

चतुर्विधं तु विज्ञेयमातोद्यं लक्षणान्वितम् ॥ १ ॥

³ ततं तन्त्रीकृतं ज्ञेयमवनद्धं तु पौष्करम्

घनं तालस्तु विज्ञेयः सुषिरो वंश उच्यते ॥ २ ॥

⁴ “The opinion of scholars is that Koothu and Kutiyaattam were reformed and developed into their present form during this period chiefly as a result of the efforts of Kulasekhara Perumal and the distinguished poet Tolan who was an outstanding member of the king’s court. It is believed that Kulasekhara Perumal composed two plays *Subhadra Dhananjayam* and *Tapati Samvaranam* with the object of getting *Chakyar-s* to enact them as Kutiyaattam”. Paniker Nirmala, Nangiar Koothu *The Classical Dance – Theatre of Nangiar-s*, Natana Kairali, 2005, p.223

⁵ Ibid, p.34

performances were staged in the temples of Kerala. Nowadays, for better transportability, the pot made up of copper or its alloy is being used due to which its weight considerably reduced.

The *Mizhavu* occupies a very sacred position in *Kudiyattam* performance. Besides it is the chief instrument, it is handled with utmost respect and sanctity. The installation ceremony of newly made *Mizhavu* carried out with all *brahmanic* rituals that are associated with the birth of a Brahmin boy. Except *veli* (wedding ceremony), all other *brahmanic shodasakriyas* (16 rituals) such as *jatakarma*, *namakarana*, *karnavedam*, *annaprasam*, *upanayanam* etc. are done to a *Mizhavu*. In other words, *Mizhavu* is personified more like a revered *brahmachari* and is given the dignified status of an expert artiste in the team. Interestingly, an old *Mizhavu* which is unfit for use is disposed with ceremonial rituals associated with the 'death' of a respected *Brahmachari*. Unusable *Mizhavus* are buried in the temple premise itself.

In the past, only members of *Nambiar* community were allowed to play the instrument. As the position of *Mizhavu* player is behind the actor at the back of the stage, he could hardly see any *mudras* (hand gestures) or the facial expression of the actor. Hence, it is important for the artiste to have a comprehensive understanding of the art-form and the play. The age-old pedagogical approach followed in *Kudiyattam* training, demands a percussion artiste of *Mizhavu* to undergo thorough training in *Kramadeepika* and *Attaprakaram* (the texts detailing with the text, craft and *abhinaya*) of every play enacted in a *Kudiyattam* performance. There are plays in *Kudiyattam* which take a month's time to conclude! *Subhadra Dananjayam* requires eleven days to complete. Stylized *Abhinaya* techniques that deal with micro-level acting - detailing even the minutest aspect of storytelling are characteristic to a *Kudiyattam* performance. The pressure on a *Mizhavu* artiste to skillfully blend his playing in fine tune with the actor(s) on stage is enormous. '*Thouryathrika*', the perfect blend of *gita*, *vadya* and *nritta* is hardly accomplished in the absence of a skilled *Mizhavu* artiste to accompany a *Kudiyattam* performance. *Mizhavu* players undergo rigorous training. Initial practice sessions are on stones or wooden-blocks which is followed by smaller sized *Mizhavu* and finally on the professional ones. Training is given in *Talas* such as *Ekam*, *Chembada* (8 beats), *Adantha* (14 beats), *Chemba* (10 beats) and *Panchari* (6 beats). Except for *Veera* and *Raudra rasas*, rhythmic patterns set in *Ekam*, *Adantha* and *Chembada* are mostly used. For *Veera* and *Raudra rasas* in addition to *Adantha*, *Tripata* is also used to suit the contextual ambience.

