

# *Nilalkkuttu* and other *Mahābhārata* Episodes from Kerala

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## Abstract

This paper deals with some *Mahābhārata* related episodes in oral, ritual, theatrical and performance traditions in Kerala. *Tirunilalmāla*, one of the earliest poetic works in Malayalam literature, contains many references to *Mahābhārata* episodes. The rituals described in *Tirunilalmāla* resemble *Pallippāna* which is connected with *nilalkkuttu* (Shadow Piercing) dealing with *abhicāra*. This episode is absent from the known Sanskrit manuscripts of *Mahābhārata* and well-known written retellings in Malayalam, even though Vyāsa has used the word *abhicāra* in Ādi Parva in connection with Pāṇḍava's birth.

So far, *nilalkkuttu* episode has been located in (1) *Nilalkkuttu Pāṭṭu* associated with *Pallippāna* (2) *Kuratti Tōrram* associated with *Teyyam* ritual (3) *Nilalkkuttu Pāṭṭu*, a section of an oral *Mahābhārata* called *Māvāratam Pāṭṭu* (4) *Nilalkkuttu Kolkkaḷi Pāṭṭu* and (5) *Nilalkkuttu Āttakatha*, the literary text of a popular Kathakali play. The theme of *Nilalkkuttu* is also discernable in the songs of *Mullakkurumbas* and *Pāṇas*, aboriginals of South India. The summary of the episode along with the variations in different contexts are discussed.

The paper also gives summary of few other episodes from *Māvāratam Pāṭṭu* and other folk and oral traditions which are outside Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata* and points out connections with folk and oral traditions in other parts of India. The paper concludes with pointers on further work required on the topics discussed.

## Preamble: Shadows of *Mahābhārata* in *Tirunīlalmāla*

*Viyātan moliyum pāratatteyoru kompkoṭeluttitūmaven*

who writes with a tusk, the Bhārata spoken by Vyāsa.

This is part of an invocation of Gaṇeśa, in *Tirunīlalmāla*, one of the earliest poetic works [1] in Malayalam literature. *Tirunīlalmāla* also contains references to other *Mahābhārata* episodes (*Kirāta*, Kṛṣṇa as messenger to Hāstinapura, Kṛṣṇa driving Arjuna’s chariot, *Mahābhārata* war). Vasiṣṭha, Vāmadeva, Vyāsa, Pulastya, Maitreya and

“Vaiśampāyana who recites *Mahābhārata*”

(*maruttu pāratattepeccum vaicempāyananum*)

are mentioned (pages 109-110) among the *Ṛṣis* who arrive to witness the ritual performed by *Malayas* (one of the aboriginal sects of Kerala) at a Kṛṣṇa temple.

There is a long invocation of the Goddess *Kurattittaivam* who carries a *Muram* in her hand (p. 125) (*Muram* is a tool against *abhicāra* - commentator). The invocation has parts resembling *Kuratti Tōrram* [2, 3] in style and content. The concluding portion describes *Malayas* removing the sins from Kṛṣṇa’s body. They enumerate nine sins of Kṛṣṇa, the ninth one being “the sin arising from causing the Bhārata war which lead to the killing of Kuru kings” (p. 134). In some aspects, the rituals described resemble *Pallippāna* [4] that is connected with *Nilalkkuttu* (Shadow Piercing) episode.

### *Nilalkkuttu*

The episode which deals with the *abhicāra* act of *Nilalkkuttu* is absent from the known Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* and its well-known written retellings in Malayalam. We note that, however, *abhicāra* is not unfamiliar to Vyāsa’s *Mahābhārata*. For example, in the Critical Edition (BORI) of *Mahābhārata* [5], Ādi Parva, the word *abhicāra* occurs four times connected with Pāṇḍava’s birth. For relevant references to *abhicāra* in Vyāsa *Mahābhārata*, see the end note. So far, we have located this episode in (1) *Nilalkkuttu Pāṭṭu* associated with a ritual called *Pallippāna* [4], (2) *Kuratti Tōrram* [2, 3] associated with the *Teyyam* performance of northern Kerala, (3) *Nilalkkuttu Pāṭṭu* [6], a section of *Māvāratam Pāṭṭu*, a folk *Mahābhārata* once popular in southern Kerala, (4) *Nilalkkuttu Kolkkali Pāṭṭu* [7] of central Kerala and (5) *Nilalkkuttu Āṭṭakatha* [8], the literary text for a popular *Kathakali* play. In the songs of *Mullakkurumbas* [9] (Adivasis of Gudallur, Nilgiri District, Tamil Nadu) and *Pāṇas* [10], aboriginals of Kerala, we can find traces of the *Nilalkkuttu* episode. In a Dictionary of Folklore [11], the word *Nilalkkuttu* is mentioned under the following: *Kuratti* (1087), *Kura Tōrram* (1091), *Kurava Pāṭṭu* (1093), *Nilalkkuttu* (2031), *Nilalkkuttu Pāṭṭu* (2032) (This is a part of *Kuratti Tōrram* sung by *Pulayas* of

