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*Music and Politics in Kerala: Hindu Nationalists Versus Marxists**

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Communists have spread all over Kerala, not only in government but also in art and culture!

M. A. Krishnan, former Chief Editor,
Kesari Weekly, the roar of nationalism (RSS), 2007

Artistic practices have greatly attracted the attention of the political arena in Kerala since the second half of the 20th century. After India's partition in 1947, the segmentation of regional states on a linguistic basis fostered local nationalism in Kerala governed by the freshly elected communist government. As a matter of fact, this state has developed a broad cultural policy promoting local heritage both in music and dance. This phenomenon has been driven by the necessity to build a 'Keralite' national unity. Since 1956, the state of Kerala has created various festivals in its large cities, targeting the middle classes and setting up artistic competitions in high schools and colleges. It has also developed a radio and television network to broadcast local music. Moreover, this policy has led to the creation of a number of research institutes where experts (usually Marxist researchers) in folklore studies have produced a large number of publications over the last 60 years.

During the mid-1970s, some 20 years after the birth of Kerala state, Hindu nationalists from the RSS set up their own organisations for the arts and their dissemination. The first of these, Tapasya 'Art and Literary Forum' *(Kala sahitya vedi)*, specialises in organising music and dance performances and literature festivals. The second, Balagokulam, also known as 'The Children's Cultural Movement',

promotes the collective teaching of music, dance and poetry for children with the aim of spreading the Hindu cultural tradition.

This article will compare two competing nationalist programmes of Keralite artistic practices. The focus will be on the opposing views on how to define the concepts of cultural heritage and national culture, as well as the different strategies used to spread them among the population. We will first present current activities and methods used by the Sangh Parivar in artistic fields to spread its Hindutva ideology to the public at large and especially to the younger generation. Such activities are mainly based on a process of Sankritisation. An analysis will then be made of the areas covered by the Kerala government's cultural policy and its strong impact on the emergence of a 'regional' nationalism. Mediated by local folklorists, this policy has acquired the approval of social equality values and has led to a social reform movement by promoting the arts.

Tapasya and Balagokulam, Two Keralite Organisations for the Promotion of Hindu Culture

Apart from the numerous (all-India based) Sangh Parivar organisations established today in Kerala, several regional organisations have emerged over the last three decades in various spheres of society and culture[1]. Among these, Tapasya (heat) and Balagokulam (herd of cows of the child [Krishna]) form two associations entirely dedicated to the arts and their teaching.

A 'Divine' Art

The organisation Tapasya was set up in 1975 in the Calicut offices of the weekly *Kesari*, the main RSS journal in Kerala, often compared to its Hindi equivalent, *Panchajanya*, and to the Marathi *Vivek*. Tapasya was formerly a small group of intellectuals interested in literature, folk arts and dance. Among them was the great poet (Mahakavi) Akkitam Achuthan Namboodiri, author of the essay

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[1] For instance, the Ksetra Samrakshana Samithi for the protection of Hindu temples; the Matsya Pravartaka Sangham, a Hindu fishermen trade union; the Bharatiya Vichara Kendram which organises conferences and seminars for the intellectual elite; the Hindu Aikya Vedi whose aim is the 'consolidation' of various organisations and social sections in Hindu society; and the Amrita Bharati Vidya Pitham, a kind of open university proposing distance learning in order to propagate Hindu cultural heritage and the Sanskrit language.

'Epic of 20th Century' (*uripatam nottantinte itihasam*) published in 1952. Today, most RSS activists consider this opus to be a visionary text having predicted the collapse of the communist block. M. A. Krishnan, chief editor of *Kesari* from 1964–90, and V. M. Korath, former freedom fighter and chief editor of *Mathrbhumi*,[2] began to animate a literature forum in Calicut which scholars, journalists and All India Radio staff members attended. The RSS was banned several times; hence these intellectuals consider themselves to have been 'formally underground'. They chose the name '*Tapasya*' in reference to the term '*tapas*', a Vedic and classical Hindu concept depicting the spiritual experience traditionally undergone by *rishi*s (sages). This RSS group, entirely dedicated to the arts and literature, seems to be one of the first of this kind in India. It appeared to be the driving force behind the Sangh Parivar national organisation called the All India Samskara Bharati,[3] established a few years later in 1981 in Nagpur, central India. At the national level, this organisation works for the preservation of Indian culture through the development of its art forms, attributing awards to young talents or senior artists. It also organises a national painters' camp and, more recently, a classical music festival.[4] Historically, Tapasya was the first regional cultural organisation to be officially affiliated to the Samskara Bharati. Although it initially emerged among RSS activists, it spread afterwards as a parallel organisation.

Today, Tapasya is well established among classical artists and art critics. By organising regular concerts and literature forums, it has managed to gather numerous artistic personalities. It also

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[2] Daily newspaper in Malayalam created in 1923. Supporting the Indian National Congress, it is considered to be one of the early platforms for the state's freedom movement.

[3] '*Samskara*' is a Sanskrit word which means 'consecration, cultivation of the mind, accomplishment'. '*Bharati*' is the goddess of knowledge and music, more commonly known as Sarasvati.

[4] Held at the cultural capital of Mysore, this event gathered around 500 musicians from all over the country. As expressed by the organisation's secretary, Krishna Murthy: 'This festival is our endeavour to bring together the renowned and young Carnatic and Hindustani musicians, as it would help them to interact with each other. Also, we believe that the festival makes a good platform for all artistes to meet and share views and experiences on a common basis' (*The Times of India*, 11 January 2009). The ideological implications of such a project, shared with Tapasya, will be explored later.

includes members of the Keralite branch of the three major national institutions dedicated to the arts in India — the Sangeet Natak Akademi (government organisation for the promotion of music and the performing arts), Sahitya Akademi (its equivalent for literature) and Lalita Akademi (Academy of Fine Arts). Like these institutions, Tapasya is a regular cultural organisation: it awards trophies, prizes and certificates to many Keralite performers,[5] poets and novelists. Moreover, it publishes the monthly *Varttikam* (1,000 copies) run by Chief Editor K. P. Shashi Dharan, a literature critique, as well as a high quality catalogue.

Among the 30 Tapasya units based in Kerala, the town of Irinjalakuda certainly is the most developed as it benefits from a rich artistic environment. It houses an important Brahmin elite: masters of the Sanskrit drama Kutiyattam, artists and producers of Kathakali and classical dances are actual members of the organisation or obtain casual contracts and funds. This success among performers is not specific to this organisation. It appears to be the result of a long process of institutionalising classical art forms which started during the 1930s throughout India.[6] After Independence, performers faced a shortage of traditional patronage, provided in the olden days by royal courts and nobility. The advent of national and private academies during the 1950s subsequently modified the status of practitioners, from craftsman to artist, and reshaped their performance and transmission activities (Guillebaud 2010). In this context of changing patronage, Tapasya has been considered a regular cultural institution offering performance opportunities and new income to local musicians. Thus, it has been rooted in the artistic, mainly classical, milieu for more than 30 years, in a way comparable to other private or public institutions.

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[5] For example, one could mention the *Tapasya Purashkar* Music Award. With regard to the performing arts, prize winners are mainly classical art specialists (Carnatic music, Mohiniyattam dance, etc.) or folk performers (*tiruvadira kali dance*, *brahmani pattu*, etc.), all members of Brahmin castes. Specialists from other castes started to win prizes only recently.

[6] On the process of the institutionalisation of Indian classical arts during the 20th century and its relationship with nationalist movements after Independence, see   Mitter (1994) and Guha-Thakurta (2004) for painting and sculpture; Bakhle (2005) for Hindustani music, Subramaniam (2006) and Weidman (2006) for Carnatic music, Srinivasan (1983) for Bharatanatyam dance and Kothari (1989) for Kathak dance.

