

Basic Rhythmic-unit patterns in Kathakali Dance

Sucheendranathan. P. K
Assistant Professor (Kathakali Dance)
Dept. Rabindra Sangit, Dance & Drama, Sangit-Bhavana,
Visva-Bharati University, Santiniketan, W.B.
E-mail: suchi_pk84@yahoo.com

Abstract

Rhythmic units of Kathakali¹, strengthens the communicative techniques of traditional presentation through Tauryatrika² approach. The rhythmic patterns are affected in Kathakali from various Vādyā-parampara³, Folk art-forms and Temple ritualistic forms of Kerala. The aesthetical beauties or the systematic structure of Kathakali Tala Sampradāyam-s⁴ are much less explained subject in the research area. Analysing the practices of Kathakali Tala Sampradāyam is very relevant and useful to comprehend the Kathakali. The detail description of each and every area of Talam used in Kathakali is not covered in this article. In this piece of writing the basic rhythmic form and the patterns are kept as most concerned area of explanation with fruitful video examples.

Keywords: Kathakali, Tala, Rhythm, Notation, Kerala Kalamandalam, Sampradaya, Chempata, Chempa, Atanta, Panchari, Muriatanta, Trputa.

Indian tradition of staged performing art is based on the presentation concept through depicting the story or idea, in which the dance and the theatrical elements are lived for ages, physically and virtually in the world of art lovers. This phenomenon happens only because of onstage and offstage dedicative participation of the donor and the receiver of the art. The presentation and the choreographic textures vary from artiste to artiste through different presenting mediums, in which the artist skilfully blends the aesthetical beauty into shape through self-attained creative taste. Kathakali is bind with the stylized form of presentation techniques, which also avails creative freedom in Kathakali medium. One of the basic elements of the stylized classical performance is rhythm, which in India rhythm is referred as Tala. Beginning with the origin of Kathakali and the concepts of rhythmic patterns, the article will only explain the basic rhythmic patterns with the

¹ Kathakali - Classical performing art of Kerala; South India.

² Tauryatrika – Theatrical combination of Dance, Vocal music and Instrumental music (Nṛitta-Gīta-Vādyā Samañwayam).

³ Vādyā-parampara - Kerala's instrumental practicing systems.

⁴ Tala Sampradāyam-s - Kathakali rhythmic practicing patterns.

notation and the Vāyṭhārikaḷ⁵ according to the Kathakaḷi veśa-kaḷari⁶. There are other perspectives of rhythm in Kathakaḷi, i.e. Kalāśaṅṅaḷuṭe –Vāyṭhārikaḷ⁷, Pravēśanaṅṅaḷuṭe-Vāyṭhārikaḷ⁸.

In which, there is space to work in future and the space is wide to be covered.

Secured under the belt of Western-Ghats, Kerala is constantly successful for the enhancement of past traditional values. Redecorated by many past master-artistes with the loving support of the art-lovers, Kathakaḷi became a classical form in its performative codified communication section. Kathakaḷi artistes upheld and accepted the Kathakaḷi-aization of different prodigies in various periods. The creative modification happened in the consisting terms and regulations of stylizations in various theatrical aspects. Understanding Kathakaḷi takes a great effort and meantime it will take a life time also to understand the creative cause of each aspect in Kathakaḷi. The influence of Kūṭiyāṭṭam⁹, Kaḷaripayarr¹⁰, Folk art-forms and temple ritualistic forms transformed the Rāmanāṭṭam¹¹ throughout ages into Kathakaḷi as classical performing art. Kathakaḷi also had influence of some intended and unintended practices of the Nāṭyaśāstra theories and off-current Nāṭyaśāstra theories. In ‘Kathakaḷi Raṅgam’ the oldest written documentation of Kathakaḷi history, Veṭṭam-Sampradāyam¹², Koṭṭayam-Sampradāyam¹³ & Kallaṭikoṭan-Sampradāyam¹⁴ of Kathakaḷi was more into nr̥tta than nāṭya, which later in Kapliṅṅāṭan-Sampradāyam¹⁵ and Kalluvaḷi-Sampradāyam¹⁶ of Kathakaḷi became more nāṭya than nr̥tta in presentation. Hence it has to be believed that the Taḷa system started developing throughout ages into systematic structure from Veṭṭam-Sampradāyam of Kathakaḷi itself.

