

Glistening theatrics of Padayani

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When the sunshine spreads over nature after the monsoon, the festival season arrives in Kerala. It is the time for celebration of fertility and happiness. After the harvest, the people give a share of it to the gracious deities who protect them. Thus, a number of ritual art forms and celebrations are born.

Padayani is such a ritual art form that has been performed year after year during the time of festivals in Kerala.

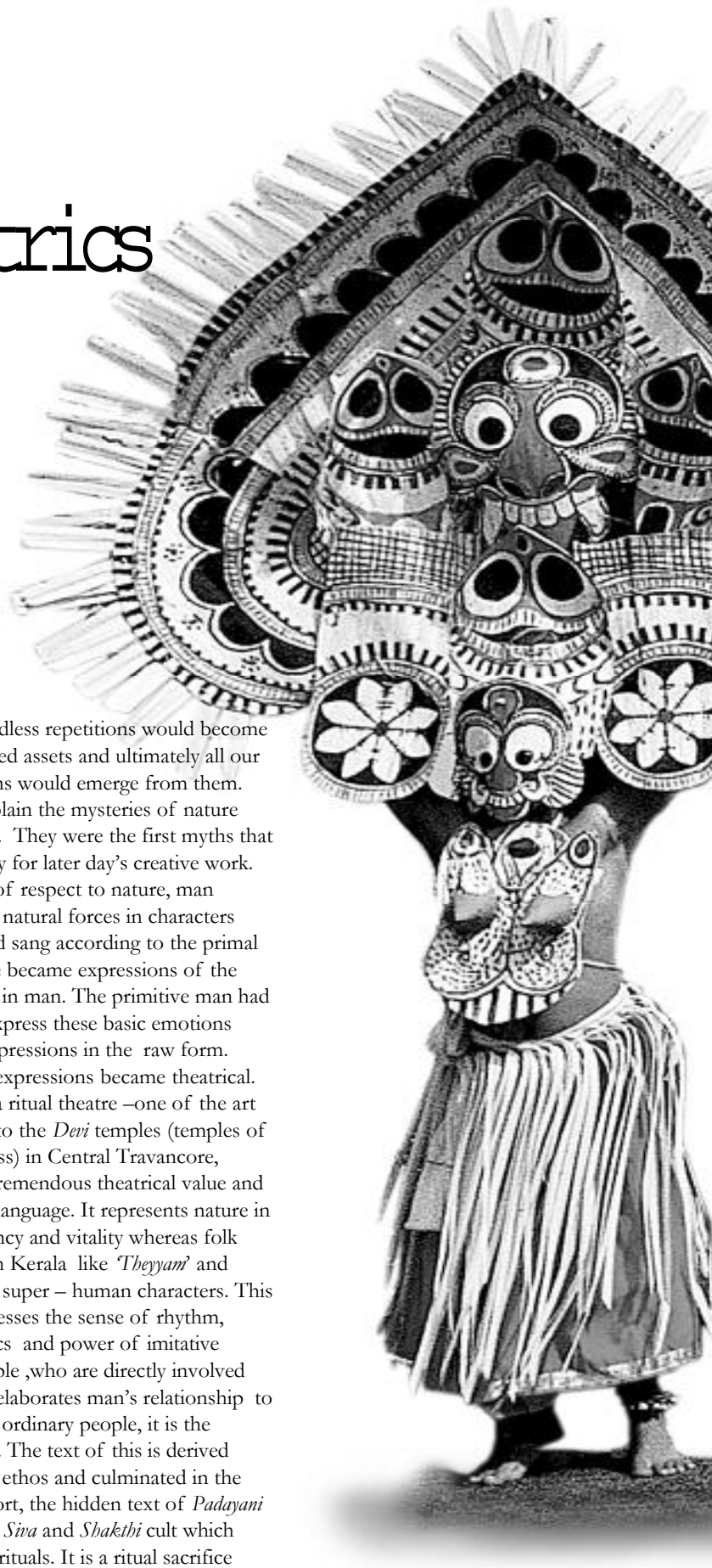
The ritual art forms all over the world are related to the land and the climate. Hence *Padayani* is also no exception to this universal fact. *Padayani* is performed two districts - Pathanamthitta and Alapuzha - of Central and Southern Kerala. Alapuzha is coastal and Pathanamthitta is mountainous regions. *Padayani* is nurtured by the mountains and the ocean. It is the festival of a people who believe that their lives are the gift of the great mountains.