However, performers are generally not aware of its affiliation with the Hindu nationalist movement. The last annual programme held in 2007, celebrating the 30th anniversary of the organisation,[7] reveals such an ambivalent position. Many well-known artists were invited to take part in the event as, for instance, the tabla player, Sudheer Kadalundi, famous for his Guinness World record in 2005 (he gave a non-stop 57-hour recital, *The Hindu*, 1 March 2007). His performance of 'fusion music' on such occasions began with the national anthem '*Vande Mataram*' and was followed by a mix of Hindustani, Carnatic and semi-classical pieces played on the flute, violin, keyboard, tabla and cymbals. Like most well-known musicians in India and elsewhere, during an interview he explained: 'I need to assume a social responsibility. I must help spread the message of peace, unity and brotherhood (…) Music is a God-given gift. It is also my bread and butter. I am glad to remain a performing artist' (ibid.). This discourse that underlines the unity and divine character of music, its universality and spirituality, even if it contains the same type of vocabulary used by Hindu nationalists, does not seem to convey any political ideology. Indeed, that is the kind of contradictory situation in which most artists affiliated to Tapasya seem to live. They agree to be patronised by Tapasya without effectively sharing its ideological views. It is one of the essential aspects of this organisation's cultural entrenchment process in Kerala.

Backstage, out of the public eye, the organisation's committees, at the regional and district levels, have formalised a specific ideological discourse to convey what, to their mind, the ultimate aim of Art should be, and a nationalist project for preserving and spreading the 'Hindu cultural tradition'. M. A. Krishnan is the current Tapasya guide at the Kerala state level. A professor and specialist of Sanskrit literature, he left his job and joined the RSS in 1954, propagating its nationalist views. He explains his project by using the notion of 'heredity', a term that is typical of a racial discourse and used by him in English:

> India has a cultural and literary background. The greatest are Vedas and Upanishads; they are the roots of our heritage. In Malayalam as well, there is a very long history. We have to keep up this heredity,

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[7] Like other Sangh associations, Tapasya brings together the different district units during an annual meeting at the state level to celebrate the organisation's anniversary, with concerts and seminars largely covered by the media.

propagate literature and pass them on to the next generation. Music, drama, especially in Kerala, mural paintings (*Ramayana* and *Purana*) and Ravi Varma[8] pictures… through the discussion and writings, we encourage heredity (interview with M. A. Krishnan, February 2007).

Plate 1.1: Tapasya logo. Courtesy of Christine Guillebaud.

From Sanskrit texts to Raja Ravi Varma paintings, including the performing arts, the Tapasya project encompasses all art forms. The association's logo is somewhat explicit. An anthropomorphic figure wears ritualistic headgear (*muti*) used in various rituals in Kerala such as in *teyyam* (a possession cult from north Kerala) or those performed by the Paraya community.[9] According to M. A. Krishnan, this headgear represents 'all Devi and Kali puja', a way of

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[8] Raja Ravi Varma (1848–1906) was a painter and portraitist. He was the initiator of posters (also called 'chromos') picturing Hindu deities and printed in Bombay in 1894.

[9] For instance, one could mention the goddess rituals *karinkaliyattam*, *ketrattam* or ritual dramas *kaliyum darikanum*, *muntiyan mukkan cattan*, *pakkanar vadyam*, etc.

symbolising the numerous folk cults dedicated to the Hindu goddess in Kerala. A painter's palette forms the chest and a lute, most probably a *tampura* (accompanying instrument in Indian classical music) serves as the pelvis. The hands of the character are decorated with accessories usually worn by Kathakali actors. Literature and poetry are symbolised by a manuscript and a quill, and the performing arts (*nrtta*) by anklets. Like a human body animated by different components and limbs, a unique Hindu cultural tradition embodies the different arts. The aim of Tapasya is precisely to work towards the unification of the arts, an ideology that fails to consider the specific history of local traditions, their distinct religious background and the heterogeneity of the social settings. We will further note that leaders of Balagokulam, the second association running cultural activities, share a common conception.

The discourse indeed revolves around a rather minimalist conception of Art, considered as the simplest adaptation of a classical text, as for instance the Puranas or the Hindu epics — the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Such a view limits all expressive variations and aesthetic diversity such as singing, dance, instrumental music, drama, etc. When asked to describe the last annual programme celebrating the 30th anniversary of the organisation in 2007, M. A. Krishnan said:

> There were cinema reviews, a mural painting exhibition, fusion music, *Mohiniyattam* (dance) which featured the Narayana story and the Krishna story (Hindu deities), poetry reciting in Malayalam, and for the concluding séance, one *Patayani* (ritual for the goddess) from Kottayam district. *Patayani* is based on Puranic stories. But *purakali* (collective dance from North Kerala based on non classical texts) and *teyyam* (possession ceremony) are non-Puranic stories, yet in a way they are in a crude form. Ritual forms take on different types of worship. Worship by the lower layer of society is different but they have common stories. We encourage heredity (interview with M. A. Krishnan, February 2007).

This concept of art, explicitly focused on pan-Indian classical texts, emphasises the 'Indian unity' of Keralite art forms. Similarly, it cancels out social differences among local performers in order to enhance their common cultural background.

Several questions must be addressed in order to explore the local mediation of this ideology: How is the Tapasya project run at the local level? How do they manage to contact performers and prepare
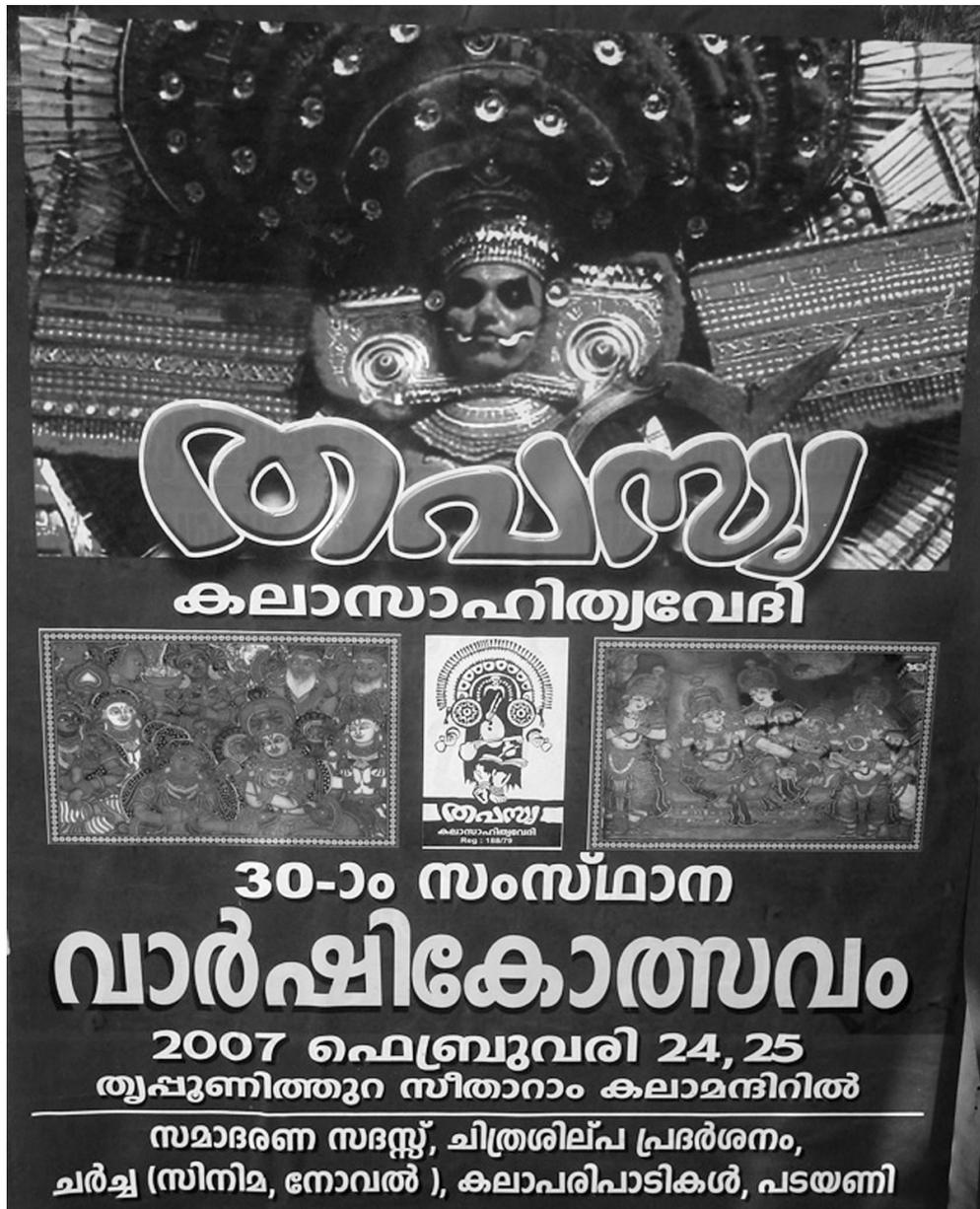
Plate 1.2: Poster of Tapasya's 30th anniversary: *Teyyam* performer as an emblem of folklore, the Tapasya logo and temple mural paintings. Courtesy of Christine Guillebaud.