The presentation and choreographic textures vary from artists to artists through the presentative medium, in which the artist skilfully blends the aesthetical beauty into self-attained or creative tastes. Revolution happens in every aspect on this earth, so does in the art form also. There are certain complicated factors in definite identity through examining in comparative studies of Keralite performing practices of Taḷa. The same Taḷa may have slightly different rhythmic structured practices in different performing forms in Kerala itself. As the relativity of time, Taḷa is

⁵ Vāyṭhārikaḷ - The verbally practices of rhythmic syllables mentioned as in Kathakaḷi.

⁶ Veśa-kaḷari – Kathakaḷi actor’s training classroom.

⁷ Kalāśaṅṅaḷuṭe –Vāyṭhārikaḷ - The verbally practices of rhythmic syllables of foot-steps or dance-patterns in Kathakaḷi.

⁸ Pravēśanaṅṅaḷuṭe-Vāyṭhārikaḷ - Rhythmic syllables for the ingress of the character or the opening situation of theatrical element in Kathakaḷi.

⁹ Kūṭiyāṭṭam - World’s oldest living theatre art form.

¹⁰ Kaḷaripayarr - Martial form of Kerala.

¹¹ Rāmanāṭṭam - First oldest style/school/gharāna of Kathakaḷi.

¹² Veṭṭam-Sampradāyam - Second Oldest style/school/gharāna of Kathakaḷi.

¹³ Koṭṭayam-Sampradāyam - Third oldest style/school/gharāna of Kathakaḷi.

¹⁴ Kallaṭikoṭan-Sampradāyam - Fourth oldest style/school/gharāna of Kathakaḷi.

¹⁵ Kapliṅṅāṭan-Sampradāyam - Fifth oldest style/school/gharāna of Kathakaḷi.

¹⁶ Kalluvaḷi-Sampradāyam - Sixth oldest style/school/gharāna of Kathakaḷi.

a method of measuring or stamping the time relative distance into certain units. The way to count the unit differs according to the presentation or the usage of Taḷa.

The style of stamping the rhythm is practiced by claps. There is only Saśabdaṁ¹⁷ and Nīśabdaṁ¹⁸ on staged Kathakaḷi practices. In Kathakaḷi Kaḷari-Sampradāyam¹⁹ only in Chempaṭa, Champa and Aṭanta there is a practice of Taḷa given with the count of fingers and wave of hand in air, which is only a practice given to the students for the better understanding of the units' count. There are some increased tempo rhythmic scales used in Kathakaḷi for some exceptional padaṁ²⁰, which do not come into the frame of the basic understanding of the rhythmic practices. There are some other rhythmic syllables used for foot-works and set of units for theatrical elements, which ultimately concludes in the area of basic Kathakaḷi Taḷa Sampradāyam. Though it is practiced and learned differently.

Kathakaḷi Taḷa Sampradāyangaḷ²¹

The Aṭistāna-Tāḷaṅṅaḷuṭe Rīti²²

Chempaṭa	04 mātra	08 mātra	16 mātra	32 mātra
Champa	05 mātra	10 mātra	20 mātra	40 mātra
Aṭanta	07 mātra	14 mātra	28 mātra	56 mātra
Pañchāri	03 mātra	06 mātra	12 mātra	
Muṛiṭanta	07 mātra	14 mātra		
Tṛpuṭa	07 mātra			

The symbols used for Taḷaṁ-piṭikkal²³ in mātra²⁴:

- ◉ = for more prominently clapped
- = for simple clap
- = without any clap/silence
- = for counting with finger

¹⁷ Saśabdaṁ - Hands' clap with sound.

¹⁸ Nīśabdaṁ - Hands without any clap or sound.

