

TEMPLE MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS OF KERALA AND ITS MAKERS

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ABSTRACT

Temple instruments, particularly in Kerala, hold a significant place in the cultural and religious landscape, often playing an integral role in rituals, festivals, and processions. These instruments, known as *Kshetra Vadyangal* (temple instruments), are a crucial part of the traditional temple orchestra. The interplay of music, dance, and devotion in these performances mirrors the intricate relationship between Kerala's sacred art forms and the temple musical instruments, which are integral to both worship and the expression of cultural identity. Instruments like the Chenda, Thimila, Idakka, Maddalam, Chengila, Ilathalam and Kombu are not merely musical tools but spiritual mediators, their rhythms and sounds resonating with the pulse of temple rituals and festivals. These instruments form the backbone of temple performances like Melam and Panchavadyam, linking tradition with divine celebration. Musical instruments in Kerala hold as much significance as the art forms they accompany. While the artists who play these instruments have garnered worldwide recognition, the skilled craftsmen who create them often remain in the shadows, unacknowledged for their invaluable contributions. In this article, I aim to shed light on the temple musical instruments of Kerala and the often-overlooked artisans who bring them to life.

Keywords: Temple, Musical Instruments, Kerala, Instrument Makers, festivals

INTRODUCTION

It is believed that Kerala's cultural heritage is almost a century old. Though the people of Kerala belong to different religions, we have our own unique heritage of language, literature, unique art forms, festivals, life styles, rituals, worship practices etc. Kerala's artforms like Northern 's theyyam (Theyyam is a ritualistic performance that is a blend of dance, music, and devotion, and is considered a channel to god), Southern Malabar 's thirayattom (a tribal art form that combines dance, acting, songs, music, face writing, martial arts, and rituals), Padayani (an ancient ritualistic dance performed in temples), kathakali (story play), thullal (recite and-dance artform), poorakkali(Festival Performance - It is a traditional dance ritual performed by men during the nine-day Pooram festival in Bhagavathy temples across North Malabar in Kerala State of south India), thiruvathira (an important dance and music festival dedicated to Lord Siva), Sopanasangeetham (a special music rendered at the steps leading to the Sanctum sanctorum of the temple), keli (formal announcement of the performance done in the evening when drums and cymbals are played for a while in the courtyard) are considered as the cultural symbols of our state . Musical instruments in Kerala are as much important as these artforms. Though the artists associated with musical instruments are being won world-wide renown, the hands that make these instruments are often ignored. In this article I am attempting to elucidate about temple musical instruments and its makers of Kerala.

A number of instruments are used in Indian music. They are classified as Thanthrivadyas (stringed instruments), Sushiravadyas (Wind Instrument), Avanadhavadyas (percussion instruments), Ghanavadyas (Mettallic Instrument). Sarngadeva, in his book Sangeeta Ratnakaram, says ' Geetham vaadhyam thadha nrutham thrayam sangeethamuchyathe (Music is a composition of song, instrument and dance). Vaadhyam, also means musical instrument. Vadyam also means musical art form. Our Kerala is rich in number and variety of musical instruments. The richness of its tradition in this field surpasses any other states in India. Besides the musical instruments of Kerala temples deserve much attention. Temple musical instruments are closely connected with temple rituals, festivals, religion cultural heritage. It is said that around 18 different type of musical instruments are used in Kerala temples. But the is still disagreement that which all instruments are included in this group. Chenda, Thimila, Idakka, Madhalam, Kombu, Kuzhal, Chengila, Ilathalam Maram, Shankhu are the dominant musical instruments employed in temples. There instruments are classified into deva (divine) and asura (demon) vaadhyas. Deva musical instruments are played inside the sanctorum whereas the asura ones are performed outside the sanctorum.

