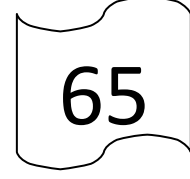


Saṅghakkai and its music



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Abstract

Saṅghakkali is a traditional ritual performing art form practiced by a sect of Kerala Brahmins called Nambūtiri -s. It is yet to gain attention outside their community and there is limited documentation on the subject. It may be assumed that Saṅghakkali has evolved from a ritual into a performing art by assimilating bits of other art forms. Through the ages it attained prominence among the Nambūtiri-s and was widely performed in temples, palaces and their residences throughout Kerala with variations in name and form. Lately however its popularity has drastically reduced and ‘the performance expertise in this art form is limited to one or two families’

The different aspects of this art form like history, its evolution, its current stature and the assimilation of music into it are delved upon in this work.

Key words: Saṅghakkali, Chāttirāṅgam, Nambūtiri, ritual, art, Kerala

Aim

This work attempts to throw light upon this unique art form of Kerala with special attention to

1. Nomenclature
2. Legend and history
3. Structure
4. Assimilation of various art forms
5. Music of Saṅghakkali
6. Significance and Present stature

Method of study and mechanics of writing

Predominantly a historical and descriptive approach has been used for this study. In the musical aspect a comparative approach has been attempted with Carnatic and Sōpānam styles of music.

Transliteration code from Sanskrit/Malayalam to English has been followed in this work. Non-English words are given in italics and meanings or explanations are provided in the endnotes wherever necessary. Certain popular non-English words and proper nouns may not be italicised.

Resource person

Limited published works related to the topic are referred to wherever possible, but the main source of information however is Brahmaśrī Poongad Narayanan Nambūtiri. He is perhaps the living reason and propagating force behind the survival of this ritual art form today. Since the art



form has constantly evolved and is now at the verge of extinction, the ritual practices and the fine details of performance are best documented in the minds of a handful of dedicated practitioners of this art like Poongad Nambūtiri.

1. Nomenclature

Though we have adopted its popular name ‘Saṅghakkaḷi’ as seen in the title , this art form is and has been called by various names at different places and during different times. A few such names and their significance are listed below.

- Saṅghakkaḷi – “since performed by members of *Saṅgham*” ‘Saṅgham’ means group and ‘Kaḷi’ means play , hence the name. The repertoires of this performing art distributed across Kerala were called ‘Saṅgham-s’
- Yātrakkaḷi – “A performing art of Kerala Nambūtiri-s involving elements like Nālupādam, Pāna (A music), satire and gesturing” here ‘Yātra’ means journey/ symbolic procession.
- Pānenkaḷi – “Pāna has reference to rāga (music) which was a necessary element of this art form.”

Apart from the above popular names , the art form has been called by various names , a few being variants of others . “śāstrakkaḷi, satrakkaḷi, cāttirakkaḷi, śāstrāṅkam, kṣātrāṅgam, śāstrāṅgam, pānakkāḷi,” to name a few.

There is also a geographic connotation attributed to the names . The name Yātrakkaḷi is used more in south Kerala , Saṅghakkaḷi in central Kerala and Pānenkaḷi is used towards north of Kerala.

2. Legend and history

There is a very popular legend associated with the origin of this art form. Seemingly it originated as a ritual with purpose which gradually gained social stature and reverence among the Nambūtiri community. There are slight variations among oral traditions of this legend but the central theme stands the same.

It is said that during the time of Buddhist advent in Kerala, the Nambūtiri-s who held strongly to the Vedic tradition felt threatened as the king himself started to patronise the Buddhists. When they informed the king about their insecurities, he ordered a debate and some tests between the two groups to decide winners. The troubled Nambūtiri-s gathered at Trikkāriyūr temple and prayed to the deity. Legend goes on that the divine form of a sage appeared before them and gave them a holy spell named ‘Nālupādam’ and asked them to chant the same at Trikkāriyūr temple for 41 days. This, he said, would assure their victory over the Buddhists. They did so and defeated the Buddhists in the king’s court and won back his support.

