

The *Rāmāyaṇa* Story in the Cākyār Kūttu Format

The Cākyār Kūttu is a striking element of the temple Kūṭiyāṭṭam theatre tradition¹ in Kerala (South India) that was and still is a temple ritual. Kūṭiyāṭṭam theatre as such concentrates on presenting the Sanskrit dramas according to its own rules referring to the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. The Kūṭiyāṭṭam artists belong to two communities of temple servants (*ampalavāsi*)—Cākyārs (actors) and Nampyār-Naṅṅyārs (musicians and actresses). Their profession is hereditary and only members of these communities can perform in the temple theatre (*kūttambalam*). The dramas staged in the temple theatre include those relating to the *Rāmāyaṇa* story—*Abhiṣekanāṭaka* and *Pratimānāṭaka* of Bhāsa, and *Āścaryacūdāmaṇi* of Śaktibhadra. These three dramas enacted together created a very unusual performance called *The Mahārāmāyaṇanāṭaka* of twenty-one acts (in following order *Āścaryacūdāmaṇi*, *Pratimā* and *Abhiṣeka*).² The presentation took one year and it used to be commissioned by the rulers of the Cochin kingdom for the special occasion. The three ‘*Rāmāyaṇa* dramas’ are still enacted, or rather some of their acts, in the Kūṭiyāṭṭam format.³

The *Rāmāyaṇa* motive is present in the Kūṭiyāṭṭam-lore not only while staging the Sanskrit dramas mentioned above. The Kūṭiyāṭṭam actors—Cākyārs—have their own stage form called Cākyār Kūttu or Prabandha Kūttu presenting stories of the Epics (the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*) and Purāṇas. It is a

1 About Kūṭiyāṭṭam see: Farley Richmond, ‘Kūṭiyāṭṭam’, in *Indian Theatre. Traditions of Performance*, Farley P. Richmond, Darius L. Swann, Phillip B. Zarrilli, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1993 (1st published Honolulu 1990), pp. 87–129; Bożena Śliwczyńska, *Tradycja teatru świątecznego kudijattam*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Akademickie Dialog, 2009.

2 The last act of the *Abhiṣeka* is divided into two in the stage presentation of the *Mahārāmāyaṇanāṭaka*.

3 According to the Kūṭiyāṭṭam rules, an act of the play is enacted as a full-fledged performance, preceded by two stage segments: *puṛappāṭu* (the ritual of beginning) and *nirvahaṇa* (a flashback) that can last for many days.

solo performance dominated by just one Vidūṣaka⁴ who is the master storyteller here. He is definitely a drama personage, although his presence onstage during the Cākyār Kūttu has nothing to do with his role in the dramas in which he participates, except for his humour and wit and, importantly, the freedom to ridicule anyone, including those of highest rank and esteem. The episodes from the *Mahābhārata* and Purāṇas are not presented in a ‘chronological order’, only the most popular ones are chosen for staging. The *Rāmāyaṇa* may occasionally be performed fragmentary as well. However, there is tradition that the whole *Rāmāyaṇa* story is presented in consecutive episodes. At the moment such a performance is only staged in the Vaṭakkunātha (Śīva) temple in Trichur (central Kerala) on regular basis.⁵ The Cākyār Kūttu is held for forty-one days every year (in the period of August-September-October) in accordance with the temple ritual calendar. The *Rāmāyaṇa* story in the Cākyār Kūttu format takes about 160–170 days to be completed. The full presentation spans three-four years.⁶ The Cākyār Kūttu performance is meant to be a ritual offering to the God who resides in the temple.

The performance always starts with stage rituals that must be conducted every day of the Cākyār Kūttu cycle: lightening the stage lamp with the fire brought from the *sanctum sanctorum* (*garbha grha*), the initial drumming (the *miḷavu* drum played by a Nampyār), and sounding the idiophones (the *tālam* by a Nañnyār). Only then does Vidūṣaka enter the stage, saluting the *miḷavu* first, after which he performs his special *nitya kriyās*, i.e. praising all quarters of the world and their divine guardians while presenting his own nature with characteristic gestures and poses. Later on, he recites an invocation (*pīṭhikā*) that is relatively long and in its final part the name of god is invoked—here Rāmacandra.⁷

4 For more about Vidūṣaka in the Kūṭiyāṭṭam theatre see: Kiḷḷimaṅgalam Vāsudevan Nampūtirippāt, ‘Kūṭiyāṭṭatile vidūṣakan,’ *Bhaktapriya*, āgaṣṭ 2001, pp. 35–37; Śliwczyńska Bożena, *Tradycja teatru świątynnego*, pp. 179–204.