CHENDA

The Chenda is a traditional percussion instrument widely used in the temples of Kerala. It is the most significant percussion instrument among all other musical instruments of Kerala. There is no other musical instrument that produces a loud as a sound as the chenda. It, an asura vaadhya, is an important temple musical instrument in Kerala. It is also an indispensable instrument in art performances like thayampaka, paandy, panchaari, kathakali, koodiyaattom, and theyyam.

THIMILA

The Thimila is another significant percussion instrument from Kerala, commonly used in temple music ensembles, particularly in the Panchavadyam (a traditional temple orchestra featuring five instruments). It plays a key role in maintaining rhythm and tempo in temple festivals and religious rituals. Thimila is an unavoidable instrument in temples where Seeveli (the procession of elephants in temple festivals of Kerala and the main deity is carried by one of the tuskers) is held every day. This musical instrument is also used in temple rituals like sreebhoothabali [the Utsava vigraha of the Lord (a miniature of the idol in panchaloha) is taken around] and sreebali ((This is the festival of three Goddesses who had been asked by Sreevallabha to protect Thiruvalla and it is conducted when they come to the Sreevallabha Temple to meet both the Lords).

IDAKKA

Idakka, known as Deva Vadyam, is considered the most revered percussion instrument in Kerala. It is an hourglass-shaped drum, not as long as the Timila. Idakka hung over the left shoulder, the right side is played with a stick, while tension is adjusted with the left hand. Typically played by Marars of the Ambalavasi community, it features in traditional Kerala forms like Panchavadyam, Kathakali, Koodiyattam, Krishnanattam, and Mohiniyattam. The name 'idakka' possibly originates from "idakku" (centre) in Malayalam. When unused, Idakka is suspended near the temple's sanctum sanctorum, not placed on the floor. Its name is believed to derive from 'dakka', an instrument tied to Lord Shiva's trisula, transforming into 'idakka'.

MADDALAM

Maddalam is an Avanadha vadya which is used in Keli, Panchavaadhya, Kathakali and krishanattam. It's a cumbersome instrument which is hung around the person playing. Maddalam is made of jackfruit wood. This is known as a Deva vadyam. The Shape of the Maddalam which is found in Kerala is similar to Mridangam, though there are a few important differences in the structure and playing technique. The Maddalam is tied round the waist in such a way that the instrument will be in front of the player in a horizontal position. There are two type of maddalam: Sudha maddalam and thoppimaddalam. Sudha madhalam is the most common instrument we use. The percussionist uses his right hand on its left head and left hand on its right head. Thoppi madhalom, a miniature of sudhamadhalam, is used in kottippadi seva, Pooja kottu, krishanattam and thullal etc.

SHANKHU

Shankhu an ancient musical instrument, has reference in Hindu puranam. They are of two types: Idampiri shankh and valampiri shankhu. Idampiri shankhu is the common shankh we use. It is used from the time of palliyunarthal to the closing of the sanctorum of lord in temples. Shank sound is also used in rituals like abhishekas, kalasas and other poojas.

CHENGILA

The Chengila is a traditional metallic percussion instrument from Kerala, mainly used in temple music ensembles. Chengila, a ghanavaadhya, is a musical instrument used in Kathakali. This instrument is made of an alloy of bronze and tin. Chengila is struck with a wooden stick.

KOMBU

This is an ancient instrument belonging to the class of wind instruments. The Kompu is played together with Panchavadyam, Panchari melam, Pandimelam etc. The word 'Kombu' in Malayalam as well as Tamil means a horn. The instrument is so called, because the horn of animals (especially cattle) were used to make the primitive musical instruments in ancient times. The Sanskrit word for Kombu is Srnga (having the same meaning) and the instrument is referred to under this name in Puranas like Bhagavatha and Mahabharatha and Lakshanagrandhas like Narada's Sangeetha Makaranda and Sarangadevas Sangita Ratnakara.

