

**Prelims Master Program (2023-24) – Ancient, Medieval, Art and Culture**  
**Handout 33: Traditional Theatre (additional handout)**

Ritual Theatre	Devotional (Bhakti) Theatre	Popular Theatre
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sacred theater is an important part of Indian life and contains seeds of theatre.</li> <li>The sources of Indian theatre are traced back to <b>Vedic rituals</b>. Natyashastra compares a theatrical performance to a yajna, the Vedic sacrifice.</li> <li>A variety of <b>non-Vedic rituals</b> still prevalent in different parts of India contain elements of theatre -- the stage, the actor, costumes, the story, song, dance, music and speech.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>These theatres started <b>emerging after decline of Sanskrit theatre</b> in the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium and up to 18<sup>th</sup> century. In its popular living forms today, theatre is mostly <b>shaped by Bhakti movement</b>.</li> <li>World is seen as the arena of god's divine play (<b>lila</b> or <b>attam</b>).</li> <li>Basis of various versions of Rama story are Ramayana while for stories of Krishna it is Bhagavata Purana and Geet Govinda.</li> <li>Plural and multi-lingual theatre.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Most of these forms are natyadharmi (symbolic) and not lokdharmi (realistic). They use rich combination of words, music and dance.</li> <li>Some like Yakshagana and Kathakali have evolved into a complex and elaborate theatrical language.</li> <li>Magnificent world of Puppetry can be categorized here.</li> </ul>

	Ritual Theatre	Devotional Theatre	Regional Popular Theatre
<b>North</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gaddi Community (HP): Nuala, Manimahesha Jatra, Chatran Jatra etc</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ramlila (all North India) (Three styles: Ramnagar, Ayodhya, Mathura)</li> <li>Raslila (Braj region)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Nautanki, Swang, Khyal (North)</li> <li>Naqal (Pj, UP)</li> </ul>
<b>East NE</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lai Haraoba (Manipur)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ankianat (Assam)</li> <li>Manipuri Raslila</li> <li>Jatra (WB, OD)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sumang Leela (Manipur)</li> <li>Bhand Pather (Kashmir)</li> <li>Pandavani (CG)</li> </ul>
<b>West</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gondhal (MH)</li> <li>Dashavatara (MH, KN)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Bhavai (GJ)</li> <li>Garodas (GJ)</li> <li>Tamasha (MH) (Lavni, Gavalana)</li> <li>Powada (MH)</li> <li>Maach (MP)</li> </ul>

<b>South</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Theyyam (Kerala)</li> <li>• Bhootaradhane (KN)</li> <li>• Nagamandala (KN)</li> <li>• Veeragase (KN, AP)</li> <li>• Mudi yettu (KN)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Krishnattam (Kerala)</li> <li>• Harikatha (KN, AP, TG, MH)</li> <li>• Yakshagana (KN)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Koodiyattam (KR) (Chakkiyars put two performances – Koothu and Koodiyattam)</li> <li>• Terukuttu (TN)</li> </ul>
--------------	---	---	---

---

### Part I: Ritual Theatre

---

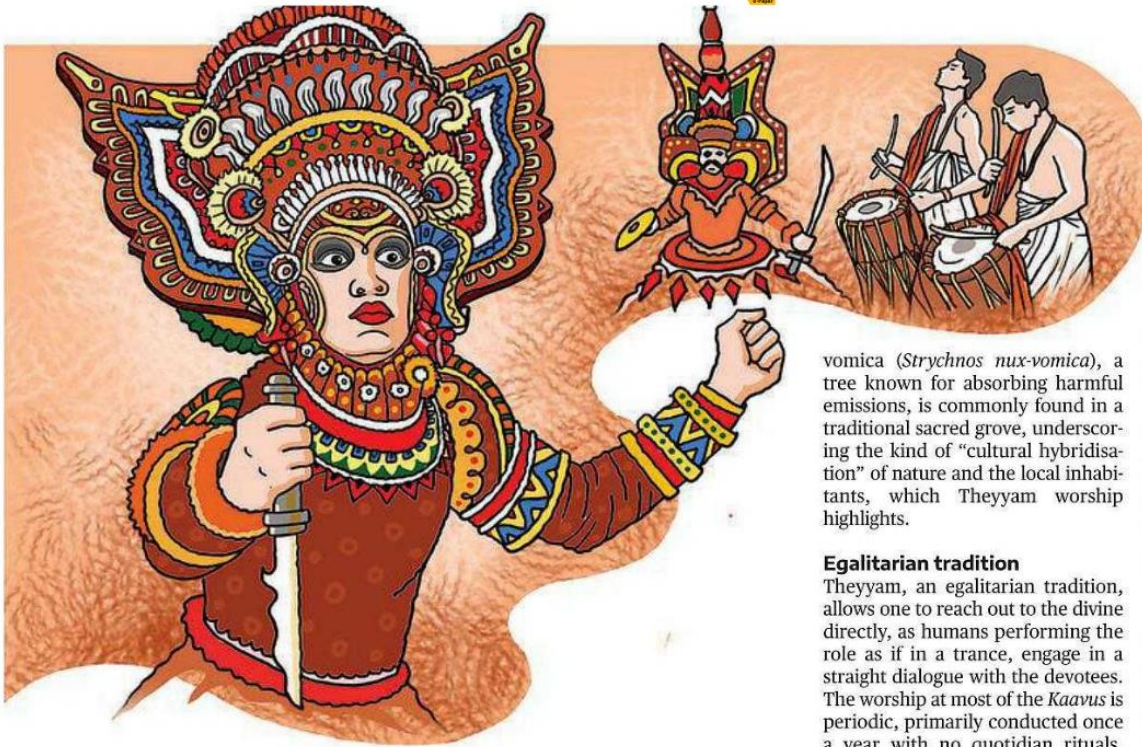
#### (1) **Theyyam** (Kerala), **Bhootaradhane** (Karnataka)

