

Sources of Kūttu in the Chola Period: References from Kamba Rāmāyaṇam

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Abstract

This paper examines references to *kūttu*, dance, and theatrical performance in Kambar's twelfth-century *Irāmāvatāram* (*Kamba Rāmāyaṇam*) as important sources for understanding Chola-period performance culture. Although primarily celebrated as a literary and devotional epic, the *Kamba Rāmāyaṇam* preserves valuable evidence relating to dance traditions, musical ensembles, ritual performances, and court entertainment prevalent during the Chola age. Kambar makes direct references to *makaḷir āṭal* accompanied by *muḷavu* and *yāl* in the *Bāla Kāṇḍam*, while the *Sundara Kāṇḍam* describes *kūttiyar* dancing *tōl vaḷaittu* with expressive bodily movement and stylized gestures. Particularly significant is the *Nikumbhilā Yāga* episode in the *Yuddha Kāṇḍam*, which details the presence of the *naṭṭuvan*, *tāḷam*, musicians, and *kūttiyar*, culminating in the description of Indrajit as *nāṭṭiya vēḷvi nāyakan*, "lord of the dance-sacrifice." These references indicate that dance in the Chola period functioned not merely as entertainment but also as an integral component of ritual and courtly culture. Through textual analysis, this study establishes the *Kamba Rāmāyaṇam* as an important literary source for reconstructing the performance traditions, musical practices, and aesthetic culture of the Chola period.

Keywords: *Kamba Rāmāyaṇam*, *Kūttu*, *Nāṭṭiyam*, *Chola Period*, *Dance Tradition*, *Temple Performance*, *Tamil Theatre*

Introduction

Kambar's *Irāmāvatāram*, popularly known as the *Kamba Rāmāyaṇam*, occupies a prominent position in Tamil literary history as one of the greatest retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Composed during the twelfth century in the cultural milieu of the Chola period, the text reflects not only literary brilliance but also the artistic and social environment of medieval Tamil society. Beyond its devotional and poetic dimensions, the epic contains numerous references to dance, music, theatre, and ritual performance, making it a valuable source for the study of Chola-period performing arts.

The Chola age witnessed extensive royal and temple patronage of artistic traditions. Dance and music formed an essential part of temple ritual, royal celebrations, and public festivals. Inscriptions from the Chola period record the presence of *kūttiyar*, musicians, drummers, and temple dancers attached to major temples, indicating the institutional importance of performance traditions. Within this broader cultural context, Kambar's literary descriptions gain historical significance, as they preserve details concerning the practice and social function of *kūttu* during the period.

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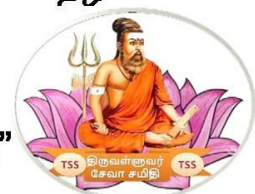
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References to dance in the *Kamba Rāmāyaṇam* appear across a variety of narrative settings, including royal courts, festive occasions, celestial assemblies, and ritual performances. In the *Bāla Kāṇḍam*, Ayodhyā is portrayed as a city where *kūttu* and *nāṭakam* are performed regularly, with designated spaces for artistic presentation. The *Ayōtti Kāṇḍam* describes women dancing to the accompaniment of *muḻavu*, *yāl*, and *kuḻal*, suggesting the existence of a sophisticated musical ensemble. In the *Kiṣkindhā Kāṇḍam*, Tārā and the women of Kiṣkindhā are represented as skilled in both *āṭal* and *pāṭal*, indicating that artistic accomplishment formed part of royal culture. Similarly, the *Sundara Kāṇḍam* presents vivid descriptions of dancers employing expressive gestures and stylized bodily movements.

Among the most significant passages is the Nikumbhilā Yāga sequence in the *Yuddha Kāṇḍam*. Here, Kambar provides detailed references to the *naṭṭuvan*, rhythmic accompaniment, percussion instruments, singers, and *kūttiyar* performing within a ritual setting. The description of Indrajit as *nāṭṭiya vēḷvi nāyakaṇ* (“lord of the dance-sacrifice”) demonstrates the close relationship between ritual and performance in Chola culture. Such passages reveal that dance functioned not only as courtly entertainment but also as an integral element of sacred and ceremonial practice.

