

## Exploring the birth of Gandhi Koothu - Life history of Indian freedom struggle through shadow puppetry

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### *Abstract*

Tholpavakoothu is a traditional shadow puppetry form of Kerala which is performed in bhagavathy temples as part of the rituals in Central part of Kerala, the southern region of India. During the late 20<sup>th</sup> century this form has evolved from a temple based ritualistic performance to a contemporary form adapting secular themes, new narratives, and a uniquely different form of presentation. This paper will look at how Kavalappara Sangam (one the troupes of tholpavakoothu) envisioned and delivered a performance based on the life of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi or Mahatma Gandhi as the father of India is honorifically called *Mahātmā* (great souled). In Gandhi's image a puppet was made for Gandhi Koothu (Koothu is an ancient art where artist play songs, dance and music in retelling epics performed in Tamil) Kavalappara Sangam has been experimenting with non-traditional themes to preserve and make the art form relevant in the present era. Gandhi Koothu was directed by Padma Shri Ramachandra Pulavar, as a tribute to his father, Krishnan kutty Pulavar, who had ardently desired a change in the traditional character of the folk art by adopting the story of life of Gandhi.

This performance marked the start of something new and provided the continual energy and inspiration necessary to create subsequent contemporary works using tholpavakoothu.

The aesthetics that were employed in it provided a patriotic spirit, which helped it garner a lot of attention from a broad audience. Gandhi Koothu is a fascinating combination of Gandhi's life story and tradition that is brought forth via the designs of the puppets, the presentation, and the one-of-a-kind manner of the narrations. This is the very first show that actively sought out and encouraged women to take on leading positions in the creation and management of puppets.

Keywords: Gandhi Koothu, Tholpavakoothu, performative theatre space, Gandhi.

### **Introduction**

This traditional form of puppetry from Kerala is performed once a year during a number of temple festivals. These festivals can span anywhere from seven to fourteen, twenty-one to seventy-one days without taking a break, and the length of each performance can range anywhere from six to eight hours. Every night at around 10 o'clock, the customary performance begins, and it lasts until the early hours of the morning. Next to the temple dedicated to the goddess Bhagvathy or Bhadrakali, the permanent puppet-play theatre known as Koothumadam is

being erected. It is anticipated that the goddess would like the performance and will be happy to bestow her blessings on the believers.

The art form was first practised in Thanjavur, which is located in Tamilnadu. It is sometimes referred to as Bommakali or Bommayattam. Sanskrit is the primary language used in the tholpavakoothu poems, although there is also some Malayalam and Tamil portions as well. The scripture known as Kamba Ramayana is still being used as a guide for the performers. When an artist or puppeteer performs tholpavakoothu, they are awarded the title of Pulavar. This title refers to a scholar whose expertise lies in various knowledge systems such as Ayurveda, Tharka, Vedas, Shastras, and Itihasas, and who also maintains a social status to contribute to the welfare of society.

The title of Pulavar was a prestigious title that was bestowed upon individuals by monarchs in ages past. KoothuMadam is a stationary puppet playhouse that was created right outside the Bhagavathy temple and is solely used for shadow puppetry shows. This is one of the characteristics that sets tholpavakoothu apart from other traditional forms of puppetry in India.

The notion of BhadraKali - Darika culture is the basis for the story that explains why performances are held in front of Bhagavathy temples in Kerala. The Asuras (demons) were dealt a crushing defeat at the hands of the Devas (Gods) during the battle between their two factions. Following the drawn-out conflict, there were just four ladies still alive. They were referred to as Dhanapathy, Dheenapathy, Vanika, and Maneeshika respectively. One of them, Dhanapathy, who was honoured by the blessing bestowed by Brahma, became pregnant and gave birth to a son.

A long time ago, the creator, Brahma, bestowed his favour upon an asurasthri, also known as a demon, and because of his favour, she gave birth to a son who was given the name Darika. When this kid of the asuras (demons) grew up, he became so powerful that he became a persistent cause of annoyance to the gods as well as the Maharshi (sages) and the hermits; hence, they petitioned Lord Shiva for assistance. Shiva fashioned the goddess Bhadrakali from the third eye of his body in order to slay Darika. Bhadrakali and Darika engaged in a fierce combat, which ultimately resulted in the victory of the goddess Kali, who then took the severed head of Darika on her way back to the Kailansh Mountain. The people who surrounded them were applauding another fight, which was the war between Rama and Ravana. At that time, the goddess was a little egotistical about the fact that she had killed such a demon. She expressed all of this to her father, Shiva, while she was feeling quite down. I was unable to be present during the battle between Rama and Ravana. During that time, Lord Shiva remarked, "Don't worry, my beloved you go and sit in the sacred spot of Kerala, and you will be able to observe the Rama and Ravana fight through shadow puppets."

It is commonly held belief that the deity will be happy to see the presentation and will bless those who pray to her.