- Theyyam also means a 'demon', but bhoots in Tulu means God.
- Thousands of years old ritual worship.
  - Bhoots are worshipped in the sacred spaces at the temples dedicated to them.
  - It involves the worship of various local deities.
- **Sanskritization**
  - With the changing course of centuries, a lot of upper caste features have been adopted. However, though the upper caste participates, it still belongs predominantly to the exploited backward castes.
- **Performance:**
  - Performers paint their faces like masks and wear headgears and costumes.
  - While narrators sing praises of the bhoots, the ritualistic actor dances them out.
    - He often goes into a trance and establishes his communion with bhoots.
    - He makes predictions for believers, often provides solutions to the problems.
    - Bhoots performers also do the settling of legal disputes.
  - Performance brings happiness to participants and fertility to the land.





THE HINDU



# Dance of the divine in SACRED GROVES

Theyyams of Kerala's Kaavus allow one to reach out to the divine directly, with humans performing the role of gods

**K.K. Gopalakrishnan**

Spirit worship is so deeply ingrained in the Theyyam concept, which is hailed for the deification of the human soul

**N**orth Kerala's fast-vanishing *Kaavus*, or sacred groves, have been miniature rainforests that serve as an "intangible umbilical cord" connecting the flora, fauna and belief, marking an aesthetic symbiosis. These play an effervescent role in social life and maintain an ecological balance by being the fulcrum and venue of the Theyyam tradition.

These open places of worship are

different from a temple that has to conform to a specific structure with a tank known as *tirtha* (holy water) and a ficus tree, all within the immediate vicinity of the idol and hemmed in by a compound wall. However, even an icon or structure is insignificant for a *Kaavu*. Devotees believe the spirits will oblige them if they make fervent prayers, and for this, one need not even go to the *Kaavu*.

The groves are an abode of several kinds of birds, mammals, reptiles and other beings. For example, nux

vomica (*Strychnos nux-vomica*), a tree known for absorbing harmful emissions, is commonly found in a traditional sacred grove, underscoring the kind of "cultural hybridisation" of nature and the local inhabitants, which Theyyam worship highlights.

## Egalitarian tradition

Theyyam, an egalitarian tradition, allows one to reach out to the divine directly, as humans performing the role as if in a trance, engage in a straight dialogue with the devotees. The worship at most of the *Kaavus* is periodic, primarily conducted once a year with no quotidian rituals. While this makes people be away from the groves the rest of the time, it allows the *Kaavus* to preserve their biodiversity and flourish, repairing the minor damage caused during the annual festivities.

However, many have recently started incorporating irrational improvements and constructions at the *Kaavus* in the name of renovation and gradually transforming them into temples, whether or not an idol is installed later. Thus, now few *Kaavus* exist pristinely, and many are losing their ecological equilibrium.

Of the Theyyams at the *Kaavus*, Neeli at Neeliyaarkottam at Mangattuparambu in Kannur is significant. This *Kaavu* is an exceptionally virgin 20 acres that preserves over 220 varieties of foliage and is the habitat for rare caterpillars, including of the southern birdwing, a large butterfly in the country. In addition, many birds roost here.

