The Meaning of Pallippāna

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This article is a translation of the tenth chapter ('Pallippānaye Porul', pp. 86–96) of the book in Malayalam, Ambalappuzha Sreekrishnaswamy Kshetram, by Ambalappuzha Gopakumar, published in 2000 by the Ambalappuzha Sree Krishnaswamy Temple Development Trust, Ambalappuzha (pp. 250, price Rs 130). The book deals with the legends, history, rituals and festivals of the famous Krishna temple of Ambalappuzha, and also speaks of the royal family of Chempakkasi and literary personalities such as Melputtir Nārāyaṇa Bhaṭṭatiri (17th century) and Kuṭçan Nambiar (18th century), who were associated with the shrine.

The Pallippāna ritual is performed at this Krishna temple once every twelve years during the month of January; it was last performed in 2002. The ritual is performed over a period of fifteen days, during which women of the Vela community recite the Nilalkuttu Pāṭṭu (Song of Shadow-piercing). The song deals with the abhīcara episode of shadow-piercing in which the Pandavas, put to sleep as ordered by Duryodhana, are revived. This episode is described in Māvāratam Pāṭṭu, an oral folk Mahabharata once popular in southern Kerala.

A detailed description of a ritual which closely resembles Pallippāna, performed by members of the Malaya community in the Krishna temple of Aranmula, is given in the Tirunīḷalā, one of the earliest poetic works (13th century) in Malayalam literature (Tirunīḷalā, with commentary by M.M. Purushothaman Nair, Sandhya Books, Calicut, 1981). For more on Nilalkuttu, see 'Nilalkuttu and other Mahabharata Episodes from Kerala', A. Purushothaman and A. Harindranath, in Text and Variations of the Mahabharata: Contextual, Regional and Performative Traditions (Samikshika Series No. 2, ed. K.K. Chakravarty, National Mission for Manuscripts, IGNCA, and Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, New Delhi; 335 pages, 2009).

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It is not known precisely when the Pallippāna performed at the Ambalappuzha temple every twelve years was first conducted. In the Devaswom register of M.E. 994 (C.E. 1819), there are references to Pantraṇṭu Kāḷabham (a yearly ritual), Pallippāna and Vijayabali. Besides, the procedures for performing these rituals are also recorded. Hence it can be assumed logically that these special rituals must have started many years before M.E. 994.

Marthanda Varma conquered Chempakkaseri in M.E. 921 (C.E. 1746). Thereafter, this region became a part of Travancore. But during this period, it is not likely that special functions or rituals were initiated in the temple. Hence it may be assumed that many rituals performed there even today were started much before C.E. 1746. In the absence of authoritative records, it is possible to depend only on legends and hearsay. While investigating the history of a land, the rituals, traditions and beliefs of the people cannot be ignored. In this context, an effort is made here to search for the meaning of Pallippāna.

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Legend and Belief
Pallippāna was initiated by the ruler of Chempakasseri for the well-being and progress of the land and the people. The ritual Pantraṇṭu Kalabham, performed every year from the first to the twelfth day of the Malayalam month of Makaram (January–February), the Pallippāna performed after twelve days of Pantraṇṭu Kalabham, and the Vijayabali performed after twelve days of Pallippāna are linked together like the continuous links of a chain. They are a series of sacred rituals conducted for achieving progress. They hark back to an era which firmly believed that contentment and happiness can prevail in people’s lives only by the blessings of the local presiding deity. These rituals reveal a clear picture of the spiritual culture of a period which endeavoured to protect temples, temple rituals and traditions. It is well known that the history of Chempakasseri is imbued with spirituality.

Every year, Pantraṇṭu Kalabham is performed to remove the impurities and weakening of the idol installed in the temple and to impart strength and power to it. In temples where puja and rituals are not conducted as ordained, the divine power diminishes. The deity gets power only through good deeds and prescribed rituals. Only a powerful deity can shower blessings. These beliefs are beyond reason. Pantraṇṭu Kalabham, Pallippāna, etc., are thus special rituals performed to enhance the power of the deity. Even though there are many prevailing legends about these rituals, it is not right to accept all of them. However, some of them cannot be totally ignored. Since there is a separate chapter on Pantraṇṭu Kalabham in this book, it is not discussed here...