stage programmes? As mentioned earlier, Tapasya has entrenched itself in the artistic milieu, mainly classical. Yet, in comparison, it failed in the areas of folk music and low-caste aesthetic forms. For instance, most of the leaders of Tapasya units are members of upper and intermediary castes. As a matter of fact, they do not have any

contact with folk performers, especially with low-caste members. Compared to most classical artists in India, appointed long ago by government institutions and private academies, folk performers have only recently been institutionalised. And today they are less well known at the public level than classical musicians. Aware of this situation, M. A. Krishnan suggested that I meet Sureshkumar, president of the organisation at Trichur district level, considered by his colleagues as the most experienced in folklore.

Working for the promotion of Keralite arts, Sureshkumar's profile is distinguishable from the majority of local folklorists. He is neither a scholar nor an artist. Sureshkumar is assistant manager of the KPL Shudi Company, one of the major coconut oil factories in Kerala. Trained in electrical engineering, he told me that even if a better salary was to be obtained in another country, he would never leave his motherland. Member of the low caste Ilava, traditionally toddy-tappers, Sureshkumar is son and the grandson of a farming family. This young man, looking like the perfect businessman, talks freely about his attachment to 'rural life' and his passion for fieldwork. Compared to other district presidents and given his social background, Sureshkumar claims to be the one who is the closest to villagers and their cults. His interest in the *teyyam* ritual led him to stay in north Kerala for a couple of weeks to attend ceremonies and to meet scholars and specialists of this form, as for instance the historian K. K. N. Kurup. For this 30-year-old, eager to meet folk performers, it is necessary to follow the path of his predecessors: those who studied and documented village cults, and those among them, who established close links with local performers. We will further develop this vital point: folk art, for the last 60 years, has been the privilege of scholars, most of them leftists. Sureshkumar knows perfectly well all the classical and recent publications dealing with *teyyam*, published in Kerala. While claiming to be an authority on folklore, he does not have any real expertise in local arts, though documentation has already been widely distributed on it by folklorists. Contacting local performers for stage programmes is one thing, yet making them feel the 'original Hinduism' of their performance and asking them to convey this to the public is an entirely different matter. Indeed, Sureshkumar's discourse is often to be taken at a purely theoretical level:

The ultimate aim of Tapasya is the divine art form. When you play music, you become a god as well as the music you are playing. The word for 'God' is '*Bhagavan*', it means 'the one who has capacities'.[10] During the introductory performance, our custom in Tapasya is to touch the artist's feet as a blessing. This is the reason why. The person who practises an art form is different from normal people. For normal people, there is a gulf between themselves and God (interview with Sureshkumar, March 2007).

This religious concept of art is the core of the association project. In order to unify aesthetical practices in the divine realm, several concepts are used. Sureshkumar explains them:

I have organised *teyyam* demonstrations in Irinjalakuda. But they are only conventional demonstrations: there were (hymns to the deity) *tottam*, then the (introductory performance of the deity with no ceremonial make-up or dress, in front of the shrine) *teyyam vellattam*;[11] this is the birth of *teyyam*, its first shape or baby *teyyam*. There are different types of *teyyam* for (deities) Chamundi, Gulikan, etc. but we only perform the conventional ones. The aim of Tapasya is to combine conventional and unconventional art forms on the same stage and to coordinate known and unknown artists (interview with Sureshkumar, March 2007).

In Sureshkumar's rhetoric, the word 'conventional' refers to any aesthetic form that relies on classical texts. Yet the way he establishes a link with Hindu sources may vary considerably according to the art form. For example, he considers Kathakali drama as conventional; most of the song repertoire has been composed by various poets on the basis of Hindu epics and the *Bhagavata Purana*. The possession cult *teyyam* is also recognised as conventional. Some hymns to deities (*tottam*) and prescriptions (*anusthana*s) were sometimes written on palm-leaf manuscripts though never based on Puranic texts or classical Hindu epics. Indeed, Sureshkumar bases his arguments on his recent readings in *teyyam* studies, those conducted by scholars having connections with the Hindutva movement. These publications are a distorted version of stories of local deities compared to the original *tottam* songs, in order to link the cult to

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[10] '*Bhagavan*' literally means 'glorious, blessed, Supreme being'.

[11] Literally, 'dance of the *Velan*', one of the castes that perform *teyyam*. See Kurup ([1973] 2000: 45, 61, 97–98).

the *Ramayana* epic.[12] Conversely, a form such as the solo dance, *Ottan tullal*, is perceived as unconventional although it is effectively based on classical sources. Compared to other classical dramas composed in Sanskrit (*Kutiyattam, Chakkyar kuttu*) or in the classical language, *manipravalam* (Kathakali), such a repertoire is based in Malayalam, the local idiom. Moreover, the stories are satirical and humoristic. These criteria have led Sureshkumar to classify this art form as unconventional. More generally speaking, such filtering does not account for the historical background of each art form nor its local specificities. If they are effectively based on classical sources, they may require a very strict adaptation of the story. If they differ considerably from the sources, as for the *teyyam* ritual, Tapasya leaders will take it upon themselves to convey to the audience a discourse about their 'heredity'.

The term 'conventional' also refers to the way of representing the deity. For example, a deity (*murtti*) parading on an elephant's back is perceived as more conventional than a possession ritual (*tullal*), a widespread form of cult among low castes, which is usually avoided in the programmes. Performers are often asked to limit their stage performance to certain parts of the ritual only. Now acquainted with stage programmes, they adapt their performance to this norm and consider it a necessary process for reducing the length of the ritual.[13] However, Tapasya leaders never argue about a time limit. In the case of *teyyam*, mentioned by Sureshkumar, the entire ritual action is deleted, though it includes precisely all aesthetic and dramaturgic components: dance, gestures, ceremonial make-up, pose of the *muti* headgear, moving the deity among the devotees, drum beat, etc. Their objective is to only keep the introductory part that has an explicit textual reference. The formatting of the performance varies from one case to another, yet it is common for Tapasya leaders to invite most performers specialising in aesthetic

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[12] For instance, the book *Let Happiness Enhanced: Folklore Studies* (*Eriyoru gunam varanam: folklor padhananal*) published in 2005 by the essayist Vazhavalappil Govindan Komaram links the story of Sita (heroin of the *Ramayana* epic) to the legend of the local goddess Muchilot Bhagavati (patron deity of the Vanniya caste), depicting the story of the self-immolation of an outcaste Brahmin girl.

[13] For instance, most possession cults performed in villages last several days. In the context of stage performances, a formatting process is usually carried out to fit the ritual into a one or two hour time slot.

forms based explicitly upon episodes taken from Puranic texts. For others, as *teyyam* ritual specialists, they usually sing their traditional repertoire on stage, while the programme posters present a discourse about the divine experience they supposedly convey to the public. I will further mention a few examples of such a divergence between performance and discourse.