There are a lot of people who are skilled in making these musical instruments. Here I am going to enumerate the artisans who work behind

M.V NARAYANA MARAR – CHENDA MAKER

M. V. Narayana Marar was born on 16th May 1972 in a village called Nayikaali in Kannur district. His parents were Venu Marar and Rohiniamma. He did his primary education in Pattanur School. Then later on he completed his degree privately. Because of his living standards, he could not continue his education. After sometime, he came into the field of musical instrument Chenda-making. He got married when we was 28 years old to Rukmini. He has a son who is studying in class 12. Since his father was into chenda-making profession, he also learnt the skill of chenda-making under the guidance of his father. His father passed away in 2017. The very next day his mother also passed away, which was an inconsolable sorrow to him. It took some time for him to come out of this tragic shock to a normal life. After all these, he came back to the same profession and actively worked in this field. Its more than 25 years now that he is continuing in the field of chenda-making.

He is also one of the finest percussionists (Chenda performer). He performs it in the nearby Nayikaali Durga Bhagavathi Temple. He also performs Thayambaka (a solo chenda performance) and Shinkari in the nearby temples. He concentrates more on the making of Chenda and Chenda Kolu (sticks used to play the instrument). He also tries a hand at making handy instruments called Timila (hour-glass shaped percussion instrument) and Idakka (hour-glass shaped drum). Some of the eminent personalities of Kerala in the field of Vadyakala (temple-performing arts) like Mattannur Shankarankutty Marar, Kalanilayam Udayan Namboothiri, Cheruthazham Chandran, etc. prefer the percussion instruments made by Narayana Marar. Some people prefer to buy the whole percussion instrument where as some prefer to buy only the Chenda sticks. He charges ₹20,000 for a Chenda as a whole. He buys the Vattam that is used for the Chenda from a place called Kunnamkulam. He prefers buying readymade chenda vattam from the market and uses it for the making of the instrument. He doesn't usually prefer to make vattam on his own as it is obtained from the animal skin. Since he belonged to a Marar family, he had some restrictions to bring the animal skin to his house and hence brought the readymade chenda vattam from the market. Earlier, he used to make the instruments manually in a traditional way, but recently he also takes the help of a machine in the making of the instrument. In all these years, he has made up to 500 chendas and 1000 Chenda kolus. He gets a fairly good income from this profession due to which he is leading a happy life with his family without much difficulties.

Method of making: The wood of Jackfruit tree and golden Shower tree is used to make the body of Chenda. First, he cuts the trunk of a jack fruit tree in circular form and then it is smoothed with a chisel. 22 inches long, drilled and smoothed on both sides of the body with a chisel. He does it mostly by hand while others use machines in making this instrument. Moreover, he buys the valam thala and the idam thala of Chenda on readymade. There is a place in Kunnamkulam area where only Chenda Vattam is made. He buys from there. The circle is actually made from palm wood. It is cut and boiled in water to form a ring. The leather needed for this is brought from the slaughterhouse and the leather is soaked in water and all the hair is removed. Then it is dried and tied. In the past, he used to make mostly by hand. During these years, 500 chenda and 1000 chendakols were made. He still earns a decent income from this sector. Therefore, his life goes on without any major crisis.

V.RAGHAVAN- MADDALAM MAKER

The fame of Peruvamp's leather instrument is centuries old. We can see the leathers nailed and dried on the courtyard of small houses situated on both sides of the narrow road. Families belonging to the Kadayan caste have made this Palakkad village a favorite place for musicians. They manufacture and supply leather instruments like maddalam, tabla and mridangam, Idakka, Chenda, thimila and thakil. There is a demand to buy musical instruments from Peruvamp inside and outside the country. Quality musical instruments are the speciality of this village. They have been given a lathe from NABARD, which comes under the government, to cut wood for making instruments. Because of that, they can do the work a little easier.