The victorious Nambūtiri-s were taken in procession or ‘yātra’ (hence the name Yātrakkaḷi). They continued the ritual of chanting the above mantra in Nambūtiri homes on special occasions. Thus the tradition came into being. It gradually gained popularity and specialised repertoires or ‘saṅgham’-s came to existence. The member families of these repertoires were called yātra-nambūtiri-s. 32 such repertoires are known to have prevailed across Kerala. Later on, various Arts of social relevance and contemporary satire got attached to it, to give it



an elaborate form. Nambūtiri *Illam*-s, palaces, Temples, all became venue to this art form.

There is no consensus regarding the period when this ritual started. Connected to the legends, there is almost a general consensus that it was during the reign of Perumal-s in Kerala.

3. Structure

As mentioned earlier , there are variations in the ritual and performance aspects of Saṅghakkaḷi among geographical areas . This work however concentrates on the general structure of the event as conducted by the resource person and his team.

- **Koṭṭicakampūkal**

This happens in the beginning of the event denoting ‘the official, ritual entrance of the *Cāttiran*-s’. The members of the repertoire are cordially welcomed into the household well in advance of the performance. The group includes actors, musicians, drummers, orators, cooks, make-up artistes and the like.

- **Kaṇamirikkal**

Slang for Gaṇamirikkal/ Yōgamirikkal - This is an informal meeting between the members of the repertoire and the household to plan the proceedings, delegate responsibilities and the like. However, today this part is reduced to the rendition of a few verses that are chanted at the end of the meeting.

- **Pātramkoṭṭiārkkal**

After a sumptuous meal, the empty unwashed *Cemb* vessel is placed on the ground, face down with a banana leaf placed over it. A few Devi hymns are chanted, accompanied by gestures and drumming on the vessel. This is deemed as a musical celebration of the cooks of the repertoire. Now a days, when performed in temples however, this part of the ritual is avoided and another element of the ritual called āyudhameḍupp is performed. Here, instead of the act of cooks, a character clad in red silk, sword in hand, depicting the Goddess, appears. This is now being performed in the famous Kodungallur Devi Temple.

- **Nālpādādam**

This is perhaps the most integral part of the whole act. The onset of this art form itself is attributed to this ritual. Now a days, this element alone is performed at most places, as a simplified symbolic replica of the whole elaborate Saṅghakkaḷi . Therefore, the word Nālpādādam has even become synonymous to Saṅghakkaḷi .

A lamp is lit with four wicks towards the four directions. Four performers take steps around the lamp chanting the holy Nālpādādam *śloka*. It is performed as an act to cleanse sins and to realise one’s wishes and prayers.

- **Kariślōkam**



As suggested by the name, this element indicates the feast. The repertoire led by its leader sits for meal and certain serving instructions, *ślōka*-s, war cries, certain comments and the like are chanted by the artistes to entertain the gathering. This session is not exactly time bound and is informal in nature.

Tōṇippāṭṭu

Literally meaning ‘boat-song’, the artistes enter the arena singing this song. The tune is quite different from the usual boat songs seen in Kerala boat races. It is an element that helps gather the whole crowd around the centre stage.

- **Pāna**

This is an elaborate sequence of songs on various deities starting with lord Gaṇeśa. It also involves rituals like poli, kurattiyāṭṭam, baliyuzhiccil, Pānapaṛi and the advent of characters like kaṇḍappan. This elaborate ritual however is performed now in a very miniature version.

- **Other elements**

The course of events in Saṅghakkaḷi involves many other rituals like āyudhamedupp , pūkkulamāla and vaṭṭamirupp to name a few and includes the entry of different characters like Itṭikkaṇḍappan, marattēṅḡoḍan, muttaśśi, viḍḍhi and the like. Many satirical characters have been added during different stages of development of the art form to match the ethos of contemporary society.