In Sureshkumar's words, it is also important to offer opportunities to 'well-known' as well as 'unknown' performers. This word is used instead of 'folk artist', a category that implies a hierarchical conception; in India, classical art forms are generally considered to be superior to folk arts. Criticising this dichotomy, Tapasya actors are more inclined to say:

> Classical, folk, I don't know what it stands for! If a *kalakali*[14] man is fully dedicated to God, I might say that it is classical. All of them are art forms and we consider them to be equally important. The (Sanskrit drama) *kutiyattam* is no bigger than the *kalakali*. Like tea and buttermilk, each has its own quality.

The term 'unknown' does not reproduce an implicit social hierarchy between performers. It implies another criterion, that is to say, access to public spaces. For the previous summer's stage programme organised by Sureshkumar, some musicians were invited to perform Carnatic music (South Indian classical music) along with Paraya specialists of the harvest ritual *kalakali*. Before opening the concert, an introduction and explanation were given to the public, in which the Carnatic musicians' repertoire was introduced by the Sanskrit word *nadopasana* (worship of sound). We note that such a term is not widely used by musicians in the contemporary context but that it is more common in ancient musicological treatises. Reference to canonical sources is a way of basing performance on the substrate of classical Indian culture. Moreover, it states that music is mainly a divine art. Similarly, the *kalakali* ritual is announced as follows: 'The performers carry their bull. While carrying it on their shoulders, they themselves become god's servants. From simple worship, they become servants' (extract from a Tapasya programme notice, 2006).

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[14] This term is the name of the harvest ritual performed by the Paraya caste, one of the lowest social groups in Kerala society. The performance takes place around an edifice representing a bull decorated with fine coconut leaves (*kurutolla*) that is moved by porters. Songs and dance movements accompany it.

How the public is to interpret the performance has nothing to do with its components, such as the instruments, gestures, accessories or movements, etc. What happens on stage is not the main focus of attention. According to Tapasya organisers, it is essential to only highlight the spiritual value of the show, and this dimension is seen as a feature of art in general. From this point of view, the way performers express the musical form and its aesthetics is not considered to be of any import. As Sureshkumar mentioned earlier, the ultimate goal is to annihilate 'the gulf between god and human beings'. According to the Hindu nationalist conception, all arts are considered to be gifts from God or ways of accessing him.

Such programmes also imply a fall in the importance of the sociological origin of the performers. For example, caste names are rarely mentioned, and the performers are only referred to as specialists of a certain ritual. In Tapasya, we prefer to talk about '*kalakali* people' rather than '*kalakali* of Parayas'. This project of combining the arts also tends to erase any regional differences, as Sureshkumar explains:

> Classical art and folklore, we always combine both. I embrace all of them! In order to prepare the monthly programmes, we prepare a list. Based on that, we select and pay the artists. For the annual festival, we always select people from the opposite region to where the programme is organised. If we are in the north, we choose arts from the south and if we are in the south we choose northern forms! We introduce arts to the people and popularize it throughout Kerala. We select arts from every area. From Kanyakumari (city located to the south) to the Himalayas, our aim is to spread a unique stream that will emphasise the national feeling (interview with Sureshkumar, March 2007).

The organising members of Tapasya have readily adapted to the recent internationalisation of certain Keralite artistic forms. I refer to Kathakali in particular — and also, on a smaller scale, to the Sanskrit drama Kutiyattam — today widely presented at music and drama festivals throughout Europe, North America and Japan. The main performers and promoters are actually affiliated to Tapasya; even their proximity to the organisation seems more institutional than ideological. Tapasya has established itself as a cultural organisation for the promotion and dissemination of the arts, yet its ideology does not come across on stage. It stands merely at an exegetic level. In addition to the lack of knowledge of certain art forms it promotes, it also has much less influence over the performers

and the public they gather during the festivals. For instance, the internationally known artists of Kathakali and Kutiyattam dramas usually denounce 'the loss of interest of Keralite people in their own artistic traditions' and, more generally, in 'their culture'. Such a discourse echoes the vocabulary used by Tapasya leaders when they claim to promote Indian culture. But this seemingly common platform is rather ambiguous. Performers object to their traditional local arts falling into decline while the organisation blithely promotes the standardisation of culture on behalf of religion. Basing their project on this contradictory situation, members of Tapasya never forget to mention the most internationally popular keralite artists to promote their achievements: 'we produce them all over the World, we wish to propagate them!' But what is effectively communicated to the public, in Kerala as elsewhere, calls for a more in-depth analysis. Such an ambiguous situation might similarly be encountered with regard to the cultural activities run by the second artistic organisation, Balagokulam.

About Artistic Education: Between Informal Learning and Biological Facts

The organisation Balagokulam is contemporary to Tapasya and deals with the educational dimension of Sangh artistic activities in Kerala. This institution, today run by M. A. Krishnan at the Kerala state level, is generally presented as the application 'on the field' of the editorial lines of the journal *Kesari* which belongs to the RSS. Until 1975, the column dedicated to the 'Balagokulam page' published poems and children songs, quiz games and drawings. Young adults, called 'elder brothers' (*gopicettam*), were also invited to organise their own workshops to educate children. The column content has always been chosen by scholars, education science professionals and by poets specialising in children's literature, most of them members of the RSS. The poet Kunjunni Master, for instance, is well known for his large collection of children's poetry printed by the organisation's publishing house (Balasahiti Prakashan).[15] These poems have also recently been widely circulated

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[15] Teacher at Sri Ramakrishnan High-school in Calicut, Kunjunni collected materials such as proverbs, small stories, folk tales and folk songs, and compiled it all for it to be taught to children. Two volumes have already been published: *Nata kutti kavithakal* and *Kunnunikkavitakal*.

by local private record companies. Balagokulam has, consequently, grown into an autonomous organisation specialising in cultural education. This project completes Tapasya's promotional activities, sharing a common aim: 'to guarantee the propagation of literature and cultural tradition'. The leaders of Balagokulam often insist on the novelty of their educative activities, said to be spread in a more informal way compared to other organisations belonging to the RSS.[16] They even claim to provide a new learning process that offers a common platform for boys and girls alike.

Setting up a Balagokulam unit consists in regrouping children from 5–15 years old, who live in the same neighbourhood for educative and leisure-time activities.[17] A 'protector' (*raksadhikari*) or tutor gets in touch with their parents and organises weekly 90-minute classes on fixed dates, usually Sunday mornings. Sessions devoted to children take place at the home of a 'patron', usually the parent of a participant or a neighbour with enough room to cater for about 20 persons. The *raksadhikari* is in charge of the educational content of the training sessions. He generally prepares his courses using a wide selection of printed material (the Bhagavad

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[16] On the one hand, they attempt to distinguish themselves from paramilitary organisations (*sakha*s) mainly focused on discipline and body training. On the other hand, they differ from the academic teaching of Sangh Parivar independent schools (called Bharatiya Vidya Niketam in Kerala).

[17] In addition to artistic and literary training, children take part in 'study tours' in different Hindu temples (for example, the Krishna temple in Guruvayur) and other 'historical places, for creating awareness about (our) culture and history' (balagokulam.net, accessed 17 February 2011). According to Hindu nationalists, these tours are held in defiance of outings organised by state schools and considered as 'stereotypes'. Balagokulam also takes part in the celebration of different Hindu ceremonial festivals such as the Rakshabhandan *utsav* (festival) for promoting 'harmony, love and brotherhood', the guru puja or *acharya* puja for 'inculcating the habit of respecting the elders' and the Vishu *gramotsav* where children perform stage programmes in order 'to create national awareness through children among families, and through such families in the whole village and the nation at large' (ibid.). Finally, Balagokulam is involved in the annual Krishna birthday festival, called Srikrishnajayanti; this deity is considered to be the 'ideal hero' of the organisation. For one day, thousands of children standing on colourfully decorated floats, display pictures of the deity in a procession (*shobhayatra*) accompanied by devotional songs (*bhajan*s). According to M. A. Krishnan, the extent of processions in Kerala cities, especially in the capital Trivandrum, has led the Kerala government to declare this day a public holiday.