5 The *Rāmāyaṇa* Kūttu is occasionally presented in the Kūṭalmāṅikkam temple in Irinjalakuda, albeit with certain intervals in the episode succession. In this article, I shall use terms *Rāmāyaṇa* Cākyār Kūttu or *Rāmāyaṇa* Kūttu.

6 In this paper, I refer to my long-term field research (1998-up today) on the Kūṭiyāṭṭam theatre tradition including the Cākyār Kūttu; here especially I refer to the two cycles of the *Rāmāyaṇa* Cākyār Kūttu that took place in the Vaṭakkunātha temple. The first began in August 2003 and finished in September 2006, the second started in August 2009 and ended in October 2012. They were presented by Ammannūr Parameśvara Kuṭṭan Cākyār with a few day help of his nephew Ammannūr Rājānīś Cākyār (in the second cycle).

7 Nārāyaṇa, Kṛṣṇa, Parameśvara when the *Mahābhārata* or Purāṇic stories are enacted. The rest of the invocation text remains the same.

After completing his ritual of beginning (*purappāṭu*),⁸ Vidūṣaka begins his flow of incredible storytelling.

The presentation is based on the *Rāmāyaṇaprabandha* that represents a *campū* type of *kāvya* where both verses (*padya*) and prose (*gadya*) occur. The text is in Sanskrit with a couple of Prakrit stanzas. There are altogether around 850 passages (*padya* and *gadya*) in the printed edition,⁹ although their number may be dissimilar depending on the certain Cākyār family tradition. The *Rāmāyaṇaprabandha* is a composition-compilation of Nampyār and Cākyār of several generations, a text of ‘long-term formation’. Definitely the composers made use of popular stanzas of other poets and included them in the text. A striking element of the *Rāmāyaṇaprabandha* are the numerous interpolations from the *prabandhas* of Melputtūr Nārāyaṇa Bhaṭṭattiri (16th-17th century). He is a famous *prabandha* composer, among his works we can find *prabandhas* on isolated episodes of the *Rāmāyaṇa*,¹⁰ some of them incorporated into the *Rāmāyaṇaprabandha* text in longer or shorter fragments. One must know that while presenting the *Rāmāyaṇa* story onstage, the actor can modify it and add new stanzas or prose, as was practised in the past as well as today. Some of them retained and formatted the text that was then orally transmitted to successive generations. Such was the origin of the *Rāmāyaṇaprabandha* performed in the Cākyār Kūttu format nowadays. Most probably the urtext was created much earlier than the seventeenth century.

The text performed onstage (the stage text), though based on the *Rāmāyaṇaprabandha*, creates its own narrative structure. In fact, it may slightly differ in every *Rāmāyaṇa* Cākyār Kūttu cycle. Many portions are omitted or swap places, while some stanzas taken from different sources are added to lighten up an episode or a sub-episode. Vālmīki’s *Rāmāyaṇa* stanzas are often incorporated into the stage text as well as stanzas from the ‘*Rāmāyaṇa* dramas’ presented in the Kūṭiyāṭṭam theatre. Just to mention a battle between Bālī and Sugrīva in the *Bālīvadha* episode where three stanzas from the first act of the

8 More about the *purappāṭu* segment see Bożena Śliwczynska, ‘The Ritual of Beginning. The *Purappāṭu* Segment of the Kūṭiyāṭṭam Theatre Tradition,’ in *Theatrum Mirabiliorum Indiae Orientalis: A Volume to Celebrate the 70th Birthday of Professor Maria Krzysztof Byrski (Rocznik Orientalistyczny)*, vol. 60, no. 2, 2007, ed. Monika Nowakowska and Jacek Woźniak, pp. 357–361.

9 *Rāmāyaṇam prabandham*, ed. Koccampilī Maṭhattil Rāman Nampyār, Trṣṣivaperūr: Bhārattha Prass, 1930. The text is in Malayalam script and accompanied by a short commentary (*laghuvyākhyā*) as well as translation into Malayalam by K. M. Rāman Nampyār.