## Mother Goddess

Neeli's profile is based on the con-

cept of the Mother Goddess. The story goes that for rejecting his romantic advances, the local ruler spread canards about Neeli's morality and in a conspiracy, forced her father to kill her to uphold the land's honour. Neeli hailed from the Pulaya community and lived near Kottiyoor, east of Kannur. Her soul caused mayhem to the culprits and went along with a sorcerer, Kaalakkattu Namboodiri. On their way, the spirit desired to stay as a protector in a forest that later became Neeliyaarkottam, the abode of Neeli. People gradually started worshipping the spirit as Bhagavati, the Mother Goddess. Spirit worship is so deeply ingrained in the Theyyam concept, which is hailed for the deification of human souls and the consecration of gods.

At the Neeliyaarkottam, members of the Vannaan lineage, hailing from the Kaanoor Mangatan and Mangattu Mangatan families and formally honoured with the title Mangatan, alone can perform as Neeli. For several years, Dasan Peruvann Mangatan from Kaanoor have been performing the role. The central presentations are during the evenings of every *samkramam* day (the last day of the Malayalam month). Neeli refrains from going deep into the forest and limits the performance to a particular area so as not to disturb the rare bio-network.

In addition, performances are done as public offerings for various reasons. One can make any request to their protective mother, the devotees say. And most such offerings are made by couples on being blessed with a child. Moreover, only one offer is accepted a day, thus facilitating more performance opportunities.

The Cheriya Veetu family of Anthoor owns the land hereditarily. Some years ago, a few family members planned to construct a temple and other buildings as in other *Kaavus*.

But fortunately, they honoured the environmentalists' wish, and this rare grove has not vanished.

kkkgerala@gmail.com

## (2) Nagamandala (Tulunad)

- It is a **primitive ritual theatre form** going back to the earlier times.
  - Elaborate ritual theatre centering on snake-worship and expected to bring health and prosperity to the people and fertility to the land.
  - Elaborate and expensive ritual, which combines tribal and Brahminical elements.
  - It is financed by rich non-Brahmin castes of the region on the advice of Brahmin priests well-versed in ritual details.
- **Mandala:**
  - The ritual space is a special space where an elaborate mandala (sacred geometric pattern) symbolising a snake is drawn and worshipped with offering of plantains, tender coconuts and rice.
  - The idols of all the important local deities are brought to the ritual area and offered special worship. The ritual takes place with the full attendance of local divinities. Vedic rituals like Chandi homa are also performed.
- **Ritual Snake dance:**
  - The culmination of rituals takes place with the fascinating snake dance performed by a trained Brahmin priest who invokes and personifies naga yakshi.
  - Accompanied by songs praising the exploits of the nagas and is sung to the accompaniment of a hand-drum. At the point of climax, the movements become extremely wild and assume conspicuous erotic suggestions.



## (3) Lai Haraoba (Manipur)

- This is a **combination of a fertility cult and ritual theatre**. It is performed either in the pre-agricultural season or in the pre-harvest months.
- It is an elaborate drama depicting how gods and human beings come together to produce benefits for the good of the community.
- Lai Haraoba is a complex ritual theatre. Several acts that last from seven days to a month
- There are many regional variations, of which, the **Kangla Lai Haraoba** of Imphal is regarded as the most comprehensive.





#### (4) **Veeragase** (KN, AP)

- It represents clash and **dramatizes conflicts**. It is a **vigorous martial dance-drama** based on Hindu mythology.
  - Involves very intense energy-sapping dance movements.
  - **Narration of the story:** Dancer-actor embodies the violent destruction that Virabhadra, Shiva's commander-in-chief, wreaked through the fire sacrifice of the Aryan king, Daksha.
- **Performed during festivals** and at all important functions of Lingayat household.
  - It is demonstrated in the Dasara procession held in Mysore.
  - The occasion is either Saivite festivals like Shivaratri or some auspicious occasion like a marriage in the family of the devout.
- **Performance:**
  - It can be a solo or group performance.
  - The performers are called **Lingada Veera** (heroic Shaivites) or **Puratanas** (rehabilitators of cities).
  - Deafeningly loud beats on **halage** (a huge drum) and **mukhaveene** (a small wind-pipe).
  - The dance is sometimes accompanied by the ritual of one or more actors walking through a pit-field of burning charcoal. This is called **konda hayuvuds**.



#### (5) **Rituals of the Gaddi community** (NW Himalayas)

These are complex rituals accommodating conflicting elements. They involve intricate symbolism to integrate socio-political and cosmological aspects of life.