It has been stated that Pallippāna is performed after performing Pantraṇṭu Kalabham for twelve days. It is seen from old records that Pallippāna is performed to remove defects and deficiencies which might have come to affect the presiding deity. Vēlas wake up and impart power to the deity by singing the Pāna song. This is considered an ancient ritual. Even now, this Vēla ritual is performed in rural areas on rare occasions.*

The First Vēla
There is a legend that the first Pallippāna was conducted by Lord Śiva. Once upon a time, Mahāviṣṇu became extremely weak and fell asleep, tired by overwork. Subrahmanya, who is also the lord of astrology, decreed that Pallippāna should be performed to wake up the Lord from sleep. The entire world was searched in vain for the Vēla to perform Pallippāna. Then Śiva and Pārvati incarnated as Vēlan and Vēlatti (female Vēla), performed Pallippāna, woke up Mahāviṣṇu and revived him. Accordingly, the Pāna song begins with praise of Lord Śiva. Śaiva musical instruments are used as accompaniment for the song. Vēlas, the principal performers of Pallippāna, point out that this story testifies to the merit of their service to the Lord.

* The Vēla and Malaya are aboriginal communities of Kerala. Vēlan and Vēlatti are the male and female members of the Vēla community. Similarly, Malayan and Malayi are the corresponding members of the Malaya community.
Öttu and Muröttu
Öttu and Muröttu are the main rituals of Pallippāna. Öttu is performed by Vēlans and Muröttu by Vēlattis. Öttu is performed during the day and Muröttu at night. The Vēlans participating in these rituals belong to two groups. They are known as Kūttājis and Puranājis. Only Kūttājis perform the Öttu as prescribed. Puranājis function as jesters in the Pallippāna ritual. They are free to speak and act as they please. During the days of Pallippāna, they conduct themselves as important persons of the locality, but in the role of vagabonds. In reality, Puranājis divert the attention of the public from the actions of Kūttājis. Puranājis enliven the process of yajña by walking around as buffoons with painted faces, wearing ilaṅġi flowers, caps made of areca-nut sheath and tender coconut leaves. Puranājis effectively perform the task of making people laugh, astonished by the exciting acts performed by the Kūttājis. The idea is that Puranājis are Śiva's bhūtagamas. Pallippāna itself is a Śaiva ritual. It was stated earlier that Lord Śiva performed the first Pallippāna. It is said that when Śiva and Pārvati performed the Pallippāna, the bhūtagamas accompanying them stood outside as Puranājis, guarding the venue of Pāna performance.

Pāna means song. Pallippāna is the song sung in presence of the Lord. It is sung by Kūttājis and Vēlans. These are devotional songs. But they are composed by common people who are not scholars. It may be seen that a Śaiva ambience pervades the songs. The songs begin with praise of Śiva:

AnbiLittīkaļaṁita purān
Titukkaṇṇil aṁjasā kanal niṅciyōnē
Adiviṅam putranum nandikēśanum
Ayyanum vannapojivarkku tukilofika

The Lord wearing the crescent moon
The Lord with fire in the divine eye
Daughter of the mountain, son and Nandikeśa
And Ayyan, kindly come and remove the tukil

There are many legends about performing this ritual at Ambalappuzha. All of them are not described here. Even so, a relevant matter may be mentioned here. It is said that Pallippāna was begun to defend people against black magic and abhicēra acts directed against Chempakkasseri by the neighbouring villages who were envious of its prosperity. Even today, one can see images of the four bhūtas released by the villagers of Chengannur to destroy Chempakkasseri, who were [according to legend] trapped and nailed to the four corners of the temple by Putumana Nanputiri, who was the tantri of the temple.