10 A famous *Śūrpaṅakhāpralāpa* (or *Niranunāsika*) composed without nasal sounds, then *Rākṣasotpati*, *Tārakavadha*, *Ahalyāmokṣa*, *Bālakāṇḍa*.

Abhiṣekanāṭaka by Bhāsa are added¹¹ to describe in detail the figures of two brothers engaged in lethal a fratricidal struggle. But there is something more peculiar and interesting in the Cākyār Kūttu presentation. All *padya* and *gadya* fragments recited onstage are explained and commented by Vidūṣaka, the narrator of the *Rāmāyaṇa* story, in Maṇipravāḷam (Sanskritized Malayalam). The method of presentation is as follows: a stanza or prose passage is recited in Sanskrit, then Vidūṣaka concentrates on certain phrases or words, repeats them in Sanskrit, and translates them into Maṇipravāḷam. However, it is not a mere, or literary translation, but a rather annotated one. Such treatment of the text opens ‘unlimited space’ for Vidūṣaka’s individual interpretation that sometimes goes much beyond the topic of the recited portion. He can also refer to actual public events or affairs and to spectators gathered in front of the stage. Thus, no wonder, that the stage text is a creation of its own. The *Rāmāyaṇa* Kūttu is foremost based on the *vācīkābhīnaya* (a stage technique based on sounds or words) with a slight addition of *āṅgīkābhīnaya* (a stage technique based on body movements).

According to the tradition, the *Rāmāyaṇaprabandha* must be preceded by a presentation of the *Rākṣasotpati* (or *Rākṣasolpatti* in Malayalam script notation) composed in the *prabandha* style by Melputtūr Nārāyaṇa Bhaṭṭattiri. Thus, the wrong is to be born first, then the right can enter the world (the stage). The text consists of 94 passages¹² (*padya* and *gadya*). Its method of delivery is as described above, although there are no additional stanzas incorporated into the stage text. The whole presentation of the *Rākṣasotpati* (*The Origin of Rākṣasa—Rāvaṇa*) always lasts 13 days. The staging of the succeeding episodes and sub-episodes is ‘uneven’. Yet, each and every portion of the text recited onstage must be commented, though Vidūṣaka can pay little or more attention to certain episode-stanzas and explain them in depth or in short. The story begins with the advent of two Rākṣasas, Heti (the first demon king known for taking possession of Sūrya’s chariot) and Praheti (a pious one leading a life of the hermit). Subsequently, the sons of Sukeśa Rākṣasa, Māli and Sumāli demons, appear. The latter is a father of Kaikaśī (who is called *manasvinī kanyakā* or ‘a young lady suitable

11 Bhāsa—*Abhiṣeka* I, 10; I, 11; I, 12. The latter is incorporated into the *Rāmāyaṇaprabandha* text, the first two are added to the stage text. All three stanzas are popular and very much elaborated during the *Bālīvadha* Kūṭiyāṭṭam (thus of the first act of the *Abhiṣeka* presentation). For example, enacting the stanza (I, 10), where Viṣṇu ‘lotus-like eyes’ are mentioned, can take an hour or so, since that particular phrase gives an opportunity to concentrate more on the Viṣṇu figure, especially on his Narasiṃha *avatāra*.

12 According to the printed text of the *Rākṣasotpati* added to the *Rāmāyaṇam prabandham*, ed. Koccampilli Maṭhattil Rāman Nampyār 1930. There are 96 stanzas in the text according to the *Prabandhamāñjarī. Melputtūr Nārāyaṇa Bhaṭṭa viracitaprabandhāḥ*, ed. N.P. Unni, Rāṣṭriya-Saṃskṛta-Saṃsthānam, Dillī 1998.