The *Kamba Rāmāyaṇam* therefore serves as an important literary source for reconstructing the cultural history of *kūttu* during the Chola period. Its descriptions preserve evidence of performance spaces, musical instruments, performers, orchestral arrangements, and ritual contexts associated with dance traditions. Through an examination of these references, this study seeks to understand how Kambar’s epic reflects the broader artistic environment of medieval Tamil society and contributes to the historical understanding of Tamil performance traditions.

Objectives of the Study

1. To identify references to dance and theatrical traditions in the *Kamba Rāmāyaṇam*.
2. To analyze Kambar’s use of performance terminology associated with the *kūttu* tradition.
3. To compare the significance of dance as in *Nāṭyaśāstra* tradition.
4. To establish the *Kamba Rāmāyaṇam* as a source for understanding Chola-period performance culture.

Methodology

The study adopts a textual and comparative methodology. Selected verses from different *kāṇḍams* of the *Kamba Rāmāyaṇam* are analyzed in relation to concepts found in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. Primary references are drawn from the Annamalai University Critical Edition of the *Irāmāvatāram*. Secondary sources on Tamil performance traditions, Bharatanatyam, and medieval Tamil literature are also consulted.

References to Dance in *Kamba Rāmāyaṇam*

Dance references in the *Kamba Rāmāyaṇam* occur in descriptions of court life, festivals, ritual ceremonies, celestial imagery, and *śṛṅgāra*-oriented episodes. These passages collectively reveal the richness of Chola-period performance culture and the centrality of *kūttu* within Tamil artistic life.

窗体底端

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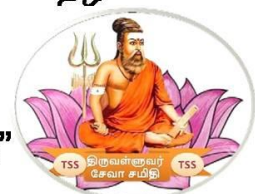
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Dance Forms and Occasions

1. *Bāla Kāṇḍam* – Description of Ayodhyā

Kambar describes Ayodhyā as a city where *kūttus* and *nāṭakams* are performed daily.

Kāṇḍam:

Bāla

Kāṇḍam

Paṭalam: Nagarap Paṭalam

The verses refer to women skilled in *nāṭṭiyam* and *āṭal*, as well as to halls constructed for performances. This reflects the Chola-period patronage of temple and court dance traditions.

Bāla Kāṇḍam – Nagarap Paṭalam [Description of Ayodhyā]

Context:

Kambar portrays Ayodhyā as a city where performance forms an integral part of everyday life. This description reflects the court culture of the Chola period.

Āṭal pāṭal azhagin mikka

Māṭa māḷigai maruṅgin yāṇṭum

Nāṭakam nayandu nāḷum nikazhtuvār

Vēḍam punaindu viḷaiyāṭum veḷḷidai

Translation:

Everywhere, beside the lofty and beautiful mansions,
People delighted in performing dramas every day;
Wearing costumes, they enacted plays in the open spaces,
While dance and music flourished throughout the city.

Analysis

Āṭal refers to dance, while *nāṭakam* refers to drama. The passage indicates the existence of institutionalized performance traditions in Ayodhyā.

2. *Ayōtti Kāṇḍam* – Daśaratha's Court

During the celebrations for Rāma's coronation, Kambar refers to *makalir āṭal*—dance performances by women accompanied by the *yāl*, *kuḷal*, and *muḷavu*.

Reference: *Ayōtti Kāṇḍam*, *Maṇimaguda Paṭalam*

The description also suggests the use of *abhinaya* through expressive eye and hand movements, indicating a codified dance tradition.

Ayōtti Kāṇḍam – Maṇimaguda Paṭalam [Rāma's Coronation Preparations]

Context:

This passage describes the festive celebrations in Daśaratha's palace during the preparations for Rāma's coronation.

Muḷavum yālum kuḷalum muraḷa

Maḷalai meṇ col makalir āṭa

Kaḷal koḷ maṇṇar kaṇkaḷ kaḷippa

Elil koḷ vīthi iravum pakalum

Translation:

As the drums, *yāl*, and flutes resounded, Women with sweet and gentle voices danced;
The eyes of the ankleted kings rejoiced, Along the beautiful streets, both night and day.

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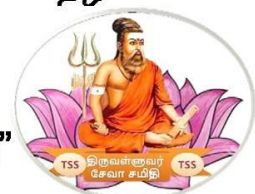
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Analysis

Makalir āṭa means “women danced.” The mention of the *muḷavu* drum highlights the close relationship between dance and musical accompaniment.

