

## Kavalam Narayana Panikkar (1928-2016): A Tribute

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Kavalam, a small village alongside the backwaters of Kerala is today known after a thespian par excellence. Kavalam Narayana Panikkar who carried along with him not just the name of his village, but the rhythm of folk, while in search of the 'roots' of Indian art forms. With a profound knowledge of the folk arts of Kerala such as *Theyyam*, *Padayani*, *Koodiyattam* and *Kakkarishi Natakam*<sup>1</sup>, he became advocate of the "Theatre of Roots" along with Habib Tanvir, Vijay Tendulkar, Ratan Tiyaam and Girish Karnad. His contributions to the revival of *Tanathu* (indigenous) art forms remain unsurpassed.

K. N. Panikkar, popularly known as Kavalam was born into an affluent family with rich cultural heritage of Kuttanad; he worked relentlessly for the revival of native theatre by incorporating classical, folk and western theaters, though not without criticism. Even as a theatre doyen, he was involved in *kalari*<sup>2</sup> till his last days, meditating over his latest drama *Rithambar*.<sup>3</sup> He remained a multitalented artist and made significant contributions as a playwright, director, lyricist and singer.

K. N. Panikkar would have remained a lawyer had his disposition not inclined to the culture abundance around him. His six years practice after obtaining a law degree was replaced by an artistic career spanning over half a century, transcending the discipline with an extensive repertoire of folk art. When in late 1950's he wrote, directed and acted in his first play *Panchayat*, he was not completely into theatre. It was during his ten year service as the secretary of the Kerala Sangeeta Nataka Akademi (1961-1971) that he developed a broad view on dramaturgy. His association with legendary artists and scholars like Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavathar, Mani Madhava Chakyar, Attoor Krishna Pisharody, M.D. Ramanathan and Njaralath Rama Poduval while documenting their art and life for the archives, gave him concrete idea regarding performing art forms. His exposure to Sanskrit language helped him to direct Bhasa's plays like *Madhyama Vyayogam* (1978), *Urubhangam* (1983), and *Karnabharam* (1984) and Kalidasa *Vikramorvasiyam* (1981) and *Shakuntalam* (1982), which brought out his talent and earned him wide acclaim. He became the founder Director of 'Sopanam', the theatre wing of Bhasabharati. His extensive research about various art forms in Kerala helped him to develop a new wave of thought, which could democratize 'poetic drama' devoid of proscenium and curtain.

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While post-independence drama was in search of the 'long lost identity', Panikkar was stepping into Kerala theatre field, where playwrights like C.N. Sreekandan Nair, C.J. Thomas, N.N. Pillai, M. Govindan and G. Sankara Pillai were the towering figures. Though Ibsenian realism worked in the background of professional theatre, new experiments brought by *Jatra* in Bengal, *Tamasha* in Maharashtra and *Yakshagana* in Karnataka fascinated a group of dramatists in Kerala, they thought of reviving native drama under the title called *Tanathu Natakavedhi*<sup>4</sup> (indigenous theatre). Their efforts to reclaim Indian theatre were based on the strategies adopted by the proponents of "Theatre of Roots" like Sombhu Mitra, Utpal Dutt, Habib Tanvir, Shanta Gandhi, Satyadev Dubey, Ratan Tiyam, Badal Sircar, and Girish Karnad. Though M. Govindan and C.N. Sreekandan Nair took the baton in Kerala, it was K.N. Panikkar's works that became the backbone of the movement, the latter among the pioneers considered him as artistic heir. When C.N.'s play *kali* (1968) failed to catch the audience's mind, Panikkar's drama groups; 'Koothambalam', 'Sopanam' and 'Thiruvvarangu' successfully performed dramas. His plays like *Sakshi* (1964), which inaugurated poetic drama, *Thiruvazithaar* (1976) and *Avanavan Kadamba* (1978) were initially rated low by dramatists; some of them lambasted him over the experimental techniques. Even when people conformed to the traditional theatre calling his dramas as low quality burlesque, he never lost his mind. At a time when the proponents of 'Theatre of roots' demanded the 'decolonization of creative forms and cultural modes'<sup>5</sup>, Panikkar successfully challenged western dramatic culture by reclaiming the indigenous theatre. He did not give much weight to the immediate past; rather he looked back to the heydays of great dramatists like Bhasa and Kalidasa.

Panikkar understood the importance of theory and praxis with a deep understanding of *Natyashastra* and *Kalaripayattu*<sup>6</sup>, and proclaimed his theatre as a 'total theatre'; a theatre which could subsume folk, native and foreign elements at the same time. He also incorporates stories, music, dance steps, rhythms into the performance. Both his Sanskrit and Malayalam plays underwent experiments, which made him acceptable among all types of audience. His first major directorial attempt was *Madhyama Vyayogam* (1979), a Sanskrit drama for 'Kalidas Samaroh' in Ujjain was well received by the audience. Later he implemented the techniques of *Natyashastra* in the Sanskrit play *Dhootavakyam* (1996) using artists from Madhya Pradesh, though he did not really stick to the rules of the text, he extracted the elements necessary to enrich his plays. His approach in drama was mostly psychophysical, and focused on two main aspects in the theatre. The first preference was given to the body; he believed the body as the primary tool in conveying ideas. He found traditional martial art *Kalaripayattu* as an effective method to train artists. He noted the strong tradition of Manipur dance, and connected it to the use of regional martial system *Thangtha*. For him, this martial art provided the necessary exposure to 'sarira bhava' (body expression). The second aspect was the mind of the actor, the actor has to transcend his/her identity into, this is achieved through the tribal ritual which actors would do in the initial part of the performance. The transformation of actors into characters along with the precision achieved through 'sarira bhava' makes the character live during uninterrupted scenes.