A special yajña stage is erected to perform Pallippāna at Ambalappuzha. Cottages are made for Vēlas, the performers, to stay on the south-eastern side of the tank in front of the temple inside the compound. Six cottages are erected in front. Behind these, many other cottages are built. The six families who are entitled to perform the Pāna stay in the cottages in front of the temple. The title is held today by the Kūttājis of Chempakkasseri, Kōyikkal,
Kunnankari, Erumunja, Netasseri and Ambalappuzha. Behind their cottages are the cottages for Manthan and Ganakan. A special cottage is made for the Anpanitta Panikkar who holds an important position in many rituals of the Ambalappuzha temple. These cottages are erected facing the yajna stage or Pallippantal in front of the building attached to the Ganapati temple. Every day, the rituals begin as the chief priest brings out the koymavati (stick symbolizing divine authority). Koymavati is used as a symbol of authority. It is kept safely in a chamber in the west nata (street) of the temple. The responsibility for safekeeping is vested with Valiya Mathattil Panikkar, the custodian of Ambalappuzha temple. He arrives and opens the chamber in the West Street, takes out the koymavati with sword and shield, and hands them over to the chief priest. When the yajna is performed, the chief priest and Valiya Mathattil Panikkar stay near the koymavati. They can leave the stage only when the koymavati is returned.

The function starts after ritually keeping the koymavati in the Pallippantal. The chief priest performs certain rituals and sprinkles paddy and rice ritually on the heads of Kuttatris and gives permission for beginning the Ottu. Sitting in their cottage, beating the Para (drum), the Velans sing the Ottu. They hold deer horns and ilanji flowers in their hands. To remove defects in the Lord’s image, they sing in groups, beating the Para, and perform uficcil at every beat of tala. The uficcil is performed thrice during the day. Uficcil is performed with the Lord’s praise, beginning thus:

Hara Hara Tripura Hara namaśivayām
Tripura Harayor namāmi namaśivayām Śivayām

Along with this, they play the Para in tripuṭa tāla (the syllables being caki caṅcaki caṅcaki ca) and repeat this in various multiples. The Para and Tuṭi are Śaiva musical instruments. Their relevance was discussed earlier. Kuttatris perform the ritual with devotion, accompanied by the instruments played rhythmically.

The Ottu is performed with the firm conviction that it will succeed in removing the defects of each organ such as

Chandanam negime chillippurikkatēl
Ārojanakkaninmēl ponmōlakkātinmēl

On the sandal forehead, on the eyebrow
On the dark eyes, on the golden ears

Ottu is performed till 5.30 in the evening. Muṟottu is performed after dipārādhanā (worship with lamps) and attāla pūja (night worship).

It is usually stated that Muṟottu is the Ottu performed after arranging all the required items on a muram. But this writer is of the opinion that Muṟottu counteracts Ottu. The Velas have adapted the relevant portions of the Mahabharata story for Ottu. This is also known as Māvāratam Pāṭṭu (song). In the song, the main plot deals with the
Nilalkuttu (shadow-piercing episode).

The relevant story is this: As ordered by Duryodhana, a Vēlan (Bhārata Malayan) makes the Pāṇḍavas unconscious by piercing their shadows. His wife Vēlatti, a disciple of Pāṇḍāli (wife of the Pāṇḍavas), learns about this and revives the Pāṇḍavas. Here, Vēlatti performs Muṟṟūtu to rejuvenate the Pāṇḍavas, counteracting the Ōṭtu performed by the Vēlan.

Muṟṟūtu begins with the verse:

Mālamaiñjoru vēlan vannu
Murasvētāippāna nirattu
Śākikeṣum piṇiyoliyu enge tampūrāne

The Vēlan came, knowing the truth
Uttered the counter-Ōṭtu, spread pāṇa
O my Lord, remove the weakening effect

The Ōṭtu begins only after singing praises of Śiva and other gods. The musical instruments used for Muṟṟūtu are Paṇ and Tuṭī. In reality, Muṟṟūtu is more important in Paḷḷippāna rituals than Ōṭtu. The summary of the song sung by the Vēlatti while performing Muṟṟūtu is as follows:

In Tenmala, Bhāratamalayi (wife of Malayan), a disciple of the Pāṇḍavas, is worried thinking about her husband Malayan, who has not returned even after seven days. Losing patience, she starts looking for her husband, accompanied by her son. On the way, she meets her husband, who is carrying a bundle. She asks what he has brought for her after seven days. He unties the bundle and takes out the contents one by one. A new cooking pot decorated with dots, different varieties of cocks, new clothes, white rice, black rice—the bundle contained the best of everything. When Malayāy enquires where he got all these, Malayan informs her that when his Lords and her Lords arrived in the forest for a hunt, he performed the Ōṭtu, adorning himself with the divine symbol. All these gifts were presented to him by his Lord as compensation. To Malayāy’s question whether anyone died at the place of the hunt, he replies that five deer and two does were killed by arrows. From this narration, Malayāy understands everything. Convinced that by the order of King Duryodhana, her husband has ‘frozen’ the five Pāṇḍavas, Kuntī and Pāṇḍāli by shadow-piercing, Malayāay’s attitude changes into hostility.