3. Kiṣkindhā Kāṇḍam – Vāli’s Court

Tārā and the other women of Kiṣkindhā are described as being skilled in *āṭal* (dance) and *pāṭal* (music).

Reference: *Kiṣkindhā Kāṇḍam, Vāli Vadhaip Paṭalam*

This passage presents dance as an important aspect of Vānara royal culture, and not merely as a feature of human courts.

Kiṣkindhā Kāṇḍam – Vāli Vadhaip Paṭalam [Vāli’s Court]

Context:

Tārā and the other Vānara women are portrayed as accomplished artists skilled in music, dance, and refined expression.

Pāṭal vallār āṭal vallār

Ūḍal tīrkkum uraiyum vallār

Kūṭal iṇbam kuṛippin uṇarvār

Māṭak kūṭam maruṅgin uḷḷār

Translation:

Skilled in song and skilled in dance, Skilled in speech that resolves lovers’ quarrels, Able to perceive the joy of union through mere hints — Such women dwelt within the palace halls.

Analysis

Āṭal vallār means “those skilled in dance.” The passage shows that dance was regarded as a refined courtly accomplishment even among the Vānaras.

4. Sundara Kāṇḍam – Description of Lankā

Hanumān witnesses Rākṣasa women dancing in Rāvaṇa’s palace with movements resembling *nṛtta hastas*.

Reference: *Sundara Kāṇḍam, Ūr Thedu Paṭalam*

Kambar uses expressions such as *tōḷ vaḷaittu āṭal* (“dancing with curved shoulders”) and *kaḍai kaṇ pārvai* (“side-long glances”), which belong to the vocabulary of *nṛtta hasta* and *abhinaya* respectively.

Sundara Kāṇḍam – Ūr Thedu Paṭalam [Hanumān in Lankā]

Context:

Hanumān observes the Rākṣasa women dancing within Rāvaṇa’s palace.

Transliteration:

Tōḷ vaḷaittu āṭum tōkai maṭavār

Kāḷai kaṇ pārvai kaḍai kaṇ kuṛippāl

Vāḷ viḷi miṇṇa vadaṇam malara

Nīḷ nakar māṭam nīraindu kaḷippa

Translation:

Peacock-like women danced with gracefully curved shoulders, Casting expressive side-long

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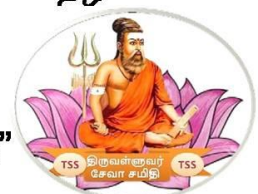
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glances, Their sword-like eyes flashing and faces blooming,
Filling the lofty palace with delight.

Analysis

Tōḷ vaḷaittu āṭum refers to dancing with curved shoulders, while *kaḍai kaṇ* denotes the side-long glance used in expressive dance. These are characteristic elements of *abhinaya* vocabulary found in the *Natyashastra*.

5. Yuddha Kāṇḍam – Indrajit’s Yāga

Before the battle, *kūttiyars* and *naṭṭuvars* perform in order to please the deities.

Reference: *Yuddha Kāṇḍam*, *Indrajit Vadhaip Paṭalam*

This passage demonstrates the close connection between ritual and performance.

Yuddha Kāṇḍam – Indrajit Vadhaip Paṭalam [Nikumbhilā Yāga]

Context:

Indrajit performs a secret *yāga* to gain invincibility. Kambar describes the musicians and dancers who perform during the ritual to invoke and please the deities.

Muḷavu iyamba muracu adira muraḷ muraḷ niṇṇu

Eḷu perum pāṇar icai pāṭa yāloṭum

Kuḷal vimma kūttiyar kulavum tōḷ vaḷaittu

Aḷagu eḷa āṇṇar ari vēḷvic cālaiyul

Translation:

As the drums resounded and the war-drums thundered in measured order,
The great bards sang music accompanied by the *yāl*,
While the flutes swelled — the *kūttiyars*, with gracefully curved shoulders,
Danced beautifully within the rare sacrificial hall.

Analysis

1. *Kūttiyar* refers to professional female dancers. The term appears in Chola inscriptions to denote temple and court dancers, who later became associated with the *devadāsī* tradition.
2. *Tōḷ vaḷaittu* (“with curved shoulders”) refers to *nrtta hasta* comparable to the *kaiśiki vṛtti* described in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*.
3. *Muḷavu*, *muracu*, *yāl*, and *kuḷal* together indicate a complete orchestral ensemble consisting of barrel drums, war-drums, lute, and flute. This suggests that dance performance was accompanied by both *vādyam* and *naṭṭuvanār* support.
4. *Ari vēḷvic cālai* (“rare sacrificial hall”) indicates that dance formed part of the *yāga* itself rather than functioning merely as entertainment. This parallels the *Nāṭyaśāstra* concept of *nāṭya* as a sacred *yajña*.