Famous Maddalam maker V Raghavan was born in Peruvamp, a heritage village in Palakkad district. He is a well-known Maddalam maker in this village. Raghavan belongs to the Perumkollan community. Since it is a traditional profession, he too came down to this profession. His father Velayudhan was a well-known Maddalam maker there. His father is his guru. After seeing his father's suffering, he also entered this field at a young age. Therefore, he got only primary education. He said that when he was young, he used to work with his father, and when people came to buy this instrument and gave him a small amount of money, he was very happy at that time. Later, after the death of his father, he continues to be very active in this field.

Fifty years have passed since he started Madhalam making. Many people from Kerala and outside Kerala come to buy Maddalam made by him. Famous Maddalam Vidwan Cherupullassery Shivan has been using the Madhalam made by V Raghavan. In addition to it, he is the one who makes Maddalam for Kalamandalam. More orders are received during Navaratri. Some difficulty is experienced only during rainy season.

Style of making

The wood of jackfruit tree is first taken for making Maddalam. The undamaged wood of the tree is cut and made into the body of the Maddalam. After drying the wood for a month, it is cut into a hollow with the help of a machine. Since they have got a lathe machine from the government, they can do the moulding work of the instrument without much effort. In the past, the use of machines was less and they were chiseled by hand and made into its shape, but today more machines are used. Similarly, the leather of the Madhalam is made from the skin of cow or goat. Mainly cow's skin is used. The Madhalam has two drums as Valamthala and Idamthala. There are 3 layers on the Valamthala. The top most layer is made of cow leather. Goat's skin is also used on the inner ring. Skin is bought, soaked in water, all the hair is removed and left to dry in the sun. When the leather is dried, it is cut into a circular shape in the shape of a drum. A black paste is seen in the middle of the Valamthala. This is called Soru. A stone called Kittan is powdered and mixed in cooked rice to form the black paste.

It is applied to the inner skin of the Valamthala. Black paste isn't applied like this on the Idamthala. Iron rings and straps are added on the outside to help maintain the tension of the drum and increase the sound quality. It takes the most time to dry the skin of the Madhalam. Leather dries well only when there is enough sunlight. He is getting a good income from this field.

RADHAKRISHNAN & KUMARAN – ILATHALAM MAKER

Kadavallur village in Thrissur district is famous for Ilathalam making. People belong to kammala community is making this instrument. Karuppan was the first person to discover Ilathalam. Now his son, Kumaran and his younger son Radhakrishnan are two famous people in this field. Their family name is known as Kopparambathu. This family in this village called Kadavallur is the only one that manufactures the entire Ilathalam in Kerala. Nowhere else can we see its making. Wherever there is Pooram, you have to come here to buy Ilathalam. Even people from abroad come here to buy Ilathalam. Kumaran and his son Radhakrishnan, who have proved their ability in the field of Ilathalam making, have been actively working in this field for more than 30 years. Radhakrishnan started this work at the age of 8. Education was very little. He learned and understood the method of making by sitting with his father.

Method of making

Ilathalam is made of bronze mixed with copper and lead. The weight of the Ilathalam instrument is two kilos. Two leaves of each kg should be made. First of all, the bronze is broken, measured and put in the dye to be melted. Then wait for 10 minutes to melt. After that, the moulding mould is made and taken. Press an Ilathalam-shaped dye into the sand and sprinkle rice bran on it. Then pour the melted bronze in it. On cooling, level it with a knocker. Then you will get the shape of the Ilathalam and finally it is ground into a perfect musical instrument.

PRADEEP PAZHAYANNUR – THIMILA MAKER

Pradeep, who has been working in the field of musical instruments for 19 years, was born to Narayanan Ezhutchan and Kalyani Amma in a village called Pazhayannoor in Thrissur district. His wife name is Jisha and they have two children. He was not highly educated. He studied at G H S S Pazhayannur School. Later he entered the field of instrument production. Instruments that are made by him include the following: Chenda, Thimila, Edakka, Thudi and Uduk. Thimila, Chenda and Idakka are the instruments that made more and receive orders for production. Mayannur Raju is their guru. The peak season time starts from around November and continues till December. Festivals and Poorams all begin at that time. The work during the year will be very less. There are 10 more workers who are working under him. Thimila is made as a set or even as one. He knows how to make the sound of a Thimila for a Panchavaadyam and according to that, sometimes he makes 2-3 Thimilas in a day, whereas there are times when he can make only one. A set of Thimila costs Rs 10,000 to 20,000.