- **Nuala:** To celebrate auspicious occasions like **marriage, house-warming and childbirth**.
  - The oral narratives about Shiva are sung to the accompaniment of instruments like dholkis and dhanthal. Alongside the singers, a male dancer dances.
  - A ram is sacrificed in honour of the deity.
- **Manimahesh Jatra**
  - Ritual journey from village, Sachuin, to the foothills of Mount Kailash. It is the re-enactment of Shiva's mythical journey and that of a "low" caste Sippi boy to Shiva's cosmic home. This mythical route conforms to the seasonal migratory pattern of Gaddis and establishes control over the region, thus unifying their social, political and religious realms.
  - The theatrical element here is the transformation of the chela into Shiva and the sacred land. Thus, his body also becomes Shivabhumi, the Gaddi-land.
  - The event lasts several days and is punctuated with brief stops and ritualistic performances en route.

- **Chatran Jatra**

- It symbolises the people's victory over demonic forces, lasting for three days and enacted at a Shiva-Shakti Temple in the village of Chatrani.
- The male crowd performs the ritual dance depicting the victory of the goddess over demonic forces. In this way the performance reaffirms the cohesion of the community, their internal conflicts notwithstanding.

- **Kugti Jatar**

- Juxtaposition of the serious dance by chela impersonating as Baba Balak Nath and another dancer, the chela Hanuman, playing monkey tricks.
- The serious dance continues in spite of this distraction and culminates in a collective trance followed by partaking of gifts and sacred offerings.

---

## *Part II: Devotional Theatre*

---

Devotional theatre forms the basis of Indian popular theatre today. Kirtana (singing Lord's name) is an important component of Vaishnavism all over India. Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, (the founder of Gaudiya Vaishnavism of Bengal), Shankardeva (founder of Eksharana Dharma in Assam) and Varkari sampradaya of Maharashtra – all set great tradition of singing Krishna's name along with ecstatic dancing in pure devotional abandon.

### **(1) Ankianat (Assam)**

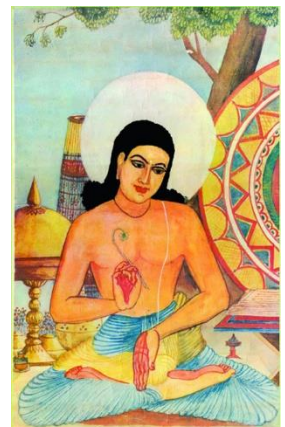
Ankianat is a dramatic form pioneered by **Srimant Shankardeva** and its performance is called as **Bhaona**. It is a rich expression of regional bhakti tradition.

- **Co-existence of Marg and Desi:** there is a great use of recitation of prose, singing of songs, music, dance and pantomime. Thus, in the language of Bharatamuni, here both lokdharmi + natyadharmi go hand in hand. Its various facets appeal to different sections of audience:

- Captivating song and orchestra – whole audience
- Wit of sutradhara and dance – connoisseurs
- Sanskrit verses – scholars
- Use of Brajbauli – village audience
- Attractive masks and effigies – ignorant

- **Wide influences:**

- **Performance element:**
  - Later Sanskrit plays (eg Prabodha Chandrodaya and Mahanataka) influenced its episodic structure as well as allegorical/didactic content.
  - Ojha-Pali provided it a combination of song, drum and dance.



- Dhulia provided group singing accompanied by drums.
- **Thematic content:**
  - Bhagavat Purana provided the Vaishnava content.
  - Brajaboli infused Maithili + Assamese and connected it with the culture of Vrindavan.
- Anikanat's composite theatre is a **perfect amalgamation of classical and non-classical elements** in music and dance.



Complex Make-up and highly stylized masks

## (2) Ramlila (All over north India)

It is a mix of theatre art and devotion, based on Ramcharitmanas.

- **Festive theatre:**
  - It is performed during **Dasara** or **Ramnavami**.
  - Ramcharitmanas is a great story full of thrills and pathos. It has everything – love, war, adventure, magic, mystery, fun and wisdom. Appropriate selection for performance from Ramacharitmanas is done by a person (who is thus called **vyasa**)
- **Many-layered technique of performance:**
  - **Dramatic readings** from portions of Ramcharitmanas.
  - **Episodes:**
    - Depicting scenes by **svaroops (actors)** on jhunka (tableaus)
    - **Spectators** too carry their own copies of Manas and **join the performance** by reading along.
    - Each episode concludes with **aarti** to Ram Lakshman and Sita.
  - **The slaying** of 10-headed Ravana with firecrackers explosion symbolizes end of evil. At the **culmination**, spectators get overwhelmed with devotion.
- **Three important regional styles** (And innumerable local versions)