for marriage¹³), a mother-to-be of Rāvaṇa. Sage Pulasya and his son Viśravas, a father-to be of Rāvaṇa, appear in due course as well. Since the future parents of the main figure of the story are mentioned, soon the birth of Daśamukhī (Rāvaṇa), their first offspring, is announced and commented. Then the narrative quickly unfolds presenting different accounts of the remarkable couple's son (Brāhmaṇa Ṛṣi, thus the *ṛṣi* who is a descendant of god Brahmā, and Rākṣasī). The episode of Daśamukhī's severe penance and a great boon (of not being killed by gods, heavenly beings like Gandharvas and others, demons, inhabitants of the underworld)¹⁴ received from Brahmā is much evaluated. The boon, in fact, defines all future deeds of young Rākṣasa. It is a turning point in the story, very much commented by Vidūṣaka. One of the most elaborated episodes onstage is lifting the mount Kailāsa with Śiva-Pārvatī in a love quarrel. The episode is fairly complex, so there is much scope for Vidūṣaka's reflections on the subject—a detailed description of the mountain, remarks on a new name (Rāvaṇa) given to Rākṣasa by Śiva, discussing love passion and the nature of female beings, ridiculing the phenomenon of self-admiration. Rāvaṇa's successive conquest of three worlds and subduing all enemies gives Vidūṣaka an opportunity not only to comment on various victories (Rāvaṇa's bravery is extolled, as well as his enormous pride, though the latter is often ridiculed), and to describe the nature of Trailokya and the residents of the *svarga-bhūmi-pātāla*. He particularly remarks on human beings inhabiting the *bhūmi*. It is a perfect possibility to criticize the *trivarna* society,¹⁵ the Brahmins above, as well as to refer to current local affairs. Since we are in the South, it is no wonder that the figure of Rāvaṇa is treated with a certain friendly attitude. His softness of character is greatly emphasized and underlined in Vidūṣaka's *vyākhyā* with reference to Rāvaṇa's filial dedication to his mother Kaikaśī, his devotion to Brahmā and Śiva in particular, his responsibility for the Lanḱā, along with his affection and care for Mandodarī (the first wife). The *Rākṣasotpati* finishes with a picture of Rāvaṇa as the mighty king of the Lanḱā kingdom and conqueror of Trailokya. The great glory of Rāvaṇa is indisputable. He enjoys his unquestionable position (for the time being), joyfully wandering through his imperial dominion extending over three worlds, occasionally shaking the worlds to remind them who is their only Sovereign.¹⁶

13 *Rākṣasotpati* 22 (*gadya*) and a commentary (*vyākhyā*).

14 Humans are not mentioned as they served as food for Rākṣasas.

15 The fourth *varṇa* (*śudras*) is not worth mentioning according to the stage text.

16 *Maghonastadghoraṃ kuliśamalasīkṛtya samare bhunakti svārājyaṃ tribhuvanabhaṭṭayaṃ daśamukhaḥ / śriyo nānāvāsbhramaṇaramaṇīya capalatām mavacchidya svaminnapi bhujavane pūrayati yah; Rākṣasotpati* 94. This is the last stanza of the *Rākṣasotpati* text as well as of the stage text.

Thus, the story of the origin of Rākṣasas and their most prominent scion Rāvaṇa has to be presented as a separated unit of the whole *Rāmāyaṇa* performance. The *durātman* ('evil-natured') hero is born and he has played his role in the wrong for the *ātman* ('good-natured') hero to appear. Such an arrangement refines further narrative stage presentation. Later on in the performance, there are only short references to Rāvaṇa's early stage of life (before the advent of Rāma), mainly in the Vidūṣaka's explanatory text. The *Rākṣasotpati* is a full-blooded story with an intimate touch towards the figure of the magnificent Rākṣasa who is the worthy enemy of the saviour to come.

Definitely the time is right for the saviour was born. Evil has governed the three worlds for too long. The *Rāmāyaṇaprabandha* follows the order of the main succeeding episodes of Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, from the *Bālakāṇḍa* to the *Yuddhakāṇḍa* in general. There is no doubt that Rāma is considered a divinity. He is addressed as Bhagavān Śrī Rāmacandra (Vidūṣaka's text). The initial invocation (*pīṭhikā*) contains his name and blessings (*sa Rāmacandra vaḥ pāyāt*). Please note that his name appears in the invocation only the moment he is born as a son of Daśaratha (after a week of staging the text); previously, a name of Padmanābha is invoked. Thus, Rāma is considered an incarnation of Viṣṇu. In his *avatāra*-life, he is perceived as a human being, the supreme human being (*nara-deva*). From the first stanza, the story is settled in Ayodhyā, a glorious capital town of the kings of the Raghu's ancestry, in the kingdom of Kosala. The well-known events keep unfolding onstage. The episodes significant for the story are elaborated in detail: Rāma's birth, his marriage with Sītā, court intrigues leading to his exile—all are discussed by Vidūṣaka at some length. However, the most elaborated and commented are the episodes while in exile: Śūrpaṅkhā's tragic love affair and her mutilation,¹⁷ Sītā's abduction by Rāvaṇa, Jaṭāyu's death, Vālin-Sugrīva conflict, Rāvaṇa's advances to Sītā in the *Aśokavanikā* (Sītā's disapproval of Rāvaṇa's actions very much emphasized), Hanumān with a ring as Rāma's messenger, a war with Rāvaṇa and Rāma's victory over the Rākṣasa king of Laṅkā.¹⁸ The death of Rāvaṇa caused by Rāma purifies Trailokyā. The magnificent Rākṣasa himself attains a final liberation (*mokṣa*) and heavenly happiness (*Rāvaṇasvargasantoṣam*; Vidūṣaka's text). The *Rāmāyaṇa*