Gita, bhajan*s*, stories, games, quizzes, proverbs etc.) published by the organisation. The latter ascertains that he has the required teaching skills. As M. A. Krishnan points out: 'he has to be able to get the children into a listening mood. We encourage him and give classes and training.' During sessions, an adolescent or a young student, called 'the children's friend' (*balamitram*), is chosen as the group leader and works regularly with the tutor. In encouraging young students to assume this responsibility, the association tries to promote a relationship as anti-hierarchical as possible and in which playing and fun are encouraged. Quoting a *raksadhikari* teacher:

> Children have to develop, not merely through formal teaching. We want to bring out what they know. It has to be informal. Thus, awareness grows and children can take a part. *Balagokulam* has been created to develop their interests and knowledge. This is very important. Informal teaching is best. It establishes ideas, the prestige of the Nation in the minds of children.

Today, there are around 1,700 balagokulam units in Kerala.[18] In some of these units children have a weekly session of 'cultural training' in orphanages run by the Seva Bharati (Service of India), a charitable Sangh institution widespread throughout India. These units, which came about mainly by targeting a specific population composed of orphans and destitute children, very rarely cater to other children. Another part of these units has been set up through networking among parents, students and children living in the same area. In this context, participants are for the most part not a member of other organisations run by Sangh Parivar, a situation that allows a renewed form of recruitment.

A Balagokulam session always starts by ceremoniously placing a statuette of Krishna, considered to be the 'ideal hero' of the organisation. The children, sitting in rows, are asked to concentrate. The very first minutes are devoted to reciting prayers, for instance the 'sun salutation' (*surya namaskaram*), and then to the reading of

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[18] The organisation has recently extended its branches beyond the Kerala border, to Delhi in particular and to the USA. See the website of the American branch: balagokulam.org (accessed 17 February 2011). Several educative programmes can be downloaded by teachers. Video clips of *balagokulam* training classes organised by Indian families in the USA are available on the well-known Youtube website.

Sanskrit verses (*slokas*) from the Bhagavad Gita or the Puranas. The children are required to improve their memories, with the group leader (*balamitram*) often asking them to copy lines of verse into their personal notebook. The leader himself does not always know these textual excerpts by heart, but leads the start of the session with the help of a teaching manual entitled Plan of Learning: A Handbook for the *Raksadhikaris'* (*Pathyapaddhati*) published by the organisation. It consists of a 100 pages presenting a large selection of texts from the Krishna epic, bhajans, excerpts of masterpieces written by classical poets (such as Ezhtutachan and Vallathol), folk poetry for children (*natan kuttikavitakal*), shorts stories by the poet Kunjunni, a Malayalam alphabet chart, the national anthem '*Vande mataram*', and a concluding verse in Sanskrit 'Let everyone be happy!' (*sarvepi sukhinah santhu*) recited as a final blessing (*mangalaslokam*).[19] Apart from this *sloka*, which is imposed by the organisers for all Balagokulam sessions, the group leader and the tutor are entirely free to conduct any other educative activities according to their own wishes and artistic skills.

The first part of the session is generally devoted to prayers, recitations, songs and poetry. The second part of the meeting is given over to games and/or group dances. In various quarters of the district, these activities are rather like any usual playtime sessions in Keralite schools, slightly adapted for the given purpose, rather than deep ideological programmes intended to indoctrinate children. As observed in many Balagokulam sessions, most of the games played are quite ordinary. One teacher mentioned that the organisation often relies on 'what children already know'. For instance, the equivalent of the English game 'Simon Says' is very popular among children in Kerala. Balagokulam teachers tend to adapt some of its rules to their own educative principles. Usually, one child (game master) tells the others what they must do with a phrase beginning with 'Simon says'.[20] Here, the name of the leader is used instead of 'Simon' and the type of commands limited to three types of action: raising your arms above your head ('Heaven!' *akasa*), putting your arms in a

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[19] Prayer from the Upanishads. In this context of enunciation, the aim is to reach universality.

[20] If Simon says 'Simon says jump!', the players must jump (players who do not jump are out). However, if Simon says simply 'Jump', without first saying 'Simon says', players do not jump; those who do jump are out.

horizontal position ('Earth!' *bhumi*) and placing your arms along your body ('Hell!' *pattalam*). These Sanskrit concepts denote the three divisions ('worlds' *lokam*) of the universe in Hindu cosmology. By modifying the content of the game's commands, educationists artificially try to inculcate Hindu values in children. However, their discourse does not differentiate between the children's cognitive experience (their ability to distinguish between valid and invalid commands) and the effective process of communicating Sanskrit concepts and their moral background. The explanation given by a tutor speaks for itself:

> The 'three worlds' game strengthens the memory, just like learning left and right. If you want to reach heaven, you have to understand the right way … if you want to guide students towards good things; there is advice in the words. It is just like when you are asleep and suddenly you hear 'fire'! You jump, don't you? Playing the game of the 'three worlds', if you say 'heaven' (*akasa*) for gods, 'earth' (*bhumi*) for human beings and 'hell' (*pattalam*) for ghosts, it creates an awareness of places and what you should do. It makes you aware of the right things.

The most striking aspect of Balagokulam ideology is the difference between the discourse on what is taught and the actual practices. The ideological image of children's actions is often greater than the actions themselves, something we have already acknowledged in performances staged by the Tapasya organisation. In Balagokulam, activities are aimed at propagating moral values and rules of behaviour that children are supposed to pass on from the training sessions to the family circle. This theory about the propagation of ideas considers the basic learning process along two successive lines, first from children to adults, then from adults to society at large. The organisation's website clearly conveys the expected impact on Indian society:

> Families will observe the following practices: plant a 'tulasi'[21] in front of the house; will not consume beef and preferably adopt the vegetarian diet; establish 'ôm' in their house; receive all guests and visitors with reverence *pranam*, offer a seat and treat them with due respect; install a deity in the house; pray together once a day after switching off the

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[21] Plant generally placed in the courtyard of a house and used for therapeutic purposes. It is widely considered as the holy place of Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity.

TV/radio; when going out, each member will inform the others of where he/she intends to go and obtain their consent; the whole family shall take meals together at least once a week, if not every day, with meals being taken after (reciting) *Bhojana* mantra; donate in kind or cash for charitable work *danam* (extracts from the website balagokulam.net, accessed 23 December 2010).

These expectations are far from what happens in reality. Is there any real connection between a game of 'Simon Says' and the fact that one will adopt a vegetarian diet, or settle a Hindu deity at home? As a matter of fact, children take part in the activities offered to them, but it is still difficult to evaluate their role in the cultural mediation of Hindu values in the family circle. More broadly speaking, the organisation's educative programmes are based on a rather caricatural conception of what should be the learning process as well as a fundamentally anti-sociological conception of culture.

Plate 1.3: Front cover of the book Malayalam Songs: Selection of *Folk Songs* (*Malayalappattukal. Terannatutta natanpattukal*) by Gopi Putukode. All rights reserved. Courtesy of Christine Guillebaud.

The book entitled 'Malayalam Songs. Selection of Folk Songs' (*Malayalappattukal. Terannatutta natanpattukal*) is rather explicit. As a teaching tool for group leaders of Balagokulam, this compilation was composed by Gopi Putukode, Director of the Teacher Education Training Department in Calicut University. As former secretary of the Balagokulam organisation and current vice-president, he is the author of a PhD dissertation which focuses on children's literature in Malayalam. Hence, this scholar has published this short 64-page illustrated essay dedicated to children. He is also the author of various articles about folklore in Kerala in which he exposes his own conception of culture. Gopi Putukode sums up some of its features:

> The basis of a human being is folklore. We cannot change fundamental forms. Changing society cannot be interpreted; folklore always keeps its specificities. If you study tribes or groups, you can start with the songs and then dig deeper. We must carry out research; defend and protect our culture. Folk songs are the fundamentals of culture. Balagokulam preserves our cultural bases in Kerala. That's why I have written this book, in order to preserve the cultural heritage through children. Balagokulam catches them at a young age because they don't know these facts. We can preserve the basic culture and through it what is fundamental to the nation. There are so many languages in folklore, different ways of presenting it, yet the ideas are the same. They reflect the basic culture of any human being. Their basic needs are the same: food, dress, agriculture, festivals, and biological needs. It also reflects the basic singing and musical talents. There is a saying: 'All living beings have a sort of song, even a donkey.' Even a donkey can sing or draw a painting, make a picture and cook! (even the stupidest man can do it!). Folklore represents basic skills. Through this learning, children can achieve the specificities of society.