<b>Ramnagar/Varanasi</b>	Most Famous	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Grandeur and huge scale.</li> <li>• Emphasis more on religion than on art.</li> <li>• No electric bulbs or microphone</li> </ul>
<b>Ayodhya</b>	Avadhi Style	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rustic, focus on dialogue-drama.</li> <li>• Kathak performance.</li> </ul>
<b>Vrindavan/Mathura</b>	Braj Style	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Music and Dance are distinctive</li> </ul>

## (3) Krishnattam (Kerala)

- It is an important **intermediate stage** in the development of Kathakali, which is still performed.

- Koodiyattam → Krishnattam → Kathakali.
- It is less complex than either Koodiyattam or Kathakali. The emphasis is on the devotional aspect, and this is brought about by graceful dances and devotional music.
- **Sources:**
  - 8 plays based on story of Krishna given in **Bhagavata Purana**.
  - Also inspired by Jayadeva's **Geet Govinda**.
  - Origin story – **Manaveda Samoothiri's** (Zamorin of Calicut, 1585-1658) dreamt of Krishna. His composition of **Krishna Geeti** became the basic text for Krishnattam.
- **Some features:**
  - **Costume and make-up** are similar to Kathakali but use of wood-masks for demonic characters is a hallmark of Krishnattam.
  - Like Kathakali, **women do not take part** in the performance.
  - Dance consists of **both lasya and tandava**.
  - **Instruments:** Chengila (gong), elathalam (heavy cymbals) and two percussions called maddhalam and edakka.
- It is performed inside the famous **Krishna temple at Guruvayur** as an offering by devotees.
  - Confined to the temple space for centuries, only recently has moved out of Guruvayur to other parts of India and world.



#### (4) **Raslila** (Braj Region, Western UP)

- Krishna devotion became immensely popular in **Braj region** in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, giving birth to Raslila form of theatre.
  - Many saints wrote the lilas. They exclusively deal with Krishna's boyhood and youth. Themes are romance and exploits of Krishna during his early life at Brindavan.
  - However, stories of great Vaishnav saints are also performed lately.
- **Aspects:**
  - A producer is called **Swami**.
  - Singers and instrumentalists are called **Samajis**
    - **Music:** Mixture of classical and folk.
    - **Instruments:** Sarangi, dholak, table, cymbals etc.
  - **Actors**





- Actors are called **Swarup**.
- Performed by troupe of **pre-puberty young boys**.
- **Costumes:**
  - Colourful but stylized version of everyday Braj region dress.
  - A make-up man is called as **sringari**.
- Can be performed **both indoor and outdoor**.

### (5) Manipuri Raslila

- It is an elaborate song-and-dance drama.
- **A royal initiative:**
  - At a time when Manipuri society was threatened with inter-tribal sectarian unrest, **King Chingthangkomba Rajashri Bhagyachandra** (1748-99) evolved an elaborate dance-drama by effecting the harmony of Vaishnavism and indigenous Maitei form and content.
- **Nata-sankirtanam:**
  - A procession of actors singing hymns before the beginning of the play.
  - 64 dancers-singers-drummers in white dhoti and turban prepare the audience.
  - Woman dancers representing gopis dance around Krishna, originally represented by an idol at the time of Bhagyachandra but later by a boy or girl.



### (6) Jatra (Bengal and Orissa)

- Jatra means **Journey**. In this, groups of devotees move from place to place, singing together and carrying idols in procession. It originated with devotional songs and dances of the Vaishnavas.
- **Repertoire:**
  - Earlier it was known as **Jatrapala** (Jatra chapter) and **palagala** (singing chapter) – all these labels underline its narrative and musical aspects.
  - Gradually, the **episodes of Krishna and Rama** were added for dramatic representation.
  - Even later, **other puranic stories** like Nala Damayanti or Raja Harishchandra were performed.
- **Evolution:** It has had a very different course of evolution from its Bhakti origin.
  - **Originally financed by rural rich** on festive occasions. Thus, it was performed in the courtyard of rich patrons or open-air theatre.
  - **19<sup>th</sup> century: emergence of Calcutta** and its neo-rich who financed and formed amateur jatra groups. Thus, newer stories with a wider range of stories.