This verse from the *Yuddha Kāṇḍam* describes Indrajit’s *Nikumbhilā Yāga*, where Kambar explicitly mentions dancers, musicians, and ritual performance. It is one of the clearest references to dance within a ritual context in the Kamba *Ramayanam*.

6. Bāla Kāṇḍam – Ahalyaip Paṭalam: Ūrvasī and Celestial Dance

In the *Ahalyaip Paṭalam* of the *Bāla Kāṇḍam*, Kambar refers to Ūrvasī’s dance in Indra’s court. The poet draws upon *Nāṭyaśāstra*-based ideas of the *apsaras* as ideal dancers, thereby

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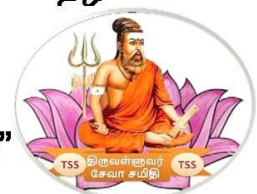
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establishing an aesthetic standard of divine beauty and performance.

Bāla Kāṇḍam – Ahalyaṇ Paṭalam [Ūrvasi Reference]

Context:

Kambar compares Ahalyā to the celestial dancer Ūrvasi in order to emphasize her divine beauty and grace.

Indiraṇ sabaiyil eḷil nalam kāṭṭi

Andara vāṇattu arambai āṭum

Sundara āṭal tōṛram koṇṭāl

Mandira vaḍiviṇ maṅgai ivaḷē

Translation:

Displaying beauty in Indra’s court, Like the celestial nymph dancing in the heavens, She possessed the appearance of that beautiful dance; This woman was of enchanting, mantra-like form.

Analysis

Arambai āṭum sundara āṭal refers to the beautiful dance of the celestial *apsaras*. The comparison links human beauty and grace with divine dance traditions.

References to Tāla and Naṭṭuvan

The following verses from the *Yuddha Kāṇḍam – Indrajit Vadhaṇ Paṭalam* establish the performance setting of the Nikumbhilā Yāga. These verses describe the *naṭṭuvan* (conductor), the *tāla* structure, and the ritual arrangement before the *kūttiyar* begin dancing.

1. Setting up the Yāga and the Musicians

Mandira vidiyṇ māṇpuḍai vēḷvi

Tandiram muraiyāl tāṇ iyarralurrāṇ

Andara vicumpiṇ amararum aṇca

Nandu naṇ muḷavam nāṭṭiya naṭṭuvan

Translation:

He began to perform the noble sacrifice. According to the rules of mantra and tantra, Causing even the celestials in the heavens to tremble in fear — The *naṭṭuvan* arranged the fine and resonant drums.

Analysis

1. *Naṭṭuvan* refers to the conductor or cymbalist who directs the dance performance. This role corresponds to the *naṭṭuvanār* in present-day Bharatanatyam.
2. *Nāṭṭiya* literally means “arranged for dance,” indicating that *nāṭṭiyam* formed an integral part of the *yāga* preparations.

Muḷavam refers to the barrel drum, which functioned as a principal *laya* instrument in dance performance.

2. Tāla and Vocal Arrangement

Tālam tappātu taṇṇumai taḍavi

Kōlam koḷ kuralāl gītam icaippār

Nīlam koḷ niraiyāl ninṇanar pāṇar

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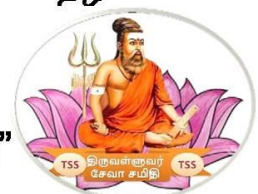
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Vāḷ amar vēḷvi maṇḍapam eṇḡum

Translation:

Without missing the *tāḷa*, striking the *taṇṇumai* drum, The singers rendered *gītams* in beautifully modulated voices; The *pāṇar* stood in long rows. Throughout the war-like sacrificial hall.

Analysis

1. *Tāḷam tappātu* (“without missing the *tāḷa*”) indicates metrical precision and a codified rhythmic structure.
2. *Taṇṇumai* (mentioned in *Silappadikaram*) refers to another percussion instrument used alongside the *muḷavu*, suggesting a multi-percussion ensemble.
3. *Pāṇar* were professional bards and singers. During the Chola period, the *pāṇar* and *kūṭṭiyar* together formed the core of temple performance troupes.
4. *Nīlam koḷ niraīyāl* (“standing in long rows”) suggests a formal *arangam* arrangement similar to a structured dance orchestra.

