

# Tolpava Koothu

## The Shadow Puppet Theatre of Kerala



Transcript of a Documentary by the Department of Tourism,  
Government of Kerala, 2005

## Tolpavakoothu

Tol means leather, Pava means puppet and Koothu means play. Tolpavakoothu is the staging of plays with leather puppets. This ritual art form is being performed at the Goddess Bhadrakali temples in and around Palakkad district.

It is a sort of shadow play staged at night. The stage is curtained-off with a white cloth and leather puppets held up with sticks are behind this screen. Earthen lamps are placed behind the puppets to create shadows on the screen. There are permanent stages called Koothumadams in many temples for the staging of this art form.

Tolpavakoothu is based on Kamba Ramayana, a Tamil version of the Indian epic Ramayana, by the great scholar Kambar, a Tamil poet of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. The story is presented through poems and narrations. It is believed that a scholar named Chinnathampi Vadhyar composed the script of this art form based on Kamba Ramayana. The story of Ramayana is presented in 21 parts and it needs 21 days to complete the plays.

In the early days leather made deer-skin was used to make the puppets. Around 300 puppets are required to present the whole story of Ramayana. Puppets of all the major characters will be made in three different forms – sitting, walking and fighting postures. The lifetime of a puppet is around 100 years.

### **Ramayana - *Balakanda***

*Lord have mercy on me.*

*Train me to triumph over everyone.*

*Remove my sorrows and bestow bliss on me.*

*O, Lord with the elephant's visage*

*I pray before you with offerings of flowers, rice and delicacies.*

**Brahmins come forth to worship Ganapathy**

*The Lord Ganapathy be praised.*

*The Lord Subramania be praised.*

*The Goddesses of the realm be worshipped.*

*The mentors who taught the alphabet be worshipped.*

*The mentors of this art form – Chinna Thambi Pulavar, Muthappa Pulavar, Lakshmana Pulavar, Krishnankutty Pulavar and others be worshipped.*

*Our Guru, Krishnankutty Pulavar be praised and worshipped.*

*"I am the Goddess earth. I have no respite from the torments by demons such as Ravana."*

*"Let me assume the form of a cow and go forth to tell my sorrows to Indra, the King of Gods."*

*"O, Lord of Lords Indra. The torments from Ravana and others are unbearable. May you annihilate them."*

**Indra:** *"I too am extremely distressed by Ravana and his cohorts."*

**Goddess earth:** *"Come, let us go forth to tell of our travails to the supreme creator, Lord Brahma."*

**Indra:** *"Let us take along the other Gods, sages, seers, scholars and other eminencies to narrate our sorrows to Lord Brahma."*

**Indra and others:** *"We cannot bear the torments of Ravana and other demons. May it please for you to put an end to our distress."*

**Brahma:** *"But Ravana too is a creation of mine. I cannot destroy those that are my creations."*

**Goddess earth:** *"Come let us approach Shiva, the Lord of destruction, with our sorrows."*

All praise and pray before Shiva.

**Goddess earth:** *"May you put an end to our sorrows."*

**Shiva:** *"What is that troubles you so?"*

**Goddess earth:** *"Ravana and his demon cronies have conquered and hold their evil sway over the heavens."*

*"May it please you to annihilate them and remove our sorrows."*

**Shiva:** *"The demons are indeed culprits. But they are my devotees, too."*

*"If I annihilate them I shall get branded as the destroyer of my own devotees."*

*"So you must go to Lord Vishnu who is Narayana, the preserver, with your grievance."*

All pray before Vishnu, along with the sages.

**Vishnu:** *"You have awoken me from my slumber."*

*"You must have ample cause to do so. Tell me your grievance."*

**Goddess earth:** *"We are tormented by the ten headed demon king Ravana and his evil clan. Pray put an end to our grief."*

**Vishnu:** *"Indeed, I shall terminate your torment by destroying the demons who harass gentle beings like you."*

**Brahma:** *"Enough. You promise to become incarnate as the son of Maharaj Dasaratha."*

**Goddess earth:** *"We too shall take birth as apes and await you in the jungle."*

In the kingdom of Ayodha on earth, Maharaj Dasaratha talks with his mentor, the sage Vasistha.

**Dasaratha:** *"Old age overtakes me who has ruled this realm for 60,000 years."*

*"There is no one to succeed me. Tell me, o sage, a solution to this problem."*

**Vasistha:** *"Fear not, oh my disciple."*

*"You shall beget sons fit to rule the world."*

*"Conduct the sacrificial rite to beget sons."*

Invites sages to conduct the rituals.

**Mahataj Dasaratho to his queen Kausalya:** *"I am commencing a sacrificial rite to beget sons."*

**The ritual.**

Dasaratha apportions the sweet derived from the sacrificial rite to his queens Kausalya and Kaikeyi.

They in turn give half their portions to queen Sumitra.

Maids in waiting inform the king that the Queens show signs of pregnancy.

The Mahataj directs that the queens be accorded special care.

A son each is to Kausalya and Kaikeyi. Twin sons are born to Sumitra.