¹⁹ Kaḷari-Sampradāyam - Kathakaḷi classroom practice.

²⁰ Padaṁ - The first-person dialogue or soliloquy literature of Kathakaḷi.

²¹ Kathakaḷi Taḷa Sampradāyangaḷ - Rhythmic practices of Kathakaḷi.

²² Aṭistāna-Tāḷaṅṅaḷuṭe Rīti - The basic styles of rhythms.

²³ Taḷaṁ-piṭikkal - The structure of rhythm through clap patterns.

²⁴ Mātra - The count of unit as per beat.

Ō = wave of hand in air

Notations:

Chempata:

Chempata – 4 mātra

Unit count	1	2	3	4
Vāyttāri	ti	ti	tai	
Talaṁ-piṭikkal	•	•	◼	○

Chempata – 8 mātra

Rīti -1

Unit count	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Vāyttāri	tai	yam	ta	ta	ti		Ti	
Talaṁ-piṭikkal	•	○	○	○	•	○	•	○

Rīti - 2

Unit count	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Vāyttāri	ti	ti	ti	ti	ti	ti	Tai	
Talaṁ-piṭikkal	•	•	•	•	•	•	◼	○

Chempata – 16 mātra

Unit count	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
Vāyttāri	ti	ti	tai		ti	ti	tai		ti	ti	tai		ti	ti	tai	
Talaṁ-piṭikkal	•	•	◼	○	••	••	◼	○	•	•	◼•	•	•	••	◼	○

Chempata – 32 mātra

Rīti -1

Unit count	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
Vāyttāri	tai	yam	ta	ta	ti		ti		tai	yam	ta	ta	ti		ti	
Talaṁ-piṭikkal	•	○	○	○	•	○	•	○	•	○	○	○	•	•	•	•

Unit count	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32
Vāyttāri	tai	yam	ta	ta	ti		ti		tai	yam	ta	ta	ti		ti	
Talaṁ-piṭikkal	●	○	○	○	●	○	●	○	●	●	○	●	●	○	●	●

Rīti - 2

Unit count	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
Vāyttāri	tai	yam	ta	ta	ti		ti		tai	yam	ta	ta	ti		ti	
Talaṁ-piṭikkal	●	□	□	□	●	Ō	●	Ō	●	□	□	□	●	●	●	●
Unit count	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32
Vāyttāri	tai	yam	ta	ta	ti		ti		tai	yam	ta	ta	ti		ti	
Talaṁ-piṭikkal	●	□	□	□	●	Ō	●	Ō	●	●	○	●	●	○	●	●

Champa:

Champa - 5 mātra

Unit count	1	2	3	4	5
Vāyttāri	Nta ti Nta ta		ti ti		tai
Talaṁ-piṭikkal	● ● ● ●		● ●		●

Champa - 10 mātra

Rīti - 1

Unit count	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Vāyttāri	Nta	ti	nta	ta	kita	di	ti	titi	tai	
Talaṁ-piṭikkal	●	●	●	●	○	●	●	○	●	○

Rīti - 2

Unit count	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Vāyttāri	Tai	e e	nta	ti	na	ta	kita	dhi	ti	ti ti
Talaṁ-piṭikkal	●	Ō	●	□	□	□	●	Ō	●	Ō

Champa - 20 mātra

Rīti - 1

Unit count	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Vāyttāri	Tai		e	e	nta		ti		Nta a	a a
Talaṃ-piṭikkal	●	○	●	●	●	○	●	○	●●	●●
Unit count	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
Vāyttāri	Ta		ki	ta	dhi		ti		ti	ti
Talaṃ-piṭikkal	●	○	●	●	●	○	●	○	●	●

Rīti - 2

Unit count	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Vāyttāri	Tai	e e	e e	e e	nta		ti		nta	
Talaṃ-piṭikkal	●	●●	●●	●●	●	●●	●	●●	●	●●
Unit count	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
Vāyttāri	ta		ki	ta	dhi		ti		ti	ti
Talaṃ-piṭikkal	●	●●	●●	●●	●	●●	●	●●	●	●