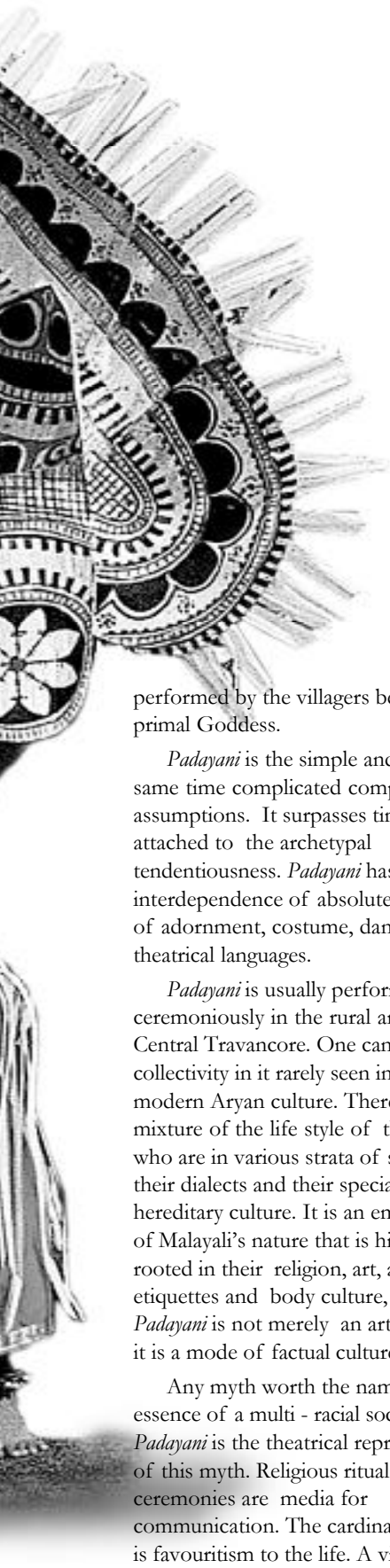
To have some kind of control over the unknown forces of nature man began to worship the divinity of nature itself and the seasonal changes brought about by it. These enquiries where resulted in certain definite

rewards. It's endless repetitions would become part of protected assets and ultimately all our ritualistic actions would emerge from them. Stories that explain the mysteries of nature were generated. They were the first myths that provided energy for later day's creative work.

As a mark of respect to nature, man personified the natural forces in characters that danced and sang according to the primal rhythms. These became expressions of the basic emotions in man. The primitive man had the power to express these basic emotions through his expressions in the raw form. Most of these expressions became theatrical.

Padayani is a ritual theatre - one of the art forms related to the *Devi* temples (temples of Mother Goddess) in Central Travancore, Kerala. It has tremendous theatrical value and very evocative language. It represents nature in its varied vibrancy and vitality whereas folk forms of North Kerala like '*Theyyam*' and '*Thira*', project super-human characters. This ritual art possesses the sense of rhythm, vision, aesthetics and power of imitative quality of people, who are directly involved with nature. It elaborates man's relationship to nature. For the ordinary people, it is the epitome of life. The text of this is derived from our tribal ethos and culminated in the *Siva* cult. In short, the hidden text of *Padayani* is rooted in the *Siva* and *Shakthi* cult which have all tantric rituals. It is a ritual sacrifice





abounds in tragic experience is providing resplendency to it. The activity of training the unnatural powers can be visualized through the extra body fitting for decorative attire and masks to reveal super-human appearance (Kolams). We experience the dreadfulness and magnanimity which play a great role in our village life. In its intricate and escalatory footsteps with its varied reverberations provide an eternal and emotional impressions to the spectator a sense of bio-physical force which all inspires them to be with the performer. Here the onlooker too becomes a performer. Here the lyrics eulogize the transparent love, courage, heroic deeds and all the other human emotions in its rustic purity. The choreographical elements, beating of drums and the modulated recitation of poetic verses all reveal a robust purity of the fertile soil and the mental frame work of the people in the village.