- **Dhanāśi**

This is the name of the concluding part of Saṅghakkaḷi where the act resembles Kathakkaḷi (classical theatre form of Kerala) in a way. At the end of the act, a *śloka* is rendered in Madhyamāvati or Puṇanīru rāga and the drummers perform a *Kalāśam*

4. Assimilation of various art forms

While observing the progression of ritual events and performances in Saṅghakkaḷi , one can notice that it is actually a garland of various art forms that existed and still does, in Kerala. A few art forms that find prominence in Saṅghakkaḷi are listed below.

1. Sōpāna Saṅgītam
2. Carnatic Music
3. Kathakkaḷi
4. Cuṭṭi
5. Kūttu
6. Pāṭhakam
7. Tiruvātirakkaḷi
8. Pāna
9. Kaḷarippayaṭṭu
10. Vañcippāṭṭu/Tōṇippāṭṭu



11. Dēhaṇḍam (Culinary Art)
12. Mēḷa kala (percussion)
13. Camayam (stage setting and props)

5. Music in Saṅghakkaḷi

Different musical attributes were gradually attached to this ritual performance as it matured into becoming an art form. There is not much evidence for the exact timeline of this transformation. So observations made in this study is limited to the current version of this art form.

In Saṅghakkaḷi, the use of music in a formal way (attribution of specific rāga -s and tāḷa -s) is not strictly rule bound. There are segments like nālupādam where there is no rāga specification and no instruments involved. There is chorus singing with vāyttāri in tōṇippāṭṭu. “A formal affiliation to rāga based singing has the precedence of only a few generations as we now know”.

A flexible choice of Carnatic rāga -s like kāmboji , ānandabhairavi, śankarābharaṇam, dhanyāsi, sāveri, bhairavi and madhyamāvati appear in Saṅghakkaḷi . A few raga -s like puṛaṇīru , pāḍi, khaṇḍāram and dukha khaṇḍāram are also seen. These rāga-s have affiliation to the sōpānam style of music.

Tāḷam-s like muṛiyāṭanta , aṭanta, pañcāri and aṭa and single beat singing in tiśram and caturaśram are used . Instruments like ceṇḍa , maddaḷam and ilattāḷam are the accompaniments . Singular as well as chorus singing is used in appropriate segments.

6. Significance and Present stature

Being a ritual which later developed into an art form, its ritualistic significance dominates over the artistic value. The performances too are part of very few Kerala temple rituals and during some of the ṣoḍaśa samskāra-s of nambūtiri-s. Since the decline of social and financial stature of nambūtiri-s the maintenance of the repertoires (saṅgham-s) became impossible. In the present condition, this art form seems to be on the verge of extinction . Only one repertoire assembled by Poongad Narayanan Nambūtiri (called kizhiviri cāttirasaṅgham) seems to be fully active now and they scarcely get invited to do the full version of Saṅghakkaḷi.

The prevalent version of Saṅghakkaḷi takes about a dozen artistes and almost half a day to perform. Earlier though, it was an elaborate two day event. A satirical character called ‘viḍḍhi’ was crafted by this repertoire.

Concluding remarks

The elements in Saṅghakkaḷi like āyudhameḍupp, pōru-viḷi and the like indicate that there was an era when despite priest-hood, the nambūtiri-s once took to arms and one segment among them were trained in kaḷarippayāṭṭu which is Kerala’s indigenous martial arts.

The incidental advent of this ritual during a time of threat to the Vedic culture in Kerala, this art form continued to be a binding agent in the social sphere of the nambūtiri-s and was a platform for display of their valour and multiple talent. Since nambūtiri-s were the primary custodians of Vedic and temple culture in Kerala, this art form has played a significant part in the preservation of these.



Looking at the future of this art form, its transition from a caste based event to a temple based and community based event seems to be an inevitable choice for its survival.

Integration of experts from the various arts appearing in Saṅghakkaḷi and involving them in performances will help the art from to cross its barriers across social sects.

More research on the script, theatre and music is warranted on this topic since this is an art form that has passed through changing social situations and absorbing values from them.

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