- **Early 20<sup>th</sup> century:** influence of **freedom movement**.
  - **Mukunda Das** used it as a powerful medium to express socio-political themes. This later inspired its use by **IPTA** and also by **Utpal Dutt**.
- **Later 20<sup>th</sup> century:** Professionalism and Commercialisation.
- **Props, Acting and Movement:**
  - It is bare minimum. There is very little pop or scenery. The chair at the centre becomes many things during the performance. The lack is made up through dance, music and impassioned rendering of speeches.
- **Absence of Sutradhara/Vidushaka:**
  - Although found in most other traditional theatres, it is not present in Jatra.
  - His functions are fulfilled by an allegorical character who plays **bibek** (conscience).

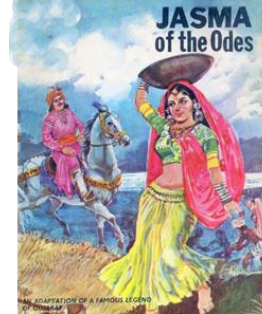
### Part III: Regional Popular Theatres

#### (1) Bhavai

- Bhava = Universe, Aiee = Mother
- **Terms:**
  - The director and producer is called **Nayaka**.
  - Characters are called as **Vesas**.
  - Actors are in general called as **Bhavaiya**.
- Bhavai performers consider **Ambaji**, the mother goddess, as the supreme deity.
- **Dance, Music:**
  - Instruments: Bhungalas (long thin copper plates), Tabla, Jhanjh, Harmonium
  - Music: desi ragas predominate.
  - Several **movements resemble Garba dance**.
- **Costumes:**
  - Ridiculous costumes – sometimes present day constable uniform for example
  - Distinct turban indicating social status.
- **Performance:**
  - Begins by paying obeisance to garbha (earthen jar that represents Amba, the mother goddess)
  - Then Ganeshvandana. Dancing Ganesha appears on stage after being paid respect to. He doesn't use mask in Bhavai, but only a piece of cloth or a copper plate.
  - After Ganesha and Mother goddess, comes the clown **Ranglo**.
- This theatre is known for its distinct mode of lighting (**technique of illumination**)



- Actors enter the acting space with torches and hold the torches during the performance. Sometimes they run behind the lead characters to illuminate them.
- Traditional lighting has been its identity. Switching over electric lighting has not done good to the quality of the performance.
- **Repertoire:** Outside the Puranic myths.
  - Locally popular stories like exploits of Ram Dev Peer, story of Birthhari (last of the nine nathas important in Gujarati folklore), stories of popular figures like Siddharaj and Manibasathi.
  - Many vesas center around lives of Rama and Krishna.
- Bhavai is still popular today in Gujarat and Rajasthan in spite of pressures of modern life. However, its audience is declining due to the advent of movie and TV. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there have been considerable efforts for its revival and modernisation.



## (2) Koodiyattam of Kerala

This traditional Sanskrit theatre is one of the richest traditions of Indian theatre. It is included in the UNESCO Intangible Heritage of the world.

- The uniqueness of Koodiyattam is its multi-layered Abhinaya conventions. It employs in elaborate manner all the 4 types of abhinayas mentioned by Bharata.
  - Angika: Incredible degree of sophistication in acting gestures.
  - Aharya: Host of costumes and props are used to convey different meanings.
  - Vachika: tones are elongated not just to convey the meaning but to emphasise sensory nuances of the words.
  - Musical conventions: Nearly 20 ragas are used according to the needs of the situation (eg Muddan, Srikandi, Thondan, Porali, Anthari etc)
- It is a very demanding art with specifics related make up, verses, clowning, dialogue, and good knowledge of Sanskrit.
- A traditional Malayalam saying goes, “*For acting, Chakkiyars; for instruments, Nambiyars; for singing, Nangiyars.*” Thus, there was a traditional distribution of labour among the three communities.
  - **Nangiyars:** Apart from singing, Nangiyars women also play female roles.
  - **Nambiyars** play the mizhavu (a huge copper or brass drum).
  - Traditional performers belong to the caste called **Chakkiyars**. They put up two kinds of performers:
    - **Koothu:** It is dominated by hasya rasa (humour). They also perform the most serious kathaprasanga of different kinds. While performing these, Chakkiyars are equivalent to the vidushakas of Sanskrit drama.