The epic poem known as the "Kamba Ramayana" serves as the inspiration for Tholpavakoothu, and the language that is used during its performance is a fusion of Tamil, Malayalam, and Sanskrit.

Koothumadam is a performative theatre venue that serves as the platform to demonstrate the lively counter-argument dialogue between the puppeteers, complete with arguments and counterarguments. As the puppet play is taking place, the puppet theatre is revered as a holy space and transformed into a sanctum sanctorum via the execution of several rituals and acts of worship.

The screen is illuminated by 21 lighted oil lamps constructed from coconut shells filled with castor oil and adorned with cotton wicks. These oil lights are set equally spaced apart on the wooden beam known as the Vilakku-madam behind the curtain. The length of the puppet theatre screen is 42 feet, and it is 8 feet tall and 12 feet wide. This puppet theatre has a screen that, from the inside, looks quite like the white screens used in current movie theatres.

The Puppets are made of deer skin and are held by a long stick in one hand, while the limbs are moved by a thinner stick held in the other hand of the puppeteer. The puppeteer is holding both sticks in one hand. There are 71 different characters in the complete version of the "Ramayana," and there are about 160 different puppets used to represent them. These puppets fall into four main categories: sitting, standing, sleeping, and fighting. In addition, there are puppets used to depict nature, battle scenes, and ceremonial parades.

In days gone by, deer skin was the material of choice for making puppets; however, because the utilization of deer skin is now illegal, puppet makers now utilise buffalo or goat skin instead. The puppet is hand-crafted by the puppeteer, who demonstrates his creative prowess by using iron chisels designed specifically for the purpose of creating puppets. Each design has its own distinct connotations, which contribute to the individuality of the character. The puppeteers employ organic dyes to give the puppets the colours they choose, and they produce those dyes themselves. The bark of the tree is stripped off and placed in a pot of boiling water for a significant amount of time. After being boiled, the coloured water will have its volume cut in half, and the resulting paint will be applied directly on the puppet as required. This has always been the recommended approach for making the natural hues.

## **Gandhi Koothu -**

The first contemporary production in the traditional puppetry style of Kerala has staged more than 220 performances till date. Across borders this production came as a spirit to search the soul of storytelling. Gandhi Koothu was an innovative experimentation which resulted in the ideal figures of Indian freedom fighters. Traditional puppeteers who are accustomed to retelling stories from the epic "Ramayana" are manipulating figures of Indian freedom fighters. Gandhi Koothu performance requires 80 puppets which were the figures of Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Vallabhai Patel, Abdul Kalam Azad, Kellappan, and several other freedom fighters, British officials, policemen, props like Spinning wheel, guns, and many animated war sequences.

This performance is sixty minutes long and the scene depicted with songs of where the life of common man and land of joy is well portrayed. The punctuality of Gandhi's life: how disciplined he was with time and ideology of vegetarianism, non-violence, is established in the performance. The play starts with song which is in Malayalam language.

“Tradition is not something constant but the product of a process of selection guided not by reason but by success. It changes but can rarely be deliberately changed. Cultural selection is not a rational process; it is not guided by, but it creates reason.” (Friedrich A. Hayek) Likewise the tradition of Tholpavakoothu is high bonds with the tradition and rituals associated with it. But with respect to time the practitioners and society admitted the changes to uplift the tradition with contemporary themes. All cultures change through time. No culture is static. However, most cultures are basically conservative in that they tend to resist change. Some resist more than others by enacting laws for the preservation and protection of traditional cultural patterns while putting up barriers to alien ideas and things.

Gandhi Koothu begins with a song which is entirely different from the narration of the tradition. When directing new contemporary production, the practitioners underwent continuous analysis and discussion to keep what elements from tradition to be introduced and what requires a change. Tholpavakoothu puppet tradition is having a unique style of narrating songs and meanings in rendering Kamba Ramayana story but here in the Gandhi Koothu puppet play the songs and narrations are changed to attract the common folks.

The material used for Gandhi Koothu puppets are goat skin whereas in tradition they were deer and buffalo skin. These goat skin gives more transparency to the puppet and gives a space to explore more colors with different styles of painting. Pattern used in these contemporary puppets are adapted from the traditional characters where they have specific semiotic meaning which makes the puppet figure into spiritual worship. But even if the same pattern is used in the Gandhi Koothu puppets, that semiotic meanings are missing and are enjoyed by the character and design nature. The instruments used for Gandhi Koothu puppet performance is Chenda (a cylindrical drum), Thalam (2-piece brass musical instrument) Conch (seashell horn), and Edakka (hourglass-shaped drum). Gandhi Koothu performance begins with the sound of the wind instrument conch which is the tradition.