Rural areas are considered as endless resources of potential energy. Padayani is performed with all its riot of colours, extravagant expressions of visual revelations which all confluences in their painting techniques, artistic posters, architectural poses, haunting music, rich literature, scintillating dances and rhythmic movements. It is also a fusion of sixty four different art forms. The participants are with earnest devotional flow of nectar, apart from the differences of caste and thus proclaim the equality of an era also.

The Kolams who dance in a frenzy on the stage of *Padayani* are its main characters. During the performance a number of realistic characters also appear and disappear on the arena. Kolams dance according to the tune of songs, but the realistic characters are not accompanied by songs. They provide improvised dialogues. Their primary aim is to add amusement. A highly theatrical story is provided by the characters who perform comedy. This is illustrated in the presentation of 'Paradesis' (exiles) to the Kolam. They appear in different opportunities, and their actions vary from place to place. These characters are on a par

with the 'Paala Kolams' in significance.

Padayani performances last for twenty eight days in the courtyard of Kaali temples. Its make-up materials are taken from the nature, like Spathe of Areca palm ('Paala' in Malayalam), Terra-cotta powder, charcoal and turmeric powder. There are different varieties of effigies to represent like *Yakshi, Paksbi, Kaalan, Kuthira Maadan, Marutha, Pisach, Ganapathi, Bhairavi* and *Kanjiramaala*. There are effigies with masks and crowns. *Padayani* is replete with human creativity and nature's bounty which all leads to excellent aesthetic extravaganza.

In good old days there were eighteen types of musical instruments used in the *Padayani* performances. Today the most important instrument is "Thappu" (A percussion instrument with a wooden ring covered with leather on one side). Another speciality in *Padayani* is a different rhythmic ensemble. They are the rarest of the rare 'Thaalaas' prevalent only in South Kerala. Some of the major Thaalaas are 'Marma', 'Valiya Lakshmi', 'Cheriyala Lakshmi', 'Champa', 'Kaarika', 'Kumba', 'Adantha'. For all these rhythms there are corresponding stylized body movements. They are not only important in rhythm but represent the characters with moments of acting which all basically based on rare rhythms. All these rhythms start mainly from a wider canvas and recede towards a conical structure.

The symphony and rhythm of *Padayani* reflect the rhythms of rural life. The foot steps of the *Padayani* artist imitates a farmer carrying bundles of paddy on his head and movements of a lonely boat in the backwaters. It reaches ecstatic heights slowly but gradually. The classical rhythms are in arithmetical progression, but in *Padayani* it is like the structure and form of a mountain. The audience who participate in *Padayani* moves towards the submits where the spiritual force of the divine mother is showered on them.

There are three types of visualization in *Padayani* :-

performed by the villagers before the primal Goddess.

Padayani is the simple and at the same time complicated compilations of assumptions. It surpasses time. It is attached to the archetypal tendentiousness. *Padayani* has the interdependence of absolute glamour of adornment, costume, dance and theatrical languages.

Padayani is usually performed ceremoniously in the rural areas of Central Travancore. One can perceive a collectivity in it rarely seen in the modern Aryan culture. There exists a mixture of the life style of the people who are in various strata of society, their dialects and their special hereditary culture. It is an embodiment of Malayali's nature that is highly deep-rooted in their religion, art, aesthetics, etiquettes and body culture, because *Padayani* is not merely an art form but it is a mode of factual culture.

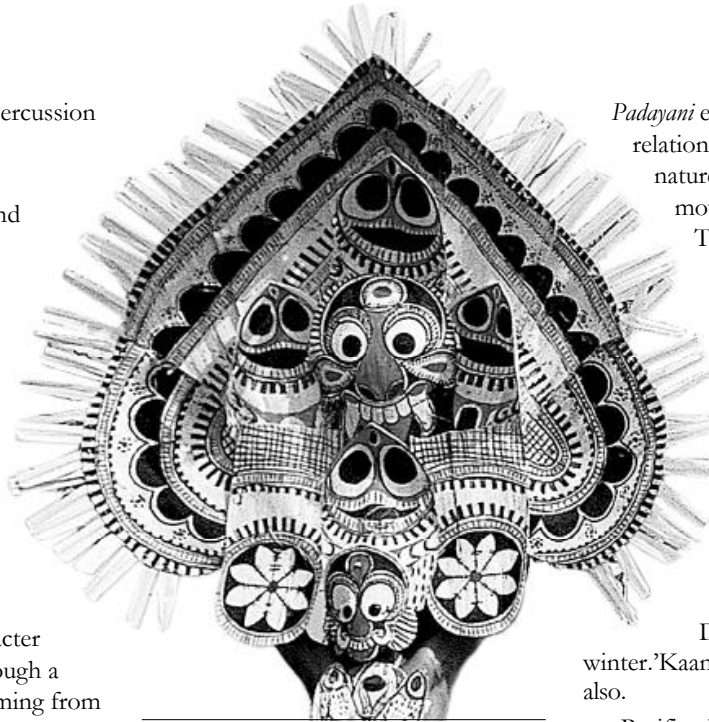
Any myth worth the name is the essence of a multi-racial society. *Padayani* is the theatrical representation of this myth. Religious rituals or ceremonies are media for communication. The cardinal element is favouritism to the life. A vision

