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. Tirunilalmala, one of the earliest poetic works in Malayalam literature, contains many references to Mahābhārata episodes. The rituals described in Tirunilalmala 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 Torram associated with Teyyam ritual (3) Nilalkkuttu Pāṭṭu, a section of an oral Mahābhārata called Māvāratam Pāṭṭu (4) Nilalkkuttu Kolkkali Pāṭṭu and (5) Nilalkkuttu Āṭṭakatha, 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 Tirunilalmāla

Viyaṭan moliyum pāratatteyoru kompkoṭeluttiṭumaven
who writes with a tusk, the Bhārata spoken by Vyāsa.

This is part of an invocation of Ganeśa, in Tirunilalmāla, one of the earliest poetic works [1] in Malayalam literature. *Tirunilalmāla* also contains references to other Mahābhārata episodes (Kirāta, Krṣṇa as messenger to Hāstinapura, Krṣṇa driving Arjuna’s chariot, Mahābhārata war). Vasiṣṭha, Vamadeva, Vyāsa, Pulastya, Maitreya and “Vaiśampāyana who recites Mahābhārata” (*maruttu pāratatteppeccum vaicempāyanaṃ*) are mentioned (pages 109-110) among the Rṣis who arrive to witness the ritual performed by Malayas (one of the aboriginal sects of Kerala) at a Krṣṇa temple.

There is a long invocation of the Goddess Kurattittaiwam 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 Krṣṇa’s body. They enumerate nine sins of Krṣṇa, the nineth 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 Pallippāṇa [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 Pallippāṇa [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 Kolkkalī Pāṭṭu [7] of central Kerala and (5) Nilalkkuttu Ṭṭṭakatha [8], the literary text for a popular Kathakali play. In the songs of Muḷḷakkurumbas [9] (Adivasis of Gudallur, Nilgiri Distict, 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 Kannerru Mantravādam, sung by Velas of south Kerala for abhicāra), Māvaratam Pāṭṭu (2902) and Velan Pāṭṭu (3329).

In a nut-shell, the summary of the episode is as follows [12]: (Note that Kuravan and Kuratty are male and female members of Kurava, an aboriginal sect of South India.) Kauravas order Malankuravan to perform Nilakkuttu and put Pāndavas 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 Pāndavas. 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 Pāndavas are put to sleep. In Māvaratam Pāṭṭu and Kuratti Tōrram, Kunti is also put to sleep. In the Nilakkuttu Pāṭṭu associated with the Pallippāna ritual, Malankuravan and Malankuratti are replaced by Bhārata Malayan and Malayi. In this version, along with the Pāndavas, Kunti and Draupadī are put to sleep. In the Nilakkuttu Āṭṭakkatha, only Pāndavas are put to sleep. In this work, responding to Kunti’s prayer, it is Kṛṣṇa who revives the Pāndavas. A notable variation is the absence of Kṛṣṇa in Kuratti Tōrram, the two versions of Nilakkuttu Pāṭṭu and the Kolkkali Pāṭṭu. Āṭṭakkatha also has additional characters such as Garthavaktra, Susarma etc.

Songs of Mulļakkurumbas [9] has the following reference to Nilakkuttu:

kaluverṛ vannuraccitu mannan kuravan kuttuvān nilalennu
paṟaka rōmattāl kuṣumattoṭaṇe purappetṭiainiavaru oruṇiṇum nerattu
oruttanaiṇiyoy kuryattiye teṭi uratta kaṇṇakam vanam kaṭannute
kaṭukkena pōva vanam tannil
peruttoru nadiyatum kaṭannute iniyum kaṇṭila kuratiyye
perutta rōmattāl kuṣumattoṭaṇi īrṇpu neyyōtu pulippalum
paṟaṅṇatokke orukki vannute kaṭukkane pōva vanam tannil [13].

Songs of Pāṇas [10] contain references to Nilakkuttu such as

perutakina mahābhāratakathayil
pāṇde kuravi perigoraran
piṇi māṟuṇa utan tirttoru vali [14].