North Kerala, sung by *Malayas* of North Kerala as a part of *Kanneru Mantravādam*, sung by *Velas* of south Kerala for *abhicāra*), *Māvāratam Pāṭṭu* (2902) and *Velan Pāṭṭu* (3329).

In a nut-shell, the summary of the episode is as follows [12]: (Note that *Kuravan* and *Kuratti* are male and female members of *Kurava*, an aboriginal sect of South India.) Kauravas order *Malankuravan* to perform *Nilalkkuttu* and put Pāṇḍavas to sleep. Under threat, reluctantly, he obliges. *Malankuratti*, wife of *Malankuravan* comes to know about it. She is enraged, performs counter *abhicāra* and revives the Pāṇḍavas. The episode indicates strong connections with Śiva and Pārvati. The *abhicāra* episode in five different contexts as summarized above have variations. In *Kolkkali Pāṭṭu* only Pāṇḍavas are put to sleep. In *Māvāratam Pāṭṭu* and *Kuratti Tōrram*, Kunti is also put to sleep. In the *Nilalkkuttu Pāṭṭu* associated with the *Pallippāna* ritual, *Malankuravan* and *Malankuratti* are replaced by *Bhārata Malayan* and *Malayi*. In this version, along with the Pāṇḍavas, Kunti and Draupadī are put to sleep. In the *Nilalkkuttu Āṭṭakkatha*, only Pāṇḍavas are put to sleep. In this work, responding to Kunti's prayer, it is Kṛṣṇa who revives the Pāṇḍavas. A notable variation is the *absence* of Kṛṣṇa in *Kuratti Tōrram*, the two versions of *Nilalkkuttu Pāṭṭu* and the *Kolkkali Pāṭṭu*. *Āṭṭakkatha* also has additional characters such as Garthavakra, Suśarma etc.

Songs of *Mullakkurumbas* [9] has the following reference to *Nilalkkuttu*:  
*kaluveṛṇ vannuṛaccitu mannan kuṛavan kuttuvān nilalennu*  
*paṛaka rōmattāl kuśumattoṭuṭe puṛappettaṇṇavaru oruṇṇum nerattu*  
*oruttanāṇṇupoy kuṛattiye teṭi uratta kaṇṇakam vanam kaṭannute*  
*kaṭukkēna pōva vanam tannil*  
*peruttoru nadiyatam kaṭannute iniyum kaṇṭīla kuṛattiye*  
*perutta rōmattāl kuśumattōṭutan iṛunpu neyyōṭu pulippālum*  
*paṛaṇṇatōkke orukki vannute kaṭukkane pōva vanam tannil* [13].

Songs of *Pāṇas* [10] contain references to *Nilalkkuttu* such as  
*perutākina mahābhāratākathayil*  
*paṇḍe kuṛavi periyoraran*  
*piṇi māṛuvān utan tīrttoru valī* [14].

An interesting narrative connecting *abhicāra* and *Mahābhārata* in Kerala is found in Logan's Malabar Manual [15].

The *Nilalkkuttu Āṭṭakkatha* performances were held at several places recently [16]: at Kalamandalam (2004), at International Centre for Kathakali, New Delhi (2005) and as a part of Kottakkal Chandrasekhara Warriar's 60th birthday celebrations. A performance was organized at Margi Ankanam, Thiruvananthapuram on 20th December 2005 as a part of 50th anniversary celebration of formation of Kerala State.

We may enquire whether the *Nilalkkuttu* episode with local flavour, which lies

outside of Vyāsa’s epic has any links with other regional variations. In Ref. [17], we find that there is one *Terukkūttu* play called *Turōpatai Kuravañci*. In this play, during the stay in the forest Draupadī disguises as a *Kuratti* and goes to Hāstinapura and engages in fortune telling to collect fresh grains. Thus both in Tamil Nadu and Kerala we find some connections between *Kuratti* and *Mahābhārata*. Furthermore, in the Tamil *Mahābhārata*, *Villiputtūrar Pāratam* [18], there is the episode of Duryodhana conducting *abhicāra* to kill Pāṇḍavas.