The royal sage Vasistha christens the boys:

*"This son who will delight all, may he be named Rama."*

*"This son who shall rule well, my he be named Bharata."*

*"This son with auspicious features, may he be named Lakshmana."*

*"This son, who will vanquish enemies, may he be named Sharughna."*

The boys become five years old. The royal preceptor is requested to teach them.

The sage Viswamitra comes to Ayodha Kingdom.

**King Dasaratha:** *"May it please you to tell us the purpose of your visit."*

**Sage Viswamitra:** *"On every new moon I conduct a sacrificial rite at my hermitage."  
"The demon Subahu and his companions regularly attack and obstruct the rites. I can never complete the rituals."  
"You must send your eldest son Rama with me to protect the rites."*

**Dasaratha:** *"But is not Rama just a child? I myself shall come forth to guard your rituals."*

Viswamitra is angered by this reply.

The royal preceptor arrives on the scene.

*"O, Maharaj! Rama is destined to accomplish many great deeds in this world."*

*"May you send him along with Visamitra."*

Dasaratha sends Rama and Lakshmana with Viswanitra saying:

*"O, sage Viswamitra! Henceforth you are their mother, father, mentor and God!"*

**Viswamitra:** *"Do not be distressed Maharaj. I shall return them to you safely."*

On the way, in order to conquer hunger and quench thirst, the sage Viswamitra bestows Rama and Lakshmana with the mystic spells Bala and Atibala.

**Rama:** *"Why is this place strewn with skeletons"*

**Sage:** *"A she-demon called Thadaka lives here. These are the bones of those whom she has devoured."*

**Rama:** *"How do we meet her?"*

**Sage:** *"If she hears you stringing your bows, she will appear."*

Rama strings his bow.

Thadaka rushes up with an uprooted tree.

Rama shoots an arrow to cut down the tree.

**Rama** asks the sage: *"Would it be right to kill this demon since it is a woman?"*

**Sage:** *"She is a demon and therefore you may kill her."*

Rama kills Thadaka.

They reach Viswamitra's hermitage.

The sacrificial rites begin.

Demons attack to obstruct the rituals.

Rama annihilates the demon Subahu and his army.

The demon Mareecha tries to run away from Rama's arrows.

Mareecha finally seeks refuge at Rama's feet.

Rama forgives Mareecha and sends him on his way.

The holy sacrifice is completed undisturbed.

A delighted sage Viswamitra presents Rama and Lakshmana with his own arrows and bows.

Viswamitra then takes the youths to the Kingdom of Mithila where princess Sita is about to choose her husband.

Maharaj Janaka of Mithila respectfully greets the sage and conducts him to the marriage venue.

**Maharaj Janaka:** *"O great sage! Who are these youths?"*

**Viswamitra** answers: *"They are the sons of Maharaj Dasaratha. They gave protection for my sacrificial rite."*

*"They are here now to compete for Sita's favours."*

**Maharaj Janaka:** *"O great sage! Sita will marry the one who can string the powerful bow kept here."*

*"Many are those who have tried to string it, failed and retreated."*

*"I pray that young Rama may succeed."*

It is ordered that the bow be brought forth into the royal assemblage. Soldiers carry it in.

Rama bends the bow to string it. The bow breaks.

**Maharaj Janaka:** *"The time has indeed arrived for Sita's marriage."*

*"Send an emissary to Ayodha to inform Rama's parents."*

The emissary arrives in Ayodha and invites everyone to Mithila.

**Maharaj Janaka:** *"O great king Dasaratha! May you allow your other three sons to marry the three daughters of my younger brother Kushadhwaaja."*

Rama marries Sita.

Bharata marries Mandhovi.

Lashmana marries Urmila.

Satrughna marries Sruthakeerthi.

They all depart for Ayodha.

Whilst traversing a jungle, a crow passes the party on their left and a peacock passes them on their right.

Dasharatha asks the sage Vasistha about the importance of such signs.

The **sage** replies: *"A crow passing to your left implies that an enemy will soon arrive."*  
*"But a peacock passing to your right implies that the enemy will become your friend."*

The hermit Parasurama meets up with the group.

Maharaj Dasaratha greets him respectfully.

Parasurama ignores Dasaratha.

**Parasurama** asks Rama: *"You, who have broken the bow in Mithila, can you break my bow?"*

Rama meditates on his sage mentors and then breaks the bow.

Parasurama pays his respect to Rama. He bestows two divine powers upon Rama and departs to meditate.

Maharaj Dasaratha, Rama, Lakshmana and others return to Ayodha.

### Artistes

Mr. K.K.Ramachandra Pulavar (Master Puppeteer)

Mr. K. Viswanatha Pulavar (singer, story teller)

Mr. K. Lakshmana Pulavar (puppeteer)

Mr. K.L. Ramachandran (story teller)

Mr. K.N. Somasundran (puppeteer)

Mr. N. Pazhaniyappan (puppeteer)

Mr. K.S. Sivarajan (puppeteer)

Mr. T. P. Ramachandran (Chenda)

Mr. K. Rajeev (puppeteer)

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Late Guru Krishnankutty Pulavar



...with his sons

Koothu Madom, the Puppet Theatre



...making puppets

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