Champa - 40 mātra

Rīti - 1

Unit count	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
Vāyttāri	tai	e	e	e	e	e	e	e	nda				ti				nda	a	a	a
Talaṃ-piṭikkal	●	○	○	○	●	○	●	○	●	○	○	○	●	○	○	○	●	●	●	●
Unit count	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33	34	35	36	37	38	39	40
Vāyttāri	ta				ki		ta		dhi	e	e	e	ti				ti		ti	
Talaṃ-piṭikkal	●	○	○	○	●	○	●	○	●	○	○	○	●	○	○	○	●	○	●	○

Rīti - 2

Unit count	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
Vāyttāri	tai	e	e	e	e	e	e	e	nda				ti				nda	a	a	a
Talaṃ-piṭikkal	●	□	□	□	●	○	●	○	●	□	□	□	●	□	□	□	●	●	●	●
Unit count	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33	34	35	36	37	38	39	40
Vāyttāri	ta				ki		ta		dhi	e	e	e	ti				ti		ti	

Talaṁ- piṭikkal	•	□	□	□	•	ō	•	ō	•	□	□	□	•	□	□	□	•	ō	•	ō
--------------------	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---

Atanta:

Aṭanta – 7 mātra

Unit count	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Vāyttāri	Nda ta	ta dheem	nda	ta ta	dheem	dheem	dheem
Talaṁ- piṭikkal	• •	• •	•	• •	•	•	•

Aṭanta – 14 mātra

Rīti - 1

Unit count	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Vāyttāri	nda	ta	ta	dheem		nda	ta	ta	dheem	ndata	dheem	ndata	tai	
Talaṁ- piṭikkal	•	•	•	•	○	•	•	•	•	• •	•	• •	•	○

Rīti – 2

Unit count	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Vāyttāri	Tai	e e	nta	ta	ta	dheem	e e	nta	ta	ta	dheem	ntata	dheem	ntata
Talaṁ- piṭikkal	•	ō	•	□	□	•	ō	•	□	□	•	ō	•	ō

Aṭanta – 28 mātra

Rīti - 1

Unit count	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Vāyttāri	Tai		e	e	nda		ta		ta a	a a	dheem		e	e
Talaṁ- piṭikkal	•	○	•	•	•	○	•	○	• •	• •	•	○	•	•
Unit count	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28
Vāyttāri	nda		ta		ta a	a a	dhe	em	nda	ta	dheem		nda	ta

Talaṁ- piṭikkal	•	○	•	○	••	••	•	•	•	•	••	•	•	••
--------------------	---	---	---	---	----	----	---	---	---	---	----	---	---	----

Rīti - 2

Unit count	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Vāyttāri	Tai	ee	ee	ee	nda		ta		ta		dheem	ee	ee	ee
Talaṁ- piṭikkal	•	••	••	••	•	••	•	••	•	••	•	••	••	••
Unit count	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28
Vāyttāri	nda		ta		ta		dhe	em	nda	ta	Dhe em		nda	ta
Talaṁ- piṭikkal	•	••	•	••	•	••	•	•	•	•	••	•	•	••

Aṭanta – 56 mātra

Rīti - 1

Un it co unt	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	
Vā y tt ā ri	T a i	e	e	e	e	e	e	e	n d a	a	a	a	t a	a	a	a	t a	a	a	a	d h e	e	e	e	e	e	e	e	m
Talaṁ- piṭi- kkal	•	○	○	○	•	○	•	○	•	○	○	○	•	○	○	○	•	•	•	•	•	○	○	○	•	○	•	○	
Un it co unt	29	30	31	32	33	34	35	36	37	38	39	40	41	42	43	44	45	46	47	48	49	50	51	52	53	54	55	56	
Vā y tt ā ri	n d a	a	a	a	t a	a	a	a	t a	a	a	a	d h e	e	e	e	m	n d a	t a	d h e	e	m			n d a	t a			
Talaṁ- piṭi- kkal	•	○	○	○	•	○	○	○	•	•	•	•	•	○	○	○	•	○	•	○	•	•	○	•	•	○	•	•	