Understanding the limitations of *Koothambalams* (traditional theatre for performance), which are not accessible to common people, he thought of a theatre accessible for people belonging to all walks of life. For this, he explored the possibilities of *Kathakali* and *Koodiyattam* in extracting *mudras* (symbols), *Padayani* and *Theyyam* in mask and costumes, *Chakyar Koothu* and *Ottan Thullal* in narration and presentation, he also used the elements of *Kakkarithi Natakam* in shaping the performance. He incorporated stories, archetypal images, and parables in dramas by recreating myths using folk elements. His theatre focused on dramatic structure revolving around a myth, the songs, humour props and colour pattern were absorbed from various folk arts. The ritualistic behavior was inherently related to the myth used in the drama,

which in turn were mostly pro-environment based themes. He used these elements to enhance the concept of 'drishya kavya' (visual poetry), with structure, rhythm, and measured movement. His major plays like *Urubhangam*, *Karnabharam*, and *Madhyam Vyayoga* are good example of these kinds of experiments. His theatre had the quintessence of *Natyasastra*, Folk elements and Poetry. Panikkar's deep knowledge in folk philosophy was one which stood for nature. He could see Urvashi in *Vikramorvasiyam* and Chekki in *Arambachakkan*<sup>7</sup> embodying the spirit of nature. He finds the deep philosophy about the relationship between the man and nature and Aramban as the Orpheus, an archetypal persona, involved with nature. He even tries to solve the fissures in Grecian myths with the folktales, thus recreating it according to the Indian sensibility. *Iliayana*, which he produced along with Greek Theatre group 'Volos', was a combination of *Ramayana* and Greek epic *Iliad*.

From a poet to playwright and then to director, he produced 26 plays in Malayalam plays among which *Sakshi* (1964), *Avanavankadamba* (1975), *Ottayan* (1988), *Karimkutty* (1983), *Koyma* (1986), *Theyya Theyyam* (1990), and *Poranadi* (1995) are most popular. Veteran actors Nedumudi Venu, Bharath Gopi and director G. Aravinda were the usual faces in his *Kalari*. He has directed two movies about the greatest *Koodiyattam* maestro legendary actor *Guru Mani Madhava Chakyar: The Master at Work* (1994) and *Parvati Viraham* (1993) in *Koodiyattam* form featuring Mani Madhava Chakyar as Ravana. As a poet he wrote lines which carried the folk rhythm, he coined words and expressions which could go with the *tala* (rhythm). Rustic images and words with dynamic rhythms made his poems popular; they were similar to the poems of Kadammanitta. As a lyricist in Malayalam cinema, he has written for film like, *Vadakakkoru Hridayam* (1978), *Marmaram* (1982) and *Ulsavapittenu* (1988), and has won Kerala State Film Award for Best Lyrics. It was Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, the then Chairperson of the Central Sangeet Natak Akademi, who asked him to do something for the revival of Mohiniyattam. His research in the *Sopana Sangeetham* and *Mohiniyattam* led to the thought of incorporating the songs of *Sopana Sangeetham* into the female dance form, which he found more congruous than Karnatic songs. He was conferred upon Padmabhushan and Central Sangita Nataka Akademi Fellowship for his peerless contributions in arts. He also received prestigious Kalidas Samman Award for Theatre in 1996, the National Award from the Sangeet Natak Akademi for Theatre Direction in 1983, and the Kerala State Sahitya Akademi Award for the best Playwright in 1974.

Panikkar gave major part of his life to revive indigenous theatre, which in turn was the revival of myths and folk culture, which were on the verge of extinction. He was a true artist who enjoyed smaller audience that could relate to the theme of the play rather than a huge audience that fails to catch the true meaning of what he presented. Panikkar as an artist faced a lot of challenges in life, but he just transformed them into possibilities; thus his life and contributions to the revival of Indigenous art forms remain an epitome of artistic perseverance.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> A satirical dance-drama based on the legends of Lord Siva and his consort Parvathy and Ganga, where they assumed human forms as *Kakkalan* and *Kakkathi*- a nomadic tribe of fortune tellers.
- <sup>2</sup> A school or training hall where martial arts or theatrical performances are practiced.
- <sup>3</sup> Last drama written by K.N. Panikkar. He could not stage the drama due to serious health issues.
- <sup>4</sup> The indigenous theatre in Kerala, the name was coined by dramatist M. Govindan.

5. As said by Suresh Awasti, former general secretary of Sangeet Natak Akademi coined the term “Theatre of Roots”
6. A traditional form of martial art in Kerala, originated in the Sangam Age.
7. Erin B. Mee directed Panikkar’s *Arambachakkan*. Her experience while doing this drama is shared in the article *Kavalam Narayana Panikkar: Meaning into Action*.