3.The Dance

The third verse presents the actual dance performance of the *kūṭṭiyar* within the ritual space of the *Nikumbhilā Yāga*. Unlike the preceding verses, which focus on the preparation of the performance arena, the arrangement of musicians, and the establishment of rhythmic order, this verse shifts attention to the dancers themselves. Kambar vividly portrays the integration of music, movement, and ritual, revealing the central role of dance within the sacrificial ceremony.

Muḷavu iyamba muracu adira murai murai niṇṇu

Eḷu perum pāṇar icai pāṭa yāḷoṭum

Kuḷal vimma kūṭṭiyar kulavum tōḷ vaḷaittu

Aḷagu eḷa āṭiṇar ari vēḷvic cālaiyuḷ

Translation:

As the *muḷavu* resounded and the war-drums thundered in measured order, The great *pāṇar* sang melodious songs accompanied by the *yāḷ*; While the flutes swelled in sound, the *kūṭṭiyar*, with gracefully curved shoulders, Danced beautifully within the sacred sacrificial hall.

Analysis

This verse offers one of the clearest descriptions of an organized dance performance in the *Kamba Rāmāyaṇam*. Kambar presents a complete performance ensemble consisting of percussionists, vocalists, instrumentalists, and dancers functioning together within a ritual setting.

The phrase “*tōḷ vaḷaittu āṭiṇar*” (“they danced with curved shoulders”) is particularly significant. The description suggests stylized bodily movement rather than ordinary physical action. The emphasis on shoulder movement indicates a codified dance technique in which the upper body contributes to expressive communication. Such descriptions reveal Kambar’s familiarity with the aesthetics of performance and bodily expression.

The verse also highlights the close relationship between dance and music. The simultaneous mention of the *muḷavu*, *muracu*, *yāḷ*, and *kuḷal* demonstrates the presence of a full musical ensemble accompanying the dancers. The performance is therefore presented not as an isolated

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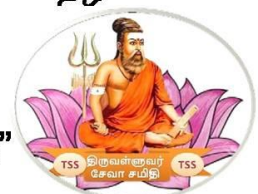
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dance but as an integrated artistic production combining rhythm, melody, song, and movement. The setting of the performance is equally important. The dancers perform within the “**ari vēl̥vic cālai**” (sacrificial hall), indicating that dance formed part of the ritual proceedings. The performance serves a ceremonial function within the yāga, suggesting that artistic expression was considered an appropriate offering in sacred contexts. This passage therefore provides valuable evidence for the ritual dimension of *kūttu* during the Chola period.

Dance Note

1. **Kūttiyar** refers to professional female dancers attached to temples and courts.
2. **Tōl̥ valaittu āṭṭinar** (“danced with curved shoulders”) indicates stylized and expressive movement.
3. The combination of **mulavu**, **muracu**, **yāl̥**, and **kul̥al** reveals a sophisticated orchestral accompaniment.
4. The performance takes place within a **vēl̥vi cālai** (sacrificial hall), demonstrating the integration of dance and ritual practice.
5. Together with the preceding verses on the *naṭṭuvan̥* and *tālam*, this verse confirms the existence of a structured performance tradition involving musicians, singers, rhythmic accompaniment, and trained dancers.

Citation:

Kambar, *Irāmāvatāram*, *Yuddha Kāṇḍam*, *Indrajit Vadhaip Paṭalam*, verse 78, Annamalai University Critical Edition, Vol. 6, 1968, p. 412.

Taken together, these verses demonstrate that Kambar was familiar with a fully developed dance performance system consisting of a conductor, percussion ensemble, vocal accompaniment, and dance performed within a ritual setting. This sequence constitutes one of the strongest textual examples of “temple dance as ritual” in the Kamba Ramayanam.

Citation:

Kambar. *Irāmāvatāram*, *Yuddha Kāṇḍam*, *Indrajit Vadhaip Paṭalam*, verses 76–78. Annamalai University Critical Edition, Vol. 6, 1968, pp. 411–412.