Rīti – 2

Un it co unt	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28
-----------------------	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----

Vā y t t ā r i	T	e	e	e	e	e	e	e	n	a	a	a	t	a	a	a	t	a	a	a	d	e	e	e	e	e	e	e	m
Taḷ am - piṭi kk al	●	□	□	□	●	○	●	○	●	□	□	□	●	□	□	□	●	●	●	●	●	□	□	□	●	○	●	○	●
Un it co unt	2 9	3 0	3 1	3 2	3 3	3 4	3 5	3 6	3 7	3 8	3 9	4 0	4 1	4 2	4 3	4 4	4 5	4 6	4 7	4 8	4 9	5 0	5 1	5 2	5 3	5 4	5 5	5 6	
Vā y t t ā r i	n	a	a	a	t	a	a	a	t	a	a	a	d	e	e	e	m	d	a	d	e	m	n	d	a	t	a		
Taḷ am - piṭi kk al	●	□	□	□	●	□	□	□	●	●	●	●	●	□	□	□	●	○	●	○	●	●	○	●	○	●	●	●	

Pañchāri

Pañchāri – 3 mātra

Unit count	1	2	3
Vāyttāri	Tom	ndati	ndaka
Taḷam-piṭikkal	●	● ●	● ●

Pañchāri – 6 mātra

Unit count	1	2	3	4	5	6
Vāyttāri	To	om	nda	ti	nda	ka
Taḷam-piṭikkal	●	○	●	●	●	●

Pañchāri – 12 mātra

Unit count	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Vāyttāri	To	o	o	om	nda		ti		nda	a	ka	a
Taḷam-piṭikkal	●	○	○	○	●	○	●	○	●	○	●	○

Muriatanta

Muriatanta – 7 mātra

Unit count	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Vāyttāri	Tai		dhi	nda	kita	dhi	nta
Talaṁ-piṭikkal	• •	•	○	•	○	•	○

Muriatanta – 14 mātra

Unit count	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Vāyttāri	Tai					dhe	em	nta	ki	ta	dhe	em	ta	a
Talaṁ-piṭikkal	•	○	•	•	○	•	•	•	○	•	•	○	•	•

Trputa

Trputa – 7 mātra

Unit count	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Vāyttāri	Ti	tai		tai		tai	
Talaṁ-piṭikkal	•	•	○	•	○	•	○

These are only basic structures of the rhythmic scales in Kathakali Taḷa Sampradāyam. There are other rhythmic usages of some same scales in Kathakali. To understand or to receive the beauty of the scales, one has to indulge into Kathakali totally. The Taḷa Sampradāyam is meant to enhance the exquisiteness of the literature, dance and the movements to emotive level. Art is about to refine oneself; may it be through rules and regulations with blessings.

Acknowledgement:

This article got finished with the guidance and the blessings of Sri. Mohan Kumaran. P. (my Teacher & Senior Faculty), Associate Professor Visva-Bharati University and Sri. K. Soorianarayanan (my Ashan/Guru). Assistant Professor Kerala Kalamandalam. I thank them both for unconditioned love and support given to me. I thank C. M. Balasubramanian (my Ashan/Guru) and M. P. S. Namboodiri (my Ashan/Guru) and other Kerala Kalamandalam teachers for mentoring me in Kerala-Kalamandalam to think and work fearlessly in the blessed subject.

Bibliography:

- Kalamandalam. C Padmanaban Nair, 1980, *Kathakali Vesham*, First ed., Kerala Bhasha Institute.
- K.P.S. Menon, 1986, *Kathakali Rangam*, Second ed., The Mathrubhumi Printing & Publishing.

Webliography:

1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Up0k8qK3xtk&t=10s>
2. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0pCIB9ThwmQ&t=15s>
3. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W8uT9EGUyk8&t=28s>
4. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AqCSok2Rs0s>
5. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qJtghz5dt30>
6. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BasTrYZEE_8