- Performance using only percussion instruments.
eg:- The *Thappu* drums
- Percussion instruments and actor's body movements.
eg : *Thaavadi*
- Spectacles incorporating *Thaala*, songs, dances, action and other elements.

Humour is widely used in *Padayani*. Comic interludes that sketch the Village life is performed in the skits. These comic strips point to a time before the advent of castes. The character titled *Paradesi* (our-lander) though a villager, is supposed to be coming from outside. *Paradesi* appears with dual function, ie, he is 'Parama Shiva' (almighty) as well as *Paradesi* (outsider). When he comes on the stage, we witness the conflict of a person entering into an alien tribal culture.

Padayani portrays stories with historical background also. For eg: Horse Kolams. The story goes like this: The King of Madurai in Tamil Nadu is about to attack Travancore of Kerala. The King of Travancore enquires his minister about the preparations for the war. The minister informed that everything was ready except horses. The envoys of the King go to Arabia to buy horses. Their dealings with the horse trader are narrated here dramatically.

Padayani has a therapeutic side as it is said that it can be used to treat epilepsy. The ancient people has carved out a treatment method out of these rituals based on the core life experiences. The Kolam of the demon is used for this purpose. All the village Gods and Goddesses are considered to have healing powers. The *Marutha Kolam* is considered to be a Goddess of Small Pox. The Goddesses are thought to be living on mountain tops. They are invoked to the planes of human existence and they take part in the ceremonial feast the children offer to them. The *Marutha Kolam* re-enacts these ancient lores, in theatrical



manner.

A scene with beginning, middle and end in unison is enacted in the spectacle of *Kaalan Kolam*, which is based on the legend of *Markandeya*. *Kaalan Kolam* (Effigy representing eternity) relates duration or time in its specific purpose. The mask used by Shiva denotes past, present and future. The actor performs many characters at the same time. There are elements of the physical theatre in it. The same actor performs the roles of *Chitragnaptan*, *Bhoobhas*, *Kaah* and *Consorts*. It is almost like a total theatre. These elements spring from the tribal culture, as is evident from the *Padayani* performances.

The lore of *Padayani* believes that the primal God head was a bird. The *Rig-Veda* imagines the Sun as a God with wings. The mask of the bird is enacted in *Padayani* in relation to a myth on children. *Maadan* is *Shiva* himself in relation to the ancient culture oriented in cow. He is the protecting deity of all quadrupeds.

The skies are imagined as *Yakshi* in the *Anthara Yakshi* (A sort of Demi-Goddess). In all its elements there is a philosophical dimension of nature which may appear in the form of *Anthara Yakshi* and *Sundara Yakshi* (charming Goddess). The *Yakshis* in

Padayani emphasise the intimate relationship between man and nature which is defining that movement is self realization. Then they come as *Yakshis* of beauty, enacted in *Padayani*.

The Mother Goddesses like *Bhairavi*, *Kaanjira Maala* and *Sundara Yakshi* are very important in *Padayani*. They represent the 'Pancha Bhoothas' (five facets of nature). *Kaanjira Maala* is the embodiment of 'Sheetala Devi', who represent winter. 'Kaanjira Maala' represents heat also.

Purification of the individual leads to the purification of the whole world. To attain this aim sacrifice on a large scale is needed. The *Pooppada* (flower offering) represents the self sacrifice of people performed through the theatrical spectacles of *Padayani*. 'Kara Vanchi' is the theatrical performance showing the solidarity of the whole village. They recreate the semblance of paddling in water.