Through this Gandhi Koothu puppet play the message of Gandhi through his life and freedom movements are well portrayed. The performance begins with a

In 60-minute show the scene depicts the following events and incidents:

1. Punctuality of Gandhi's life, live frugally, vegetarian, no engagement to other woman except his wife.

2. South African Pietermaritzburg railway station incident. Gandhi was thrown out from the train by the South African authority, even though he had a valid first-class coach ticket
3. Gandhi's wife Kasturbai Makhanji discussion, left with her newly born baby in India.
4. Gandhi gets down in Bombay shipper seaport
5. Chaowri chaowra incident (people in Gujarat burning police station)
6. Foreign dress rejection; Gandhi took off his Western suit replaced with dhoti.
7. Jaliyan Valabaha march. In jail murder to each other (massacre)
8. Salt march to Dandi or Salt Satyagraha: They reached Dandi on April 5th, 1930, and illegally produced salt from mud on the shore.
9. Freedom fighter from Kerala, Gandhi, Kellapan in Kerala
10. Wagan tragedy, killing of people inside train in Kerala
11. Bombay AICC conference Quit India moment (became President)
12. Live Punctuality against showing to British people
13. Guru Charan Singh hanging on the rope
14. Hindu-Muslim Partition
15. January 30, 1948 – Funeral as Gandhi was assassinated by Hindu nationalist Nathuram Godse.

The conversation with the director of Gandhi koothu: He got into this initiative to dedicate this performance in loving memory of his father Shri Krishnan Kutty Pulavar who had taken steps to bring the temple tradition to secondary contexts. The inspiration has come from the meeting organized by Sangeet Natak Akademi and Indira Gandhi National center for the Arts who to uplift the traditional puppeteers of India asked all state puppeteers to perform the story of Gandhi but in the National Shadow Puppetry Festival in 1996 at Dharmasthala Karnataka. Unfortunately, Kavalapara Sangam couldn't perform the Gandhi story because finding a script and making new characters was not possible at that moment. After seeing other puppeteer's performances, the troupe got new inspiration and during his father's last breath he said the words to upbringing this artform by directing novel themes. No established writer in Malayalam was willing to write a script for a Tholpavakoothu; since the medium was alien to them, they were apprehensive. Finally, novelist Nandan Edappal, agreed to write the script. After eight years of Krishan Kutty Pulavar's demise, the first contemporary shadow puppetry production in Kerala was released in 2008. That was a great start for him as a puppeteer and director. He has directed more than twenty productions through shadow puppetry.

This was a new journey for the artists in all manners by creating scripts, screenplay, puppet sketch, puppet making, manipulation, narrations, songs, sound mixing all those were coordinated and finally this new act took birth. Ramachandra remembers the contribution received from two research scholars from France named Evana and Megali who came to study tholpavakoothu was interested in the making of new contemporary story and corporated in discussions and the scholars have created a Gandhi standing puppet which is still using in the Gandhi Koothu performance.



The illusion and transition in each sequence was blended with traditional narration style and contemporary voice overs. The traditional oil lamp lights were used but gradually electric lighting sources were introduced to get a sharpened image of puppets. The material used for this contemporary production is done with goat skin whereas traditional puppets were made in deer and buffalo skin. The goat skin puppets were transparent, and the contemporary popular figures stand like clear outfits as they are portrayed in real life. This made the audience to understand about the craft and its ideology and nationalistic patriotic feeling is communicated through the traditional storytelling method.

Thus Gandhi Koothu became a revolutionary history to the shadow puppetry of Kerala. It breaks all social laws and rituals based on traditions. In all spheres of tradition, it made a huge impact to undergo radical changes. As Folklore is fluid and dynamic with respect to time and space it will change and stand for a social cause. The practice of engaging in real time life practice of ritual traditional story Ramayana at primary contexts and secondary contexts itself is a challenging practice. The period of postmodernism where modern technologies are emerging and ubiquity of contemporary screen and have also influenced the traditional shadow puppetry to depict a contemporary story with shadow puppetry. This direction of contemporary story in shadow puppetry requires huge observation of contemporary media practices like films and many documentaries. Gandhi (1982) by Richard Attenborough is a film which helped to structure the life story of Gandhi. Likewise, one major challenge the artists faced: people are highly stuck to new visual effects and technology so the tradition of narrating a contemporary story with traditional technique will stand odd. In portraying the puppets, the puppets intentionally used close sequences like the puppet of objects like India where close observation of Indian map is visible and a feel of close shot whereas walking for dandi-march sequences will be fitting the puppets into a wide frame.

### Conclusion

The philosophy of existentialism is adapted by the puppeteers in searching the way for sustaining their art practice and life. The gradual emergence of modern media platforms and technology has made the practitioners compete with their tradition. By foreseeing the danger in proliferating only traditional epic texts out of self-interest and questioning gave birth to contemporary production. By doing such a groundbreaking change for the existence of practices it gained widespread attention and a space for performing on secular stages.

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