With bloodshot eyes, trumpeting like a mad elephant, running about like a wild boar, she shouts at Malayan to give her the accessories of the ritual to reverse the harm. Her sorrow that she would be without her Lords cannot be described in words. Malayan tells her he has not killed her Lords, he only attempted to kill them. Between them there is a pledge—a mutual understanding that neither Malayan nor Malayāy will try to kill each other’s Lords. Malayan says many things to tempt Malayāy who proceeds to perform the ritual counteracting Malayāy’s mischief. He offers her a garland of diamonds gifted by his Lords. Malayāy’s reaction is—he could offer it to the next Malayāy; her Lords are dearer to her than her life. She throws away the garland of diamonds in the forest. Seeing this, her son Manikanthān approaches her. Her
anger towards him is uncontrollable. She becomes possessed, saying he would act only like his father. She grabs him by his legs, dashes him against the rocks, and kills him. She questions Malayan and proceeds to revive the Pândavas by removing the ill-effects wrought by her husband’s magic. She proceeds to collect the items required to perform the ritual undoing the shadow-piercing.

Covering a dead cow with new cloth, reciting the mantra of sañjīvanam, sprinkling grains of rice on the face and snapping her fingers, Malayi calls out ‘Vā mahaḷē jivakōṭṭi’ and brings the animal back to life. The gods ask her what she wants. She tells them that she does not want any gifts; she wants the kempu maṇi (bell for pūja), Pāra and Tuṭi used by Lord Mahadeva when he took the incarnation of Malayan. When she pleads with the gods for these, the gods give them all. After collecting them, Malayi proceeds to Daivam Gurunāṭu. That is where Malayan has shadow-pierced the Pândavas. Carrying the kempu maṇi, Malayi reaches there, performs Muṇṭṭu, and revives the Pândavas.

This story is sung by Vēlattis in Pallippāṇa. It is not known who composed the song or when it was composed. The language appears to be quite old. The song must be three to four hundred years old. The phrases and imagery is of rural and folk origin. The most significant fact about this song, which is learnt orally, is its power of communication. The sentiment is soaked in sincerity. But most of the text is close to prose. It is recited using a peculiar rhythm; a part is quoted as follows:

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\begin{align*}
\text{Kunnipōl kaṭaḷa] chuvannavaḷḷkainēram} \\
\text{Madavāna pōle vīraṇṭu tuṭaṇṭiṇiśāl} \\
\text{Panni muṇṭṭummāl pāyum vaṇṇam} \\
\text{Patarṇa īṭappuli kaṭaṭku} \\
\text{Naṇṭā cārṇa nāgam pōle} \\
\text{Naṇṭāṇa kaṭiḷ maṇṭyeppōle.}
\end{align*}
\]

Then her eyes became blood red
She was enraged like a mad elephant
As a wounded boar rushes forth
As an angry tigress
As a hissing serpent
As rain lashed with wind...

This reveals the fierce nature of Malayi once she learns about the shadow-piercing of the Pândavas by Malayan.

During the days of Pallippāṇa, many associated functions are performed in the night—Aṭāvi, Ayiramāṇiyan Kōlam, Kuruti, etc. The Vēlans, pulling out the wild vegetation, roaring, walking and running rhythmically, reach the site of the Pāṇa. This is possibly an enactment of the arrival of evil spirits.

