

## The Meaning of Paḷḷippāna

AMBALAPPUZHA GOPAKUMAR

This article is a translation of the tenth chapter ('*Paḷḷippānayūṭe Poruḷ*', 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 Chempakasseri and literary personalities such as Melputtūr Nārāyaṇa Bhaṭṭatiri (17<sup>th</sup> century) and Kuñcan Nambiar (18<sup>th</sup> century), who were associated with the shrine.

The Paḷḷippāna 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 *Niḷalkuttu Pāṭṭu* (Song of Shadow-piercing). The song deals with the *abhicara* 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 Paḷḷippāna, performed by members of the Malaya community in the Krishna temple of Aranmula, is given in the *Tiruniḷalmāla*, one of the earliest poetic works (13<sup>th</sup> century) in Malayalam literature (*Tiruniḷalmāla*, with commentary by M.M. Purushothaman Nair, Sandhya Books, Calicut, 1981). For more on Niḷalkuttu, see 'Niḷalkuttu 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, IGNC, and Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, New Delhi; 335 pages, 2009). —A.P.

It is not known precisely when the Paḷḷippāna 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 Pantraṅṅu Kaḷabham (a yearly ritual), Paḷḷippāna 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 Chempakasseri 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 Paḷḷippāna.

### *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 Pantraṅṭu Kaḷabham, 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~~ Pantraṅṭu Kaḷabham, 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, Pantraṅṭu Kaḷabham 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. Pantraṅṭu Kaḷabham, 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 Pantraṅṭu Kaḷabham in this book, it is not discussed here.

It has been stated that Pallippāna is performed after performing Pantraṅṭu Kaḷabham for twelve ~~days~~ <sup>years</sup>. It is seen from old records that Pallippāna is performed to remove defects and deficiencies which might have come to affect the presiding deity. Vēlans 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 Vela and Malaya are aboriginal communities of Kerala. Velan and Velatti are the male and female members of the Vela community. Similarly, Malayan and Malayi are the corresponding members of the Malaya community.

*Öttu and Muröttu*

Öttu and Muröttu are the main rituals of Paḷḷippāna. 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 Kūttāṭis and Puranāṭis. Only Kūttāṭis perform the Öttu as prescribed. Puranāṭis function as jesters in the Paḷḷippāna ritual. They are free to speak and act as they please. During the days of Paḷḷippāna, they conduct themselves as important persons of the locality, but in the role of vagabonds. In reality, Puranāṭis divert the attention of the public from the actions of Kūttāṭis. Puranāṭis enliven the process of *yajña* by walking around as buffoons with painted faces, wearing *ilanji* flowers, caps made of areca-nut sheath and tender coconut leaves. Puranāṭis effectively perform the task of making people laugh, astonished by the exciting acts performed by the Kūttāṭis. The idea is that Puranāṭis are Śiva's *bhūtagaṇas*. Paḷḷippāna itself is a Śaiva ritual. It was stated earlier that Lord Śiva performed the first Paḷḷippāna. It is said that when Śiva and Pārvatī performed the Paḷḷippāna, the *bhūtagaṇas* accompanying them stood outside as Puranāṭis, guarding the venue of Pāna performance.

Pāna means song. Paḷḷippāna is the song sung in presence of the Lord. It is sung by Kūttāṭis 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:

*AnbiLittiñkaḷaṇiṇṭa purān*  
*Tirukkaṇṇil aṇjasā kanal nīrriyōṇē*  
*Adrimakaḷ putranum nandikēśanum*  
*Ayyanum vannanpoṭivarkku tukiloḷika*

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 Paḷḷippāna was begun to defend people against black magic and *abhiçāra* acts directed against Chempakasseri 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 Chempakasseri, who were [according to legend] trapped and nailed to the four corners of the temple by Putumana Nanpūṭiri, who was the *tantri* of the temple.