According to Putukode, folklore might be considered a natural fact, almost a biological skill. 'Fundamental culture' is perceived as activity common to all human beings, thereby erasing the sociological settings, for example, caste or regional differences. The book layout and the criterion used for song indexation have been conceived to reflect such a view. As described earlier for Tapasya activities, song items are never referred to by the name of the performers' caste, but designated by a generic term referring to the art form or a purely invented name summing up the main contents of the song. According to him, one has to take care not to 'cause conflicts among

people' so that they will 'work together'. In the book, songs are numbered and classified by subject matter following an ideological progression, giving a biological relationship between the vegetal world, animal life, the family structure and artistic forms. Indeed, the very first songs deal with agriculture, from preparing the paddy field to the rice-grinding stage. Then a series of songs presents the different vegetables, flowers, animals and birds, as well as the tribes and castes. According to this naturalist view, the flora, fauna and social groups are part of a unique line of living beings. Further in the book, one can read the songs about the family (for instance, the 'Grand-mother Song'), then those introducing the different folk arts as a set of domestic practices. Such a way of introducing songs tends to establish continuity between the natural environment, the family circle and ritual practices, considered to be the very core of the model for reshaping the whole of society. This way of naturalising family and artistic forms is also a means of stating that groups and castes are not relevant to the general process of learning songs. They would be considered to be natural basic skills shared by any living being.

Such a collection of songs is later used as educative material for the group leaders of Balagokulam sessions. However, the book does not give any practical instructions concerning the way of performing the written texts, in terms of tune or rhythm. It presents teachers with the difficult task of conveying its contents. Indeed, how can they teach songs that most of the time they have never heard before? How might a *kalakali* song be performed in a teaching context if the group leader has never attended such a ritual nor met a specialist of this repertoire, member of the Paraya caste? From the time a song is compiled to the effective dissemination of its content, the performative aspect has been entirely forgotten, retaining only the text as a reference for teaching. Asked to comment on this observation, Putukode simply suggested:

> Children find their own tune for each song! It is the special characteristic of folklore! Ideas are most important. A tune is nothing. When one reproduces a CD, it will create a condition, just like a novel when adapted to cinema. We see the hero from a single point of view. It is not good at all because creativity is limited. Individuals' thinking capacity is lessened. That's my view as an educationist. We have to let them [the children] imagine things in their own way. The written forms always help us to think in our own way, it creates new forms!

As observed in the Balagokulam sessions, the group leader never asks the children to create new tunes for the songs. Most of the time, he usually teaches song material that he has previously learned or listened to on some occasion: in fact, any of the folk songs published in the book! Generally speaking, the volume does not attract his attention during the session and he prefers to focus the children's attention on another style of singing, for instance the bhajans, the only musical genre that has been recorded on CD by the organisation's publishing house.[22] Finally, a very small number of folk songs are effectively performed during the sessions.

Putukode's discourse forsakes performance in order to enhance the texts. Musical aesthetics is considered to be a simple adaptation of the written sources and never as an expressive language itself. Moreover, the authors of compilations have, so to speak, rarely been in touch with the original performers. Putukode himself told me that he aimed to make a kind of recollection from famous Keralite folklorists' 'old editions'. Such a statement reveals the actual difficulty of the Hindu nationalists' task of spreading their ideology by merely promoting art. In folk art, in particular, local folklore experts appointed by Keralite universities have been conducting fieldwork for the last 60 years. Working closely with the performers themselves, their research has been well documented and provides a lot of ethnographic data that helps the reader to contextualise the songs.[23] Apart from their academic productions, one of the main priorities is to promote musical performances (and performers) through festivals and by broadcasting audio and video productions. We will further show that their conception of culture as compared to Hindu nationalists is more explicitly focused on the notion of performance and not reduced to a collection of texts. Moreover, the cultural policy adopted by the Kerala government strongly relies on those intellectuals who take an active part in the expansion of their promotional activities. I will now demonstrate

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[22] The album, entitled '*Nandalala. Sri krishnan ganannal*' is the only CD published by the organisation. The number of printed books is comparatively much higher, amounting to about 50.

[23] For an annotated bibliography about oral literature, see Tarabout (1996). For a complete descriptive bibliography of folklore in Kerala, see Payyanad (2004) and Namboodiri (2004), presenting more than 600 references, abstracts and thematic indexes.

how the Kerala government, nearly 20 years before the emergence of Hindu nationalist organisations, entrenched other values (as well as other methods) through the promotion of the arts in this region.

'Regional' Nationalism: The Kerala Government's Cultural Policy and its Local Mediations

In Kerala, music and the performing arts are firmly rooted in caste society and cause strong hierarchical splits in terms of religions[24] and gender relations. They are indeed powerful media for shaping local identities. For the government, traditionally communist,[25] the aim is to promote a sort of 'Keralite' cultural identity by spreading social equality values. In this ideology, the performing arts are not only considered through their song texts but rather as sensitive and cognitive experiences through which performers and their audience would celebrate the common history of their region and culture. Keralite Marxists often say that a political speech does not reach people as effectively as a sensitive, aural, kinetic and visual experience. Thus, their goal is to encourage artistic practices in their collective, aesthetic and emotional dimension. Unlike the activities run by Hindu nationalists, the government's cultural policy has succeeded in creating new artistic spaces and in diffusing en masse numerous music and dance practices. We will highlight two areas in such a policy: first, the urban folklore festivals for promoting music and the performing arts in the public sphere; and second, artistic competitions which attempt to renew and extend the aesthetic forms to pupils of public high schools.[26]

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[24] The population of Kerala is around 56 per cent Hindu, 24 per cent Muslim and 20 per cent Christian.

[25] Marxists have headed the coalition government alongside other parties and alternatively with the Congress. On the birth of the Communist Party in Kerala, see Jeffrey (1978). For an account of the 1965 Elections, see Gough (1967).

[26] The third area examined by the government's policy is national radio (All India Radio [AIR]) and the TV broadcasting network (Doordarshan) run by central government in New Delhi. However, the programmes are fully assigned to local stations. Because of such autonomy, AIR stations in Kerala have become the most important institutions for broadcasting and promoting local music in this region, which is a very unusual situation in India. For a detailed ethnographic account of the radio production line and aesthetic criteria chosen, see Guillebaud (2008: 119–55).

Performing Culture on Stage: The Example of Folklore Festivals

Since 1957, several 'folk arts' festivals (*natan kala utsavam*) have been organised in the main cities. Groups of musicians and dancers are appointed from all over the state and are paid for their stage performances that target urban audiences invited to 'rediscover' their cultural heritage (Tarabout 2005). These festivals are mainly held during the Onam[27] celebrations, the national feast in Kerala, and have significantly grown apart over recent years. Such diversification has enabled local aesthetic practices to be fully adapted to the public sphere. For instance, the last major festival entitled 'Dance' (*Attam*) held in Trichur, the cultural capital of Kerala, testifies to the importance of those events.

For a week, it gathered several hundreds of musicians, dancers and ritual performers from all over Kerala. Everyday, over a 14-hour period, groups were presented one after the other on an open-air stage, accompanied by short announcements giving the name of the aesthetic form, the caste or tribe specialists and their group leader. Conferences were held and papers delivered twice a day in a small tent set up near the main stage. Participants were specialists of different art forms, such as literature, poetry, drama, music and folklore studies. Some issues focused on specific cultural forms; for instance, different goddess rituals such as *mudiyettu* and *patayani*, and possession cults such as *teyyam*. Others, regarding Kerala folk arts in general, or current economic, social and environmental issues, such as the preservation of ecosystems and local knowledge, natural resource management, social forums, and the MGO were addressed during debates.