*From Kāppukēṭṭu to Kuruti in Puṭakkaḷam*

The ritual of Kāppukēṭṭu (tying of kāppu) signifies the beginning of Pallippāṇa. Kāppu-
is performed in the Pallippāna pantal (shāmiana). In the presence of Vēlan (Kūttātiṣ), the Anpanāṭṭu Panikkar, Gaṇakan, Devaswom officials and local people, the chief priest ties six kāppus on the koymavatī brought from the temple after invocation. The kāppus, presented by six Kūttāṭis who take part in the Pāṇa, are attached with the koymavatī and tied. All are given golden kāppus except the Netṭāsseri Kūttāti, who is given a silver kāppu. The Devaswom makes the kāppus well in advance and hands them over to the Kūttāṭis. This is the practice followed. After tying the kāppus, pūjās are performed as scheduled. Then the chief priest gives permission to Kūttāṭi to begin the Ĭṭṭu. Various rituals are performed daily, such as Rakṣākalaśa Pūjā, Bhūṣmarūpa Āvāhanam or Ḭḷaṇḍam Ṭṭal, Nūṟum Pāḷum, Maṇiṭṭu Cāṭṭal, Anippēkaṇvaḷēral, Pāṇaṭituṭṭam, Brāhmaṇ Puṇappaṭṭu, Kāḷiṭṭuṭam Tuḷḷal, Kāḷan Puṇappatto, Śāṣṭaṃ Puṇappatto, Bhārataṃ Tuḷḷal, Čerīya Kūṃpubali, Kīṭtuku Ḭuli, Veljēcchappetaṭal, Aṭavi, Āṭru Etuppū, Vaḷiya Kūṃpubali, Pāṇkk̄al Kuruti, etc. With the removal of kāppus after performing these rituals, the fifteen-day-long Pallippāna rituals are concluded. There are many details about these rituals, but it is not possible to discuss them all here. Rare rituals such as Bhūṣmarūpa Āvāhanam, Pāṇaṭituṭṭam, Kīṭtuku Ḭuli, Taṭṭu Ḭuli, Aṭavi, etc., performed on the third day, arouse wonder and strengthen belief in the viewers. It is believed that the rituals of Maṇiṭṭu Cāṭṭal and Kīṭtuku Ḭuli, performed standing on platforms built at a height of 11½ kol in front of the Pallippūntal, lead the viewers to the ecstasy of faith of a distant past. To prepare the Bhūṣmarūpam on the stage of yajña, it is prescribed that soil from the seven seas of āṭ, salt, lotus, water, red lotus, fire and milk shall be brought. But such a Pallippāna may never have taken place, except the one performed by Subrahmanya in the original story. Now Bhūṣmarūpam is made of soil from seven jetties, mixed with termite soil. It is believed that termite soil is pure. After the Bhūṣmarūpam is invoked, torrential rain is expected to take place. This is considered the fruitful culmination of the rituals. It happened in the Pallippāna of 1990.

Outside View

From the outside, all these rituals may be seen as creations of devotion and purity of heart. Through the Pallippāna, moments are created in which the temple, the sacred place of devotion, becomes the performance stage of ancient arts. In an age where caste divisions and untouchability prevailed, the rituals of Pallippāna cleared the way to popular participation, removing restrictions on people of low caste and their creativity. In the rituals of Pallippāna, prominence is given to castes such as Vēlan, Gaṇakan, Maṇnān, etc. Anpanāṭṭu Panikkar, an Ezhava chief, holds a prominent position. Pallippāna proves that these people had the freedom and right to enter temple premises years before the announcement by the King allowing the lower castes to enter temples. Kunammari Pankajakshi (seventy-two years old) who came to perform murōtu in 1990, spoke of the freedom and authority given to them during the period of Pallippāna.

Leaving aside the path of faith, it may be stated that the folk art forms presented during the rituals of Pallippāna reveal the true aesthetics of an earlier age. Kōḷa Tuḷḷal, Kāḷikutam
Tulāja, Śāstām Purāppāju, etc., can be considered the underlying sources of the art and culture of Ambalappuzha. Pallippāna is an occasion for us to remember the sponsor of the ritual, the King of Chempakasseri, and his broad-based culture supported by devotion. The kind blessings of Lord Srikrishna are showered on all ceremonies performed in His name. Everything is līla for the Lord. Getting an opportunity to take part in the ceremonies is itself a divine blessing.

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