Padayani fulfills the aspirations of the people, their value systems and sense of beauty. Despite the drastic changes that occur in the world, *Padayani* holds on to the eternal aspects. The popular subterranean force of *Padayani* gradually ascend to great realm of the spirit and enables the actors and spectators to participate in the dance of the eternal elements. It links the earth and the sky.

One can measure the relevance of *Padayani* from different angles. It represents the social ethos and solidarity. It is formed out of a classless and casteless society that is essentially tribal in nature. The class feeling is supreme to every individual. They worked and prayed in solidarity. *Padayani* also resembles a streak of light that illuminates the primal darkness. It is a grand spectacle of theatre that uplifts the human hearts to the eternal realms of the spirit that exist in the collective self of man. When we analyse *Padayani* in a theatrical manner, we understand the following aspects :-

India international trade fair

Confluence of business and culture

K.C. Venu

The young and pretty polish women Monica's high heels went click-click-click against the hard, polished floor, and ended in front of three life size caparisoned elephants in the central area of the Kerala Pavilion of India Inter-national Trade Fair (ITF) at Pregathi Maidan, New Delhi. She touched the tusk of the elephant and exclaimed Wah..... beautiful. Ms. Monica smiled her sweet and enquired to the Girl Guide stood nearby, the medium with which the elephant was made of. The girl replied that it was made using sponge, narrow iron rods and clothes.

The Kerala Pavilion's central area unfolded the colours and sights of *Thrisurpooram* where elephants decked up in the traditional way under the backdrop of 'Vadakkumnatha Temple' and the sacred lamp. The 'Pancharimelam' of the 'pooram' (festival) was spread over the central hall added the mood of the festival.

The central area of the Pavilion also highlighted through big photo panels, the enticing beauty of Kerala landscape, dense forests and animals, ancient system of medicine, Ayurveda and its fabulous therapies, the dance-drama Kathakali, the awe-inspiring Theyyam, the lasya nirtha, Mohiniyattam, the

unique martial art, 'Kalarippayattu' and so many other features of Kerala were depicted offering a medley of experience for tourists and businessmen.

The new facade of the Pavilion constructed for the fair portrayed unique experience of Kerala, the tranquil backwaters and beautiful houseboat gently rocked by the waves rippling to the rhythm of the swaying coconut palms on the banks. The visual impact of the facade and central area created by the talented sculptor C.B. Jinan, was superb.

There were a total of 35 stalls in the Kerala Pavilion. The Government departments Tourism, Fisheries,

Agriculture, Industries, Scheduled Tribe Development and the public undertakings Khadi and Village Industries, Hantex, Handicrafts Development Corporation, Coir Fed, Market Fed, Farm Information Bureau, Kudumbasree etc engaged in these stalls with wide range of their products. Figuring prominently, they include Spices, Cashew, Coir, coir products, tea, coffee, food products, pickles, curry powder, Ayurvedic medicines and a lot of other consumable goods.

Meticulous care was taken to decorate the Pavilion in consonance with this year's theme of trade fare 'Tourism and Promoting exports by small and medium enterprises'. It is said that there was a sale of more than Rupees one crore for all these stalls for a period of two weeks. It was also estimated that more than 10 lakh people visited the Kerala Pavilion. The Deputy Prime Minister of Latviya, Alanas



Mr. M. M. Hassan, Minister for Information & Parliamentary Affairs and Mr. Babu Divakaran, Minister for Labour visit the Kerala Pavilion.

- The methods of actor transforming himself into characters. The performer maintains strict spiritual discipline(Vratham) for days together prior to the actual performance. By this, the presenter of the character changes his 'Self' into the self of the character and analyses the character very deeply before the actual day of the performance.
- The made up performer who

carries heavy masks and decorative body fitting forgets himself and reaches to an unconscious state of affairs - a trance - in it's full sense. Here the conscious actor slips into then mental state and sub conscious to unconscious state which is nothing but a non performance. One should study properly all these aspects from a modern psychic level so that the transformation of 'self' to the

character is a psychological process which is full and final when it reaches the trance.

- Another important factor in the *Papdayani* performance is that the performer himself becomes a character in certain sequences and then changes to his 'Self' and then from the 'self' to back stage worker and then from theback stage worker to onlooker and vice versa.