### ***Māvāratam Pāṭṭu***

*Nilakkuttu* episode forms a part of the oral text *Māvāratam Pāṭṭu*. Ullur [19] mentions that *Māvāratam Pāṭṭu* has many sections. Some of the sections are: (1) *Viruntunṭeṭam* (Partaking in the Feast), (2) *Nāgakanniye Mālayittēṭam* (Marrying the Nāga Maiden), (3) *Nīlal Kuttīyeṭam* (Shadow Piercing), (4) *Pilāvila Paṛicceṭam* (Plucking of Jackfruit Leaf), (5) *Viṣam Koṭuttēṭam* (Poisoning), and (6) *Cāmakkañṇi Kuṭicceṭam* (Taking Cāma gruel). Sections (1), (2) and (3) of *Māvāratam Pāṭṭu* are available in Ref. [6] which is a collection of Malayalam folk songs.

Summary of the first episode is as follows: Kāntakāri (Gāndhāri) from Kārunādu sends a message to the Pāṇḍavas in Kurunādu stating that she is ill and inviting them to visit her and have a feast with her. The message is given to Kuñcu Pīman (Bhīma). Kuñcu Tevi (Kunti) informs the Pāṇḍavas that Kāntakāri had tried to poison them. Initially, she does not allow them to go. Pīman convinces her that no harm will come to them and instead of five, six of them will return. They leave led by the youngest, Pīman. On the way, Pīman overcomes many obstacles. Pīman gives parts of the food offered to cat, dog etc., and finds out that the food is poisoned. In the evening Karṇa’s wife informs Pīman about the arrangements made to kill the Pāṇḍavas. Later, Pūmāla, a maid, visits Pīman’s room (as per the custom (?)). Pīman discovers a knife hidden in Pūmāla’s hair. He finds that other maids are engaged to kill the Pāṇḍavas. Pīman kills these maids. The Pāṇḍavas return to Kurunādu, taking Pūmāla with them. (Thus six persons return).

In Pūmāla, we may discover traces of Hiḍimbi.

Summary of the second episode is as follows: Kāntakāri sends a flute putting a snake inside to the Pāṇḍavas. Not playing the flute would bring dishonour to them. Pīman volunteers to use the flute. Immediately, the snake bites Pīman and kills him. Pīman’s body is bathed, kept inside a boat and is left adrift in the sea. The boat drifts away. In the nāga city (nāgapuram), there is a nāga maiden (*nāgakanni*). The maiden brings the boat ashore by reciting *mantras* and discovers the body inside. She removes the poison from Pīman’s body. The maiden marries Pīman and they have a son. One day the smell of his palace burning reaches Pīman and he leaves nāgapuram.

The story of the revival of Bhīma by a serpent maiden and conception afterwards

is known to Ālha singers in the Bundelkhand region (cited by Alf Hildebeitel in the context of Barbarīka, Aravān and Kūttāṇṭavar [20]). It is very intriguing to see the same story surfacing in both Bundelkhand and Kerala in folk *Mahābhārata* with no known written sources elsewhere.

### Boat Episode

Another short folk song, *Bhīman Katha* (Story of Bhīma) [21], begins with an episode in which, after the burning of lacquer house, Kunti and Pāṇḍavas have to cross a river. The boatman asks for money. Kunti does not have any money. The boatman asks to give a son. Bhīma asks Kunti to give him away. Bhīma is asked to warm water for the boatman's wife to bathe. Bhīma kills the woman by drowning her in boiling water. Later Bhīma catches the boatman and flings him far away. The rest of the song deals with the retelling of killing of Hiḍimba and Baka (*Mahābhārata* episodes).

Ullur [22] gives a summary of the boat episode and infers from the last two lines (“those who sing and play this will enjoy long life, prosperity and wealth”) that the song was written for some kind of a ritualistic practice.