The three verses from the *Yuddha Kāṇḍam*—*Indrajit Vadhaip Paṭalam*—collectively present a complete picture of an organized performance tradition. The first verse, “*naṭṭuvan̥ nāṭṭiya*”, describes the *naṭṭuvan̥* arranging the drums and preparing the performance space, a function comparable to the *pūrvaraṅga* tradition, which involves the ceremonial preparation of the *araṅgam* before a performance. The second verse, with references to *tālam*, *taṇṇumai*, and *pāṇar*, introduces the musical ensemble and rhythmic framework, corresponding to the concept of *vādyavṛnda*—the organized orchestra consisting of percussionists, singers, and instrumentalists that supports a dance presentation. The third verse, “*kūttiyar tōl̥ valaittu āṭṭinar*”, focuses on the dancers themselves, portraying the *kūttiyar* performing with stylized bodily movements and expressive gestures. The description of curved shoulders and graceful movement suggests a sophisticated performance vocabulary associated with expressive dance traditions. When examined together, these three verses reveal that Kambar was familiar with a highly developed performance system comprising a conductor (*naṭṭuvan̥*), rhythmic accompaniment,

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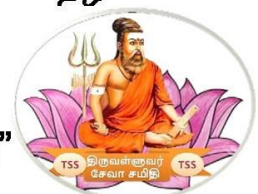
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vocal and instrumental music, and trained dancers performing within a ritual context. The sequence demonstrates that dance in the *Kamba Rāmāyaṇam* functioned not merely as entertainment but as an integral component of sacred ceremony, making it one of the strongest literary examples of the close relationship between ritual and performance in the cultural milieu of the Chola period.

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Uttara Kāṇḍam – Lavakuśa Paṭalam [Lava and Kuśa Perform the Rāmāyaṇa]

This is the *Uttara Kāṇḍam* verse in which Kambar explicitly describes *kūttu* as a “*navarasa nāṭakam*” (“drama of the nine rasas”). This is one of the clearest statements in the *Kamba Ramayanam* linking dance-drama to the complete *rasa* system described in the *Natyashastra*.

Context:

Sage Vālmīki trains Lava and Kuśa to sing and recite the *Rāmāyaṇa*. They perform it as *kūttu* in Rāma’s court, and Kambar describes the performance in theatrical terms.

Navarasa nāṭakak kūttiṇ nalam elām

Avar icaip pāṭalil amaintu tōṇṛiṭa

Kavari vīciya kāvalaṇ avaiyil

Tavar muṇivar taru cēyar pāṭiṇār

Translation:

All the excellence of the *kūttu*, which was a *nāṭaka* embodying the nine *rasas*, Manifested through their musical rendering; In the royal court where fans were waved, The sons bestowed by the great sage performed.

The verse describing Lava and Kuśa’s performance is significant because it reveals Kambar’s understanding of performance as a comprehensive aesthetic experience. The phrase “*navarasa*” indicates awareness of the full spectrum of emotional expression embodied in dramatic art, extending beyond individual sentiments such as *śṛṅgāra* and *karuṇa* to encompass the complete range of human emotions. By employing the expression “*nāṭakak kūttu*,” Kambar brings together the Tamil concept of *kūttu* and the broader tradition of dramatic performance, suggesting that the two were understood as related theatrical forms. The reference to “*icaip pāṭal*” (musical rendering) highlights the inseparable relationship between music and performance, indicating a presentation that integrated song, instrumental accompaniment, and dance. The setting of the performance in the “*kāvalaṇ avai*” (royal court) points to an established court-performance tradition in which dramatic presentations were patronized and appreciated by rulers and learned audiences. Furthermore, the description of Lava and Kuśa as “*cēyar*” (sons) evokes the tradition of bardic performers who transmitted epic narratives through recitation and enactment. Collectively, these elements demonstrate that Kambar conceived the *Rāmāyaṇa* not merely as a literary text to be read, but as a performative work intended to be sung, enacted, and experienced before an audience. The phrase “*navarasa nāṭakak kūttu*” therefore encapsulates Kambar’s vision of the epic as a complete aesthetic experience conveyed through performance, framing the *Kamba Rāmāyaṇam* itself as a theatrical and performative text.

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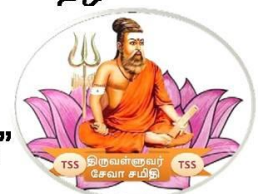
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Key

The phrase *navarasa nāṭakak kūttu* represents Kambar's conception of the epic itself as a complete *rasa* experience conveyed through performance. This interpretation frames the entire *Kamba Rāmāyaṇam* as a performative and theatrical text.