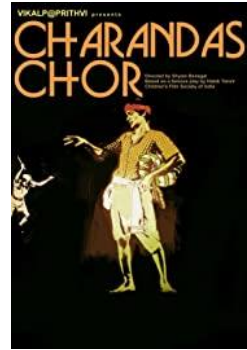
- Silappadikaram speaks of different kinds of koothus. This makes Chakkyarkoothu as old as silappadikaram, i.e. roughly 1800 years old.
- **Koodiyattam:** other performances involving classical Sanskrit texts by playwrights like Bhasa, Kalidasa, Shudraka and Kulashekhar.
- Chakkiyars are very selective in choosing the most performable portions and passages, thus making up their own theatrical narratives out of these Sanskrit texts.
- The theory part of the knowledge is found in **texts** like **Attapraka** and **Kramadeepika**.
- **Performance:**
  - It is performed in the theatres of various temples.
  - In Natyashastra, Bharata speaks of the **rectangular stage called ayuta**. The acting area of Koodiyattam conforms to this structure.
  - **Vidushaka** acts as the bridge between the world of the play and the world of the audience is the most loved in Koodiyattam plays.

### (3) Nautanki

It is the most popular theatre form in Hindi-speaking region and a near-cousin of Swang and Khyal.

- **Different from other traditional theatres in India:**
  - It is based on written text.
  - Music and singing are the soul and chief cases of its popularity.
  - Less to do with religion and mythology than with other forms.
- It is open to all castes. There is no exclusive caste meant for this performance.
- **Varied subjects:** eclectic selections
  - Locally popular heroes (Amar Singh Rathore)
  - Characters taken from mythology (Raja Harishchandra)
  - Popular stories (Laila Majnu)
  - Contemporary subjects
- **Khichadi of emotions:** serves everybody
  - Melodrama (so dear to Indian spectators) – thus wafer-thin characterization
  - Whole gamut – heroism, love, tragedy, humour.
- **Performance:**
  - Varied languages – Avadhi, Brajbhasha, Hindi, Urdu
  - For most part it is full of music. (high pitch ragas in combo of classical and folk). Prose dialogues are few and far between.
  - Varied performance spaces – indoor + outdoor
  - Acting is not too stylized or rigorous. It mostly involved footwork.

- Special acting for the clown figure – **munshiji**
- Make-up is minimal but the costumes are flashy.
- **Akhara** – institution where nautanki actors are trained. Apart from acting, singing and dancing, they are also trained in wrestling.
- **Many regional sub-styles:**
  - Most important – Kanpur and Hathras styles. Hathras emphasizes music and dance while Kanpur emphasizes speech and dialogue.



#### (4) Sumang Leela (courtyard play)

It is a popular traditional theatre in Manipur.

- **Historical Evolution:**
  - Its origin is in clown-plays (phagi) at the royal court of the king Chandra Kirti in Imphal in 19<sup>th</sup> century
  - Gradually, full-fledged story, greater number of characters and more complicated plots emerged.
  - In the 20<sup>th</sup> century came the influence of Jatra from Bengal.
  - Soon, there started the performances outside the royal court too. The most popular arena was a large courtyard in front of a big house.
- **Evolving Theme:**
  - Ridicule of important people.
  - Puranic themes like Raja Harishchandra
  - Addition of element of Vaishnavite Keertan
  - Various facets of everyday life (particularly of saints)
- Till recently, it was an all-male theatre. In fact the most fascinating feature even today is Nupi-Shabi – the man playing a woman. However, all women troupes are also there nowadays.
- Its immense popularity today is due to the fact that it has somewhat embraced cinema and also something from everything. However, ironically the clown, the father of the form, has declined.

#### (5) Tamasha

It is the best loved traditional theatre form in Marathi-speaking region. Its influence can also be seen in Karnataka's Bayalata and Sri Krishna Parijat.

- **Historical evolution:**
  - Since the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Maharashtra became the centre of the **progressive Vaishnavite devotional movement of**



**Varkaris.** It was pioneered by Sant Jnandeva and Namdev, furthered by Tukaram and Eknath into social and cultural movement.

- Eknath popularized street-theatre of **Bharud** to spread his social message.
- **Abhang** of Tukaram are also performed in varkari Kirtans
- However, the Tamasha tradition didn't directly emerge from the devotional movement. It is said to have been **founded in 18<sup>th</sup> century Peshwai era by a Brahmin named Ram Joshi**. Though it was a new form, it was a melting pot of several earlier forms prevalent in Maharashtra.
  - **Lavani** singing emerged during this time. The artists in his courts came from all the caste background – but many were from among Mahars and Mangs. Ram Joshi used the singing form of Lavani for the didactic purposes. It was a secular form of dance.
  - **Gondhal** form (performed for goddess Amba) of song-dance-drama. It was primarily a ritualistic performance.
  - **Dashavatara** theatre from MH/KN.
  - Earlier vaishnavite form **Gavalana** (Marathi equivalent of Lilas of Hindi-speaking region)
- **Decline and Revival:**
  - Because the performers came from the lower caste background, they were vulnerable to the **exploitation by the upper castes/classes**. This was seen during the final days of the Peshwa rule.
  - **After women started playing as nachis**, the situation worsened. During the British time, they were often treated as harlots by the rich.
  - In 1958, the Bombay government setup the **Tamasha Sudharak Society** to help the exploited performers.