The boat episode and the episode in which Bhīma dies by snake bite are also found in the play songs of *Mullakkurumbas* [9]. These songs describe many of the well-known *Mahābhārata* (such as lacquer house, *Kirāta*, *Gītā*) and Bhāgavata episodes. The folk *Gītā* (song 126, page 54) is very brief having six lines:

*Then Kṛṣṇa said (many things) to Pāṇḍavas  
To dispel their worries  
To destroy their enemies  
You should not worry  
Like ignorant people.*

### Some Observations

It is difficult to date *Māvāratam Pāṭṭu* whose author remains unknown. What is remarkable about the portions of this work that have survived, is the dominant female roles in the episodes. In the episode of Partaking in the Feast, the Kuru-Pāṇḍava rivalry is handled by the queens Gāndhāri and Kunti and there is not even a mention of their husbands. Female assassins are employed by Gāndhāri and it is Karṇa's wife who helps Bhīma. In the episode of Marrying the Nāga Maiden, it is the *nāgakanni* who takes charge of the course of events. In the Shadow Piercing episode, *Kuratti* controls the turn of events.

Since all the narratives of *Nilalkuttu* are associated with either ritual or classical

theatre performances, it is important to record the details of the performances of *Kuṛatti Teyyam*, *Pallippāna* and *Nilalkkuttu*, both *Pāṭṭu* and Kathakali, to gather further insights. We are told [23] that the performance of *abhicāra* on Kathakali stage is rich in details. The episodes mentioned by Ullur [19] as part of *Māvāratam Pāṭṭu* but missing in the collection in Ref. [6] need to be recovered and published. In this context it is also important to collect and study the versions of *Nilalkkuttu Pāṭṭu* sung by other aboriginal communities of Kerala. In addition, the poem *Tirunilalmāla* which is a storehouse of important informations needs to be translated into English.

As noted by Alf Hildebeitel [20], a proper understanding of folk culture of India and their interrelation with the Sanskrit Epics, *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa* requires close collaboration among mythologists, folklorists, historians and scholars of Indian literature, religion and anthropology.

### End Note: Relevant references to *abhicāra* in Vyāsa *Mahābhārata*

Occurrence of *abhicāra* in the Critical Edition (BORI) of *Mahābhārata* [5], Ādi Parva, in relation to Pāṇḍava's birth is given in the following. Corresponding sloka numbers in Nīlakaṇṭha Edition [25] are also given.

01104006 c *abhicārābhisamīyuktam abravīccaiva tām muniḥ*  
(Nīlakaṇṭha 111.6)

01109015 c *agastyasyābhicāreṇa yuṣmākaṁ vai vapā hutā*  
(Pāṇḍu to Deer) (Nīlakaṇṭha 118.15)

01113034 c *sa me'abhicārasamīyuktam ācaṣṭa bhagavān varam*  
(Kunti to Pāṇḍu) (Nīlakaṇṭha 122.35)

01113042 c *upacārābhicārābhyām dharmam ārādhayasva vai*  
(Pāṇḍu to Kunti) (Nīlakaṇṭha 122.43)

Instead of *ārādhayasva*, Nīlakaṇṭha has *āvāhavasva*, which has more *abhicāra* flavour to it.

Also see, Alf Hildebeitel's [24] discussions on *abhicāra* in the context of *sarpasatra* (p 115), Kāthaka Samhita (p 129), Draupadī's birth (p 186-191), Pāṇḍava's birth (p 188) and note 50 (p 194).

The word *abhicāra* is also found in the Supplement to the Critical Edition (BORI) of *Mahābhārata*, Ādi Parva, in the context of Janamejaya's *sarpasatra*:

010310010 *abhimantritenodakena ṛṣibhiścābhicārakaiḥ*

For the entire passage which appears in the manuscript *K<sub>4</sub>* consulted by BORI editors together with the English translation by Satya Chaitanya, see Ref. [26]. It is interesting to note that Janamejaya is asked to listen to Bhārata to absolve himself from the sin of *brahmahatya* committed by him at the end of the snake sacrifice.

We may discover a reflection of *Nilalkkuttu Pāṭṭu* (counteracting *abhicāra*) in the first recital of *Mahābhārata* by Vaiśampāyana to Janamejaya at the end of the snake sacrifice.

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- [13] *The King decided that the Kuravan should kill them by shadow piercing. They were oragnising items such as hair, flowers. One went to the deep forest searching for Kuratti. Quickly go to the forest. In the deep forest, they crossed a river. They could not locate Kuratti. They gatherd all prescribed items such as long hairs, flowers, ant’s ghee and tiger’s milk from the deep forest. Quickly go to the forest.*
- [14] *In the great Mahābhārata story, in olden times, kuravi devised a method to remove the sins of the great Śiva.*
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