Yuddha Kāṇḍam – Indrajit Vadhaip Paṭalam [Indrajit as the Master of the Dance-Sacrifice]

This verse from the *Yuddha Kāṇḍam – Indrajit Vadhaip Paṭalam* is one in which Kambar directly refers to Indrajit as the master of the “*nāṭṭiya vēḷvi*” (“dance-sacrifice”). This is one of the strongest links Kambar establishes between *nāṭṭiyam* and *yajña*.

Context:

Just before Lakṣmaṇa interrupts the *yāga*, Kambar describes Indrajit's mastery and expertise. The poet equates his ritual accomplishment with mastery over dance and performance.

Marai vaḷi vēḷvi vallāṇ māyam vallāṇ

Nirai vaḷi nīti nilaimai vallāṇ

Kuraivu il kūttiṇ kuṇaṅkaḷ vallāṇ

Nāṭṭiya vēḷvi nāyakaṇ avaṇē

Translation:

Skilled in Vedic sacrifice and skilled in illusion, Skilled in the complete path of righteous governance, Skilled in the flawless qualities of *kūttu* — He alone is the lord of the *nāṭṭiya vēḷvi*, the “dance-sacrifice.”

Key Points for Dance Research

1. *Nāṭṭiya vēḷvi nāyakaṇ* means “Lord of the dance-sacrifice.” Through this compound expression, Kambar equates *nāṭṭiyam* with *vēḷvi* (*yajña*), echoing the concept found in the *Natyashastra* that *nāṭya* functions as a sacred offering.
2. *Kuraivu il kūttiṇ kuṇaṅkaḷ* (“the flawless qualities of *kūttu*”) indicates that Kambar understood dance as a codified artistic system possessing identifiable *guṇas* or aesthetic qualities.

From the perspective of Bharatanatyam research, this verse serves as direct textual evidence that twelfth-century Tamil culture viewed dance as a sacred and sacrificial act rather than merely as entertainment. It supports the interpretation of Indrajit's *Nikumbhilā Yāga* as a form of *nṛtta-yajña*.

Conclusion

The references to *kūttu*, dance, music, and ritual performance in the *Kamba Ramayanam* demonstrate that the text is not merely a literary retelling of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, but also an important cultural document reflecting the artistic traditions of the Chola period. Kambar's descriptions of *makaḷir āṭal*, *kūttiyar*, *naṭṭuvaṇ*, *tāḷam*, musical ensembles, and ritual performances reveal the existence of a highly developed performance culture supported by royal courts and temple institutions.

The various *kāṇḍams* of the epic collectively preserve evidence of dance traditions practiced in festive, courtly, celestial, and ritual contexts. The *Bāla Kāṇḍam* and *Ayōtti Kāṇḍam* portray dance as an integral feature of royal celebration and urban culture, while the *Kiṣkindhā Kāṇḍam* and *Sundara Kāṇḍam* emphasize artistic accomplishment, expressive movement, and aesthetic

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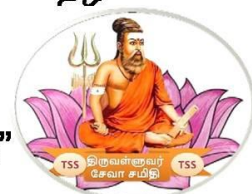
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refinement. The Nikumbhilā Yāga sequence in the *Yuddha Kāṇḍam* is especially significant because it presents a structured performance environment involving musicians, singers, percussionists, dancers, and the *naṭṭuvan*. The phrase *nāṭṭiya vēlvi nāyakan* further establishes the close association between dance and ritual sacrifice, suggesting that performance was understood as a sacred act rather than mere entertainment.

The text also preserves valuable terminology connected with Tamil performance traditions, including references to *kūttu*, *nāṭṭiyam*, *āṭal*, *pāṭal*, *tālam*, and orchestral accompaniment. Such references correspond closely with the cultural realities described in Chola inscriptions and temple records, thereby strengthening the historical value of the epic as a source for reconstructing medieval Tamil performance practices.

Thus, the *Kamba Rāmāyaṇam* emerges as a vital literary source for understanding the history of *kūttu* and dance traditions in the Chola period. Through its detailed depictions of performers, musical instruments, ritual settings, and aesthetic expression, the text preserves the artistic ethos of medieval Tamil society and contributes significantly to the study of South Indian dance and theatre history.

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