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

The Nilakkuttu 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 Kottakal Chandrasekhara Warrier’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 Nilakkuttu 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 *Terakkuttu* play called *Turūpatai Kuravaṉcī*. In this play, during the stay in the forest Draupādi disguises as a *Kuratti* and goes to Hastinapura 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*, *Villiputtūrur 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) *Viruntunṭetam* (Partaking in the Feast), (2) *Nāgakanniye Mālayitṭetam* (Marrying the Nāga Maiden), (3) *Nīlal Kutiyyetam* (Shadow Piercing), (4) *Pilāvila Pariccetam* (Plucking of Jackfruit Leaf), (5) *Viṣam Koṭutteṭam* (Poisoning), and (6) *Cāmakkānṉi 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: Kāntakārī (Gandhārī) from Karunādu 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 Kuṇcū Pīman (Bhīma). Kuṇcū Tevi (Kūntī) informs the Pāṇḍavas that Kāntakārī 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 lead 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 Karna’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 Hidimbi.

Summary of the second episode is as follows: Kāntakārī 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 Hiltebeitel in the context of Barbarīka, Aravan and Kūttanṭavar [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 Hidimba 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 Kṛṣṇa’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 Nilalkkuttu are associated with either ritual or classical
theatre performances, it is important to record the details of the performances of Kuratti Teyyam, Pallippana and Nilakkuttu, 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 Nilakkuttu 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 Hiltebeitel [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 Nilakaṇṭha Edition [25] are also given.

01104006 c abhicārabhisaranyuktam abravīccai̇va tām munīḥ
(Nilakaṇṭha 111.6)

01109015 c agastyasyabhicarēṇa yuṣmākaṁ vai vapaḥ hutā
(Pāṇḍu to Deer) (Nilakaṇṭha 118.15)

01113034 c sa me’abhicārasaranyuktam aṣṭaḥ bhagavān varām
(Kunti to Pāṇḍu) (Nilakaṇṭha 122.35)

01113042 c upacārabhicārabhyāṁ dharmaṁ ārādhyasva vai
(Pāṇḍu to Kunti) (Nilakaṇṭha 122.43)

Instead of ārādhyasva, Nilakaṇṭha has āvāhavasva, which has more abhicāra flavour to it.

Also see, Alf Hiltebeitel’s [24] discussions on abhicāra in the context of sarpasatra (p 115), Kāṭhaka 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 abhimantrenodakena rṣibhiścābhicārakahāi
For the entire passage which appears in the manuscript K₄ 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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**References**


- [http://www.phx-ult-lodge.org/five-years.htm](http://www.phx-ult-lodge.org/five-years.htm). See the chapter entitled “Witchcraft on the Nilgiris”.
- Alienation of land, culture and performance of the Kurumba tribes of Attappady by Ramachandran Mokery available at [http://krpcds.org/reportleft.htm](http://krpcds.org/reportleft.htm)


The King decided that the Kuravan should kill them by shadow piercing. They were organising 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 gathered all prescribed items such as long hairs, flowers, ant’s ghee and tiger’s milk from the deep forest. Quickly go to the forest.

In the great *Mahābhārata* story, in olden times, kuravi devised a method to remove the sins of the great Śiva.

The narrative is available on the internet at [http://mahabharata-resources.org/variations/logan_excerpt.pdf](http://mahabharata-resources.org/variations/logan_excerpt.pdf)

*Nizhalkuttu*, C. Ambujakshan Nair, [http://narthaki.com/info/articles/art168.html](http://narthaki.com/info/articles/art168.html)


English Summary by Prema Nandakumar available at [http://mahabharata-resources.org/variations/villi_abhicara.html](http://mahabharata-resources.org/variations/villi_abhicara.html)


[23] Private communication from Shri Nelliyotu Vasudevan Nambudiri, Kathakali actor (October 2003).


[26] Available at [http://mahabharata-resources.org/southern/Sarpasatra_verses_070121.pdf](http://mahabharata-resources.org/southern/Sarpasatra_verses_070121.pdf)