A special *yajña* stage is erected to perform Paḷḷippāna 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 Kūttāṭis of Chempakasseri, Kōyikkal,

Kunnankari, Eramuṅṭa, Neṭṭaśśēri and Ambalappuzha. Behind their cottages are the cottages for Maṅṅān and Gaṇakan. A special cottage is made for the Anpanāṭṭu Paṅikkar who holds an important position in many rituals of the Ambalappuzha temple. These cottages are erected facing the *yajña* stage or Paḷḷippāntal in front of the building attached to the Gaṇapati temple. Every day, the rituals begin as the chief priest brings out the *koymavaṭi* (stick symbolizing divine authority). *Koymavaṭi* is used as a symbol of authority. It is kept safely in a chamber in the west *naṭa* (street) of the temple. The responsibility for safekeeping is vested with Valiya Maṭṭattil Paṅikkar, the custodian of Ambalappuzha temple. He arrives and opens the chamber in the West Street, takes out the *koymavaṭi* with sword and shield, and hands them over to the chief priest. When the *yajña* is performed, the chief priest and Valiya Maṭṭattil Paṅikkar stay near the *koymavaṭi*. They can leave the stage only when the *koymavaṭi* is returned.

The function starts after ritually keeping the *koymavaṭi* in the Paḷḷippāntal. The chief priest performs certain rituals and sprinkles paddy and rice ritually on the heads of Kūttāṭis and gives permission for beginning the Ōttu. Sitting in their cottage, beating the Para (drum), the Velans sing the Ōttu. They hold deer horns and *ilaṅji* flowers in their hands. To remove defects in the Lord's image, they sing in groups, beating the Para, and perform *uḷicciḷ* at every beat of tala. The *uḷicciḷ* is performed thrice during the day. *Uḷicciḷ* 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 tāḷa* (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. Kūttāṭis perform the ritual with devotion, accompanied by the instruments played rhythmically.

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

*Chandanam neṟimēḷ chillippurikattēḷ*  
*Aṅjanakkaṅṅimēḷ ponnōlakkāṭimēḷ*

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

Ōttu is performed till 5.30 in the evening. Muṟōttu is performed after *dīpārāḍhanā* (worship with lamps) and *attāḷa pūja* (night worship).

It is usually stated that Muṟōttu is the Ōttu performed after arranging all the required items on a *muṟam*. But this writer is of the opinion that Muṟōttu counteracts Ōttu. The Velas have adapted the relevant portions of the Mahabharata story for Ōttu. 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 Pāñchālī (wife of the Pāṇḍavas), learns about this and revives the Pāṇḍavas. Here, Vēlatti performs Muṛōttu to rejuvenate the Pāṇḍavas, counteracting the Ōttu performed by the Vēlan.

Muṛōttu begins with the verse:

*Mūlamariñjoru vēlan vannu  
Muṛayōttōtippāna niratti  
Śaktiketum piṇiyōliyū enre tampurāne*

The Vēlan came, knowing the truth  
Uttered the counter-Ōttu, spread *pāna*  
O my Lord, remove the weakening effect

The Ōttu begins only after singing praises of Śiva and other gods. The musical instruments used for Muṛōttu are Paṇa and Tuṭi. In reality, Muṛōttu is more important in Paḷippāna rituals than Ōttu. The summary of the song sung by the Velatti while performing Muṛōttu is as follows :

In Tenmala, Bhāratamalai (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 Malayi 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 Ōttu, adorning himself with the divine symbol. All these gifts were presented to him by his Lord as compensation. To Malayi'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, Malayi understands everything. Convinced that by the order of King Duryodhana, her husband has 'frozen' the five Pāṇḍavas, Kunti and Pāñcālī by shadow-piercing, Malayi'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 Malayi will try to kill each other's Lords. Malayan says many things to tempt Malayi who proceeds to perform the ritual counteracting Malayan's mischief. He offers her a garland of diamonds gifted by his Lords. Malayi's reaction is—he could offer it to the next Malayi; her Lords are dearer to her than her life. She throws away the garland of diamonds in the forest. Seeing this, her son Maṇikaṅṭhan 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 Pāṇḍavas 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 *sañjivanam*, sprinkling grains of rice on the face and snapping her fingers, Malayi calls out 'Vāmakalē jivakōti' 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), Para 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 Gurunātu. That is where Malayan has shadow-pierced the Pāṇḍavas. Carrying the *kempu maṇi*, Malayi reaches there, performs Muṟōttu, and revives the Pāṇḍavas.

This story is sung by Vēlattis in Paḷlippāna. 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:

*Kunnipōl kaṅka| chuvannavaḷkkannēram  
Madayāna pōle viraṅṅu tuṭaṅṅināl  
Panni muṟintennāl pāyumu vaṅṅam  
Patarṅma iṅṅappuli kaṅakku  
Nannāy ciṅṅina nāgam pōle  
Nanamāna kāṅṅil maḷayepṅōle.*

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 Pāṇḍavas by Malayan.