The way to gather performers and scholars together is rather characteristic of such events. Performances mainly target city dwellers and foreign tourists yet, in fact, the public is mostly made up of the intellectual and artistic elite, such as directors of art academies, drama school teachers, novelists, poets, classical and contemporary

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[27] Onam (full name Tiruvonam) is a 'constellation' (*naksatra*), in fact a term applied to lunar mansions (Gilles Tarabout, personal communication, 2008). Initially a Hindu ritual, the festival celebrates the mythological King Mahabali whose reign is associated with prosperity. The date of the feast is calculated according to the lunar mansions and takes place during the solar month of the 'Lion' (*Cinnam*, mid-August/mid-September).

artists, folklorists, teachers and college students. Other persons attending the festivals are generally members of the performers' families or some of their neighbours. As for tourists, finding out about access to these events is tricky since any communication materials (posters, press releases and fliers) are written exclusively in Malayalam, the official language.

According to the president of the Kerala branch of Sangeet Natak Akademi, the national organisation for the promotion of drama and performing arts in India, such festivals lead to the revitalisation of so-called 'old' forms, considered to be the cultural roots of the main classical arts in Kerala:

> We organise that because people don't have the opportunity to perform for this type of audience. Folk is the root of classical arts. We shall never forget it. Young generations have to know how our beautiful classical art forms came about. Sangeet Natak Akademi mainly promotes classical arts but this has to change!

Given such an ideology, the main point is to create a cultural unity gathering different Keralite arts. Yet unlike Hindu nationalists, the adopted criteria are not concerned with the 'divine' dimensions of practices. Instead, it consists in establishing a cultural link between 'folklore', firmly fixed in peasant society and representative of intermediary castes and low-status populations, and the field of 'classical' arts, comparatively more urban and traditionally performed among the upper-caste milieu. In this conception, a generic and hierarchical relationship is established between folklore and classical cultures. The latter is considered to be better achieved, synthesising folk arts aesthetic resources and having developed a supposedly superior level of complexity. Such an evolutionist view, in which the historical and ideological background has been analysed by several authors in contemporary India,[28] constitutes the first type of discourse on folklore festivals.

Second, the artistic elite attending the public, in particular drama directors and professors, consider stage performances to be artistic resources liable to inspire contemporary creation. Whereas the Tapasya organisation aimed at associating forms of folk art with ancient classical sources, some government festival organisers intend to

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[28] See note 6.

favour connections between local folklore and modern arts. According to V. Vasudevan Pillai, former director of the School of Drama in Kerala, modern theatre has failed to incorporate aesthetic elements of folk drama. However, he notes that such festivals have changed the current creation process: 'Opportunities for students of modern theatre to interact with folk theatre were rare compared to today. The introduction of folk elements has to be a natural process, spontaneously occurring in the mind of the director. It should not be a willful act' (*The Indian Express*, 25 February 2007). Hence, not only do theatre artists, but also modern painters and dancers now constitute a large part of the festival audience and they all seek to absorb local folklore specificities by closer contact via live performances and to nourish their creations from this experience.[29]

Finally, a number of folklorists, scholars or folk music collectors hold a very central position during festivals, not only among the public but also upstream. As a matter of fact, local folklorists take part in government festivals as the main mediators between the organising institutions and performers: they contact troupes, organise their travel arrangements, prepare the programme notices, and even announce into the microphone the forms performed on stage. This contrast with Hindu nationalists is also noteworthy. We have mentioned how Tapasya leaders have encountered great difficulties in contacting folk performers for organising their own programmes. Indeed, most of them do not carry out fieldwork. Similarly, Balagokulam educationists are also forced to follow the path of leftist folklorists, by recollecting previously published song texts and to adapt a few of them to their own educational goals. During government festivals, such as *Attam*, there were folklorists from all over Kerala and lecturers, and students from the main university folklore departments took it upon themselves to make announcements. Given the huge number of groups and the movement of performers going back and forth from the stage, this coordination work was crucial. However, because most programme notices were not prepared beforehand, this task was done by students of folklore from Calicut University. Placed near the stage, they would frequently provide some references to a unique document, the opus *Folk Arts Directory. Natoti drsyakalasucika* (1978), from which they would copy ethnographic data for each performance, reproducing the style of early 20th-century British compilations.

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[29] For examples of contemporary creations including folk components, see, in particular, the drama productions of the director Kavalam Narayana Panicker.

Unlike the stage programmes organised by the Hindu nationalist organisation Tapasya, government festivals focus exclusively on folk and tribal arts and do not attempt to unify their heterogeneous contents, or to convey a 'divine' feeling. The aim is, on the contrary, to show the extreme diversity of regional cults and art forms, what they consider to be the true criterion of the 'richness' of local heritage. Parallel to this, both methods differ considerably in the way they stage performances. Tapasya organisers usually ask performers to cut out certain aesthetic components from their ritual in order to keep only the part with an explicit textual reference. During government festivals, it is not rare for each form to be broken down into different 'items' and performed successively by the same musicians and presented as distinct art forms. This calls to mind, for example, the domestic snake deities ritual (*pampin tullal* 'shaking of snakes'), performed in Kerala by the caste specialists, Pulluvan. Usually conducted over a period of several nights, it is staged under three different names as 'song and ritual drawing' (*kalam eluttu pattu*), 'snake songs' (*naga pattu*) and 'swirling of flame' (*tiriyuliccil*), yet it corresponds to successive stages in a single ritual. Moreover, the same performers were presented three times in a row, announced each time as specialists of '*naga* worship'. Indeed, during this type of festival, the heterogeneity of Keralite folk practices is literally enhanced. Fragmenting aesthetic forms on stage impresses the public by its mere profusion. The plurality of genres, the performers' castes and social groups are the main components explicitly displayed on stage and are seen as a way of conveying to the public the 'greatness' of Keralite regional culture.

We shall finally note that nowadays government festivals gather together performing groups of very different status. The great majority of guest troupes are mainly made up of musicians used to performing together in their villages, or in a familial context. Other formations have recently emerged under the impetus of some folklorists, those who are politically involved. Here I mean 'folklore troupes', formed under the commitment of local scholars and most often from government cultural networks. One remarkable fact is that the field of research in Kerala is closely linked to promoting culture, with scholars often accepting the title of 'troupe director' or festival organiser as part of their academic activities (see also Tarabout 2003). For these folklorists, mainly leftists, the constitution of folklore troupes is considered to be an alternative strategy in preserving local music. As active Marxist activists or as

simple sympathisers of the 'proletarian' cause, they exclusively work with singers and instrument specialists from lower castes, mainly landless agricultural workers and leather workers, Paraya and, more recently, with tribal groups.[30] These troupes now specialise in stage performances during government folklore festivals, but also to a larger extent in celebrations organised in neighbourhoods by town administrations, sport and art clubs with financial backing from private companies such as banks, jewellers or clothes vendors for local feast days. The public is almost exclusively made up of local inhabitants and comparatively few scholars or artists; this, consequently, leads to reaching a wider audience in the long term. For the troupe director, the aim is to promote the whole of Kerala 'folk music' (*natan pattu*), through the knowledge of a particular caste — the Parayas. According to this ideology, the status of musicians (the lowest level of the social hierarchy) is the criterion implicitly chosen to emblematically represent all Kerala folklore. By contrast, Hindu nationalist organisations claim to gather 'known' and 'unknown' artists, rejecting the terms 'classical' and 'folk' in order to establish a non-hierarchical approach to art forms and performers.