Thimila Legend: It is said that all the instruments originated during Shiva Tandava. During the Shiva Tandava, Shurapadma (the demon) demands for the part that is on top of Shiva shul. Then Shiva says that the rhythm of the universe itself is on this beat and did not give it. Instead Shiva suggested to build something similar. It is said that Shurapadma made an instrument similar to its shape and put leather on both sides of it and brought it to Lord Shiva.

But unfortunately, the instrument did not produce any sound. This caused Shurapadma to be angry and he threw the instrument towards Shiva. Luckily, Shiva caught it with his right hand and made a hole in its middle, called Karnadvaram. It is also called Jivadwara. After that, Thomkara, which is equal to Omkara, and Thakara, which is equal to universe, made the sound Tha Thom and the instrument was given it to Shurapadma. Thimila is also a deva instrument made by Asura. It is said that when Shurapadma heard this sound, he chanted the mantra Mritya Jaya Hara Hara Hara Hara and started dancing. Lord Shiva said that this shall be the legend associated to this instrument.

Method of construction: Thimila is made of four types of wood since the olden days. They were jackfruit tree, kumizh, arali and konna. But today the jackfruit tree itself is mostly used for the production of thimila because its sound quality is very good and easiest to get. The branch of the jackfruit tree is mainly used for this because it is more hardy. The dimensions of Thimila are given in Yoni basis. Gajayoni, Dhvajayoni, Simhayoni, Rishabhayoni. The measure currently used is the Simhayoni. In terms of measuring using the finger count, 18 fingers (one finger is 3 cm) long, the circle should equal to that length and that is the ideal size of the Thimila. Corner part - 3 quarter inch, the middle region - 12 ½ inch and the Inside - 4 finger count - These are the figures. Vattam used – Thimila is made of leather. Thimila is called a skin instrument. cow kids' leather is used for this purpose. The leather of a cow below 1 1/2 years old is used for this. Compared to the front part of the Thimila, the back part is thinner. The skin of the cow should be pulled dry and its hair should be removed. Chittikol (made from bamboo) is smeared with ash and the hair is removed. After the hair is put aside the leather is reduced in thickness. The thickness should be reduced. Today it is done with glue like Fevicol. The next thing that is needed to hold the leather is twisting. In the early days Annakodi vine was used for this. It is brought and boiled in water, after which it is tied around the edge of the gourd. After that, the carpenter cuts it and hammers it with a nail to form a ring. Now most of the work is done using mahogany or other hard wood

planks which are hammered and bent into a curved shape. Vaar is used to tie the Thimila outer part. The method of making it is to cut the leather of middle-aged cows into six mares, half an inch wide, and soak them in water. Make it spring type and crochet it in a circle. Thimila is beaten by hanging it on the shoulder. It is hung with kacha which measures up to 3 1/2 meters long. It is hung with a thick cloth.

CONCLUSION

Temples in Kerala have not only served as places of worship but have also played a vital role in preserving and nurturing the region's rich cultural and artistic traditions. Since ancient times, Kerala's temples and their festivals have been deeply intertwined with the local culture, with temple music and instruments holding a place of great significance. While it is often said that the instrumentalist breathes life into these instruments, it is equally important to acknowledge the craftsmen who create them. These artisans, who dedicate their lives to the intricate and skilled craft of instrument-making, are the unsung heroes behind the beauty of the music. Their techniques, struggles, and contributions deserve recognition and appreciation from society, as they are an essential part of keeping this cultural heritage alive.

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