¹⁷ In this episode we can find four initial stanzas from the *Śūrpaṅkhāpralāpa* (*Niranu-nāsikaprabandha*) of Melputtūr Nārāyaṇa Bhaṭṭattiri. See *Rāmāyaṇam prabandham* 366, 367, 368, 371.

Her loss of nose (and ears) due to Lakṣmaṇa's cruel action seems to matter less to her than the loss of her breasts. Vidūṣaka vividly describes her figure shedding streams of blood that flow from her cut nostrils, ears and breasts.

¹⁸ The episodes of the exile are particularly popular with the audience, not only in the Kūttu presentation, in the Kūṭiyāṭṭam drama staging as well.

Kūttu storytelling finishes with Vibhīṣaṇa's coronation as a new ruler of Rākṣasas. Rāma-the-Conqueror goes back to Sāketa (Ayodhyā) with his wife Sītā and his dearest friend Sugrīva (*priyasakha*).¹⁹ The final benedictory stanza clarifies that he is crowned there.

The general structure of the daily performance unit is as mentioned earlier. Usually it lasts two hours in the Vaṭakkunātha temple. After completing the everyday ritual of beginning with the final invocation stanzas, Vidūṣaka takes a seat in the front of the stage lamp. First, he recites a summary of the past events of the previous performance days, and only then does he continue the episode or start a new one. A number of stanzas recited and commented is not defined for a certain performance unit. It depends on the episode or sub-episode, but first and foremost on the text and speech versatility of the Cākyār-Vidūṣaka. Thus, the number of stanzas can vary from a couple up to twenty or twenty-five per daily Kūttu. The privilege of being the only stanza presented in a performance unit is traditionally given to the one containing the words of grief-stricken Sumitrā to her son Lakṣmaṇa. The very short stanza of few yet meaningful words offers Vidūṣaka a whole spectrum of lectures (divided into twelve segments) concerning the duties of the individual towards others as well as comments on the varied unexpected issues of fate.²⁰

The *Rāmāyaṇa* Kūttu focuses on the story of Rāma. His name is frequently extolled, although his figure does not dominate the stage presentation. The hero is somehow overshadowed by other characters who have their due share in the story performed. Well, without any doubt, they and their deeds are a better target for Vidūṣaka's witty and critical (even hypercritical) comments than Bhagavān Śrī Rāmacandra.²¹ However, it must be stated that irrespective of the multifarious episodes and their 'narrative personages', it is Rāma to be praised at their conclusion. The whole multilevel narrative structure is subdued to glorify Śrī Rāma.

Vidūṣaka of the Cākyār Kūttu is not 'a frolicking idiot' (in general public opinion) of the Sanskrit dramas, but a person of immense wisdom. He is considered a perfect teacher of the divine and mundane affairs, a great sage (*mahārṣi*) who explains the divine to the humans. He tells the story of Rāma, weaving into it multiplied subordinary narratives. Though they often stray away from the mainstream narration, they enlighten in order to finally merge with it. The *Rāmāyaṇa* story with all its complexity serves the superb stage *ācārya* to

19 Concluding stanza of the *Rāmāyaṇam prabandham* 848.

20 *rāmamdaśaratham viddhi mām viddhi janakātmajām ayodhyāmaṭvīm viddhi gaccha tāta yathāsukham; Rāmāyaṇam prabandham* 253.

21 Though Rāma is not completely spared from humorous remarks of the narrator.

provide people with wise instructions on how to lead a dharmic life. Thus he, the temple bard who extols the right and condemns the wrong, should be considered as a genuine creator of the *Rāmāyaṇa* Cākyār Kūttu narrative structure.

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