#### • Performance

- Main characters are Shahir (poet), nachis (dancer) and songadya (clown).
- Most exciting part is the entrance of **nachis** (unique to tamasha).
- **Gavalan:** A conversation between gopika, Krishna and clown. The exchanged borders on the double meaning and ribaldry.
- **Rang Baji** (erotic performance): It contains **Lavani**. It emphasises on footwork, mostly of the heels.
- **Batavani:** A savage piece of satire against the hypocrisy among the pillars of the society – pundits, priests, politicians, merchants etc.
- **Vag:** It is the core of the performance. It centres on historical or puranic/mythological theme.
- **Mujra:** concluding dance, which is something like an aarati.

#### • Music:



- Tamasha was kept alive predominantly by the untouchable castes of Mahars and Mangs through two types of performances – **dholkibari** (public show) and **sangibari** (private show).
- Music combines Hindustani raag music and regional folk tunes. Costumes are not elaborate.

## (6) Terukuttu of TN

- Teru – street, kuttu – theatre.
  - Its **performance takes place on street corners** but rarely, also inside temples. However, primarily it is an **open-air musical opera**. It is one of the oldest street theatres in India.
  - In ancient Tamil literature, word kuttu also means trance. It refers to the sacred role of priests during a tribal ritual.
- It is popular in norther parts of Tamil Nadu (Vellore, Tiruvannamalai, Tiruvallore, Kanchipuram, and in Pondicherry.)
- Apart from having close relation to Agriculture cycles, **various traditions melt into it:**
  - Ancient ritual of Mother Worship (Draupadi Amman)
  - Mahabharata performers from various parts of India (like Pandavani of MP, Akhyan of GJ)
  - Tamil tradition (poetry of Silappadikaram, characters connected to Kuruvanji)
- **Performance:**
  - Colourful costumes and make-up
  - No stage effects, audience on street from the three sides
  - Women's role by men
  - 8 successive days during festive season
  - Mridangams, mukhavina, cymbals and harmonium
  - Elaborate patrapravesha
- **There are no written texts. It depends on memorised oral tradition.**



## (7) Yakshagana (KN)

It is one of the most widely researched and discussed forms of traditional Indian theatres.

- Several varieties but two major categories
  - **Paduvalappaya Yakshagana:** Western Yakshagana (Coastal Region)
    - Badaguthittu (northern style).
      - Popular in Karwar, Gokarna, Sirsi (Uttar Kannada)
      - Emphasizes Lasya, songs, music and dance which are more stylized. Its music closer to Hindustani style.
    - Thenkuthittu (southern style)

- Popular in Kundapur, Udupi, Mangalore.
- Emphasizes Tandava. More rusting, dramatic and dialogue-oriented. Its music closer to Carnatic style.
- **Moodalappaya Yakshagana:** Eastern Yakshagana (Inland Region).
  - It is less stylized, more influenced by local form forms.
- A group of Yakshagana performers is called **Mela**.
- **Performance:** Layered performance of song, dance, gesture, movement, and complete symbolic language of aharya abhinaya (make-up).
  - **Bhagwats:** singer-narrators
  - **Kodangi:** clowns
  - **Patrapravesha:** elaborate and stylised (like Kathakali)
  - Then begins the play proper.
  - Narrator sings metrical passages in mix of classical and folk conventions.
  - Traditionally the performance lasts the full night and then ends with a song of benediction and hymn to the ishta devata.
- **Themes** mostly revolve around shringar rasa or veera rasa.
  - Basic text is sung by the Bhagavata (narrator).
  - It is not a written play – it's a **champu kavya** on selected episodes of Ramayana, Mahabharata or one of the famous Puranas. These verses employ wide range of Kannada metres.
  - After 18<sup>th</sup> century, there was an introduction of realistic social themes apart from mythological stories.
- Stage performance is **backed up by off-stage rituals**.
  - **Chowki puja:** Ganapati worship at the beginning either in near-by temple or in a special place inside the greenroom. Without it, the actors cannot go on stage.
  - Another puja follows the end of the play.