Mizhavu is played with bare hands and it requires years of practice for an artiste to gain mastery over the instrument. '*Tha*' and '*thom*' are the major sounds produced by the instrument. However, over a period of time, through continuous practice the player acquires mastery over the instrument and aesthetically reproduces different sounds such as roaring of the sea, fluttering of birds and butterflies, humming of bees, sounds of wild animals etc. embellishing the context of the play performed on stage. A *Kudiyattam* performance begins with lighting of *attavilakku* (the ceremonial lamp) by the *Mizhavu* player strictly belonging to the *Nambiar* community. This is followed by the ceremony called *Mizhavu ochappeduthal* – the sounding of *Mizhavu*. After *rangapravesha*, every actor in a *Kudiyattam* performance

offers ritualistic salute to the *Mizhavu* which shows the significance of the instrument. Similarly, the show is concluded with the ceremonial *Mizhavu* playing.

The playing of *Mizhavu* is called *melam* and the technique of playing is largely classified into four kinds: Playing for *Charis* – supporting the walking movement of the characters enacted, playing for *ilakiyattam* – the *manodharma* or the innovative acting performed by the performer, playing for *Cholliyattam* – acting with dialogues and the playing patterns when no actor is on stage. *Mizhavu* is sounded during the end of every second and forth lines of the *slokas* sung in different ragas⁶. It is believed that the playing pattern in *Mizhavu* is set according to the ragas used in *Kudiyattam*. *Druva Tala* patterns, in lower tempo are used for ragas such as *Muddan*, *Arthan*, *Veeratharkkan*, *Danam*, *Korakkurinhi* and *Muraleendalam*. Rhythmic patterns set in *Eka Tala* are used for ragas *Sreekandhi*, *Thondu*, *Puraneer*, *Kaishiki*, *Indalam*, *Bhinna Panchamam*, *Dhukha Gandaram* etc. While stylized acting such as “*Jatayu’s Parannu Chavittu*” etc are enacted on stage, Folk Talas like *Lakshmi* (also called *Kunhilakshmi*), *Marmam* etc. are played on *Mizhavu* to create the vigor and solidity in the contextual background as demanded by the play.

Kudiyattam was exclusively a temple art-form for centuries. Training and performances were strictly under the control of Nambiar and Chakyar communities. The rebellious initiative of Painkulam Rama Chakyar was instrumental in secularizing the art-form. When Kudiyattam Kalari was first started in Kerala Kalamandalam way back in 1965, Rama Chakyar was appointed as the Head of the Department and Narayanan Nambiar, son of Mani Madhava Chakyar was the *Mizhavu* instructor. Thereafter, every interested candidate irrespective of their community, caste or religion received entry for training and performance of Koothu and Koodiyattam. These visionary duo further redefined and fine-tuned the training and performance of Kudiyattam. They ensured the systematization of the training methodology resulting in the absolute synchronization of the acting and the dancing in Kudiyattam with the music of the *mizhavu*. For the *lasya* and *tandava* components of Kudiyattam, Nambiar developed a style interspersing melody and solidity.⁷ Sri. V. Kaladharan, a noted scholar and art critic adds that Nambiar and his accomplished disciples provided an esthetic profundity to every scene in Kudiyattam exhibiting their mastery to play *Mizhavu* in all its subtleties.

Unlike other percussion instruments, *Mizhavu* being a primitive instrument does not offer much scope for improvisation in terms of tonal modulations and articulations. The success of the play is greatly depended on the mastery and talent of the *Mizhavu* performer in providing befitting musical support to the actors in the play. The *Mizhavu* player should also be acquainted with customary rituals executed during such a performance. *Mizhavu* is getting wider acceptance among contemporary dance and theatre practitioners across the globe these days. The players are also invited to exhibit their talent in musical fusions conducted by

⁶ The raga is not typically same of Indian Classical music

⁷ V.Kaladharan, *Mizhavu and other Musical Instruments in Kudiyattam*, www.sahapedia.org

eminent artistes of different genres. And furthermore, the unparalleled resonance of this wonderful instrument reverberating worldwide is drawing attention to the age-old Sanskrit theatre tradition of *Kudiyattam* of 'Gods Own Country'.

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