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

*From Kāppukeṭtu to Kuruti in Purakkaḷam*

The ritual of Kāppukeṭtu (tying of *kāppu*) signifies the beginning of Paḷlippāna. Kāppukeṭtu

is performed in the Paḷḷippāna *pantal* (*shāmiana*). In the presence of Vēlans (Kūttāṭis), the Anpanāṭṭu Panikkar, Gaṇakan, Devaswom officials and local people, the chief priest ties six *kāppus* on the *koymavaṭi* brought from the temple after invocation. The *kāppus*, presented by six Kūttāṭis who take part in the Pāna, are attached with the *koymavaṭi* and tied. All are given golden *kāppus* except the Neṭṭāsēri Kūttāṭi, 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 Kūttāṭis to begin the Ōttu. Various rituals are performed daily, such as Rakṣākalaśa Pūjā, Bhiṣmarūpa Āvāhanam or Itupaṇam Ital, Nūrum Pālum, Maṇukiṭṭu Cāṭṭal, Antippēkāvalēral, Pānapiṭuttam, Brahman Puṇappāṭu, Kālikūṭam Tuḷḷal, Kālan Puṇappāṭu, Śāstam Puṇappāṭu, Bhāratam Tuḷḷal, Ceṛiya Kūnpubali, Kiṭuku Bali, Veḷichchappēṭal, Aṭavi, Śātru Eṭuppu, Valiya Kūnpubali, Puṇakkaḷam Kuruti, etc. With the removal of *kāppus* after performing these rituals, the fifteen-day-long Paḷḷippāna rituals are concluded. There are many details about these rituals, but it is not possible to discuss them all here. Rare rituals such as Bhiṣmarūpa Āvāhanam, Pānapiṭuttam, Kiṭuku Bali, Taṭṭu Bali, Aṭavi, etc., performed on the third day, arouse wonder and strengthen belief in the viewers. It is believed that the rituals of Maṇukiṭṭu Cāṭṭal and Kiṭuku Bali, performed standing on platforms built at a height of 11¼ *kol* in front of the Paḷḷippāntal, lead the viewers to the ecstasy of faith of a distant past. To prepare the Bhiṣmarūpam on the stage of *yajña*, it is prescribed that soil from the seven seas of *ōr*, salt, lotus, water, red lotus, fire and milk shall be brought. But such a Paḷḷippāna may never have taken place, except the one performed by Subrahmanya in the original story. Now Bhiṣmarūpam is made of soil from seven jetties, mixed with termite soil. It is believed that termite soil is pure. After the Bhiṣmarūpam is invoked, torrential rain is expected to take place. This is considered the fruitful culmination of the rituals. It happened in the Paḷḷippāna of 1990.

#### *Outside View*

From the outside, all these rituals may be seen as creations of devotion and purity of heart. Through the Paḷḷippāna, 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 Paḷḷippāna cleared the way to popular participation, removing restrictions on people of low caste and their creativity. In the rituals of Paḷḷippāna, prominence is given to castes such as Vēlan, Gaṇakan, Maṇṇān, etc. Anpanāṭṭu Paṇikkar, an Ezhava chief, holds a prominent position. Paḷḷippāna 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. Kunnankari Pankajakshi (seventy-two years old) who came to perform *murōttu* in 1990, spoke of the freedom and authority given to them during the period of Paḷḷippāna.

Leaving aside the path of faith, it may be stated that the folk art forms presented during the rituals of Paḷḷippāna reveal the true aesthetics of an earlier age. Kōlan Tuḷḷal, Kālikūṭam

Tuḷḷal, Śāstām Puṛappāṭu, etc., can be considered the underlying sources of the art and culture of Ambalappuzha. Paḷḷippāna 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 *lila* for the Lord. Getting an opportunity to take part in the ceremonies is itself a divine blessing.

*Translated from the Malayalam by A. Purushothaman*

#### *Acknowledgements*

The translator thanks the author, Dr Ambalappuzha Gopakumar, for his permission to translate and publish this chapter from his book. He also thanks Dr A. Harindranath of the Saha Institute of Nuclear Physics, Kolkata, for checking the English translation, incorporating the diacritical marks for Malayalam words, and, above all, keeping alive his interest in topics related to the Mahabharata.