Finally, leftists and Hindu nationalists significantly clash regarding the way they conceive the process of conveying art. Indeed, I encountered the fact that Tapasya organisation did not produce any discourse on artistic education. This area is exclusively covered by a separate association (Balagokulam) which mainly conceives the transmission of art through manuals, most of the time without including original performers in the process. Conversely, local folklorists notably use festival platforms to promote young Paraya troupes, without announcing their particular status to the public. As a matter of fact, in Kerala, the number of young music troupes has considerably grown over the last three years, with Paraya performers imitating the 'model' invented by folklorists. These new groups are mainly made up of the same caste's younger generation, now educated and with jobs other than the traditional activities of farming or leather working. As semi-professional musicians, they willingly introduce themselves as 'traditional artists' and their

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[30] These so-called 'tribal' populations mainly settle in the mountain areas of the Idukki District and Wayanad District.

address to the public is often didactic, exposing for instance the main components of their ritual (costumes, song lyrics, instruments, etc.) and the cultural background to their music.[31] Today, this phenomenon of self-promoting caste knowledge is certainly on the rise. It particularly relies on cultural policy events held by the government, while creating new spaces for performances, as especially shown by the increasing number of music albums and VCDs recorded by these troupes and published by various private companies. The circulation of recordings, mainly in educative and artistic circles at present, will surely guarantee wider dissemination of low-caste knowledge beyond traditional village frontiers.

A Mass Transmission of Arts: The Government 'Youth Festival'

Apart from the folklore festivals, the second area of the government cultural policy deals with the learning process of local arts. Since 1960, major competitions called Kerala State Youth Festival (renamed in 2006 School Kalotsvam/School Arts Festival), have been organised in public high schools and colleges. While Hindu nationalists have chosen to create small educative units (*balagokulam*) within the family circle, for the last 50 years youth festivals have led to a mass education project, gathering several thousand students at these events every year.[32] Students are invited to form troupes and to compete in stage performances on behalf of their school or district.

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[31] The singer Ramesh, leader of the group Karintalakuttam, is emblematic of such a process of reflexivity, the driving force behind these groups' musical activity. Member of the Paraya caste and a tailor, he studied for a few years at the School of Drama (Trichur) and is preparing for a Master's degree in Folklore Studies, focusing on Paraya folk arts.

[32] In 2005 the festival, held in Calicut, gathered nearly 3,000 students from 25 high-schools, pre-selected in their respective districts among 1,565 public schools (*The Hindu*, 11 December 2005). In 2006, the number of participants grew to 5,000 students (46th School Art Festival held in Cochin) (*The Hindu*, 20 January 2006). It reached a record level of 6,000 participants in 2008 (48th Kerala State School Arts Festival held in Kollam), which competed in 16 venues. A budget of '28.87 lakh was allocated to its organisation and '21 lakh for the cash prizes (*The Hindu*, 9 January 2008).

A committee of carefully selected experts is in charge of evaluating the troupes and awarding honorific titles and trophies. This committee is generally composed of artists and professors, members of the main government institutions such as Sangeet Natak Akademi or Kalamandalam Kerala State Academy of Fine Arts.

Pre-selected during district competitions, enthusiastic students reach the venues often with a single thought in mind: to excel and win. What are the stakes involved in a youth festival prize? The highest step on the podium leads to the *Kalapratibha* title (literally 'intelligent in art') for the best boy and *Kalatilakam* title '"forehead mark/head of art') for the best girl. The typical profile of these two winners: young people able to excel in five musical forms and/or dances, prodigies in whom Kerala society acknowledges their genius to embody the 'cultural heritage' of their region. Many other students achieve satisfaction by cumulating as many 'A' grades as possible in different aesthetic practices. Finally, contestants can assess their performance in their annual school report. As a matter of fact, artistic and academic emulation goes hand in hand: students' marks are not only honorific, but really weigh in the balance regarding the future career of these students. Reaching the highest step of the podium is indeed the key to enrolling on an artistic course at university, but also to pursuing a prestigious career as doctor or engineer. The system today is so strict that public opinion has often compared the evaluation rules for competing in youth festivals to quotas for university admission.[33]

In fact, such competitions encourage the creation of a new transmission of aesthetic forms rather than the promotion of local specialists in music and dance. The learning process takes place during school time. It generates a large diffusion of local knowledge and a shift in the performance's locus from the family (and neighbourhood) context to the public sphere. Whatever their caste or religion, students learn music and dance forms collectively

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[33] In 2006, the individual titles of *Kalaprathiba* and *Kalatilakam* were officially scrapped and replaced by a generalised system of marks. The competition manual gave rise to strong protests from the public opinion denouncing in particular an 'unhealthy' competitive spirit, conflicts between parents and teachers, financial inequalities and corruption practices toward the jury by the most influential families.

while being initiated into a wide range of unexpected performance situations.[34] New aesthetic initiatives are promoted by the competition judges, while among participants it creates a collective imagination of social reform in terms of caste equality, religions and gender. The aim is to allow a new social category to emerge — the youth — an alternative to the caste (or religion) identity, considered in this process as the main driving force behind national culture. The festival thus participates in renewing these forms, at socio-logical as well as aesthetic levels, a principle on which the government has built its policy of 'preserving' music. As noted by the Minister of Education, M. A. Baby, in his inaugural address at the 2008 edition: 'these festivals should help in preserving folk art forms and introducing them to the new generation' (*The Hindu*, 11 January 2008). Quoting Chief Minister V. S. Achuthanandan, such an event has to be considered as 'a reflection of Kerala's great cultural tradition' (*The Hindu*, 15 January 2008). Modification and innovation in attempting better preservation: such a sentence might be considered the motto of this national policy event. Considered to be a particular way of heritage preservation, this type of competition is based on evaluating performances not in terms of 'authenticity', but according to their potential degree of transformation. This innovation process, the driving force behind the learning process, sustains aesthetic forms in the long term.

Due to the popularity of school competitions and growing enthusiasm among the young, numerous private record and VCD companies have started to sell albums of youth festival live per-formances and, more recently, of private recording sessions. Future participants buy these productions as new learning and training materials or as new inspiration for their choreographies. It is not rare for these albums to be also used as pedagogical materials in the context of Balagokulam sessions organised by Hindu nationalists! Young Balagokulam group leaders are often free to act according to their own musical tastes. As a matter of fact, they have mostly

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[34] For instance, it is quite common for temple instrumental music, traditionally played in Kerala by specialists of the Ampalavasi caste ('temple inhabitants, servants'), to be performed during the competition by young Hindus from other castes, and even by Muslims and Christians. During such events, girls also master several temple instruments at a high technical level, whereas in the past they were exclusively reserved for masculine and religious practices.

acquired their artistic knowledge during government school festivals. Today, artistic competitions are particularly well established in school circles in Kerala. In the political arena, objectives are now directed towards diffusion at an international level. The aim in the near future is to achieve a better consolidation of the competition by grouping schools at a fixed date, launching an official website with a permanent logo and finally, by publishing a historical review of the festival. Hence, the government of Kerala sees the internationalisation of the festival as the main way of promoting Kerala culture abroad and as a form of resistance to the globalisation process.[35]

Conclusion

Wishing to explore the idea of local mediation of the Hindutva movement in Kerala, I have mainly focused on promoting art forms. Indeed, artistic practices have been widely covered by the regional state cultural policy nearly 20 years before the advent of Hindu nationalist organisations. Faced with the powerful cultural entrenchment of their opponents, Hindu nationalists have been compelled to base part of their activities on what had already been achieved in terms of documentation and education. However, I have also highlighted their very contrasting methods as well as the fundamental discrepancies in how they conceive national culture. The number of Hindu nationalist organisations has grown thanks to the ambiguous relationship they have cultivated with local performers and children, while spreading a discourse based on cultural unification which goes beyond the effective involvement of the people targeted. Government cultural activities have been conducted with the local mediation of folklorists and have spread immensely among local performers and students. The involvement of participants in such events is based on performance, that is to say,

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[35] As recently expressed by Kerala Chief Minister V. S. Achuthanandan in his inaugural speech at the festival in 2008: 'the onslaught of the globalisation culture will not only harm our rich cultural traditions but also convert us into mere spectators of that culture (…) globalisation was attempting to convert us from producers into consumers. Mimicry and cinematic dances were part of the globalisation culture and these would not do any thing good to our cultural tradition (…) The schools' arts festival played a big role in saving us from globalisation' (*The Hindu*, 15 January 2008).

the cognitive, emotional and physical experience it implies. Indeed, while being developed according to an imagined social equality, this regional nationalism, at the same time, generates new gender, caste and religious claims.

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