

# **SELECTED ESSAYS**

*Author,*

**M. Raja Raja Varma Raja M. A., B. L.**

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### III

In sweeping away the cobwebs from many a game which by long disuse have hid themselves in the dark caverns of oblivion, I am far from sanguine of their happy revival when such high-class civilised games as tennis and billiard, foot-ball and cricket, golf and hockey with their finished and superior appliances, their inviting company and their social elevation charm away our countrymen. The preservation of ancient monuments and relics has recently been declared by all Governments a task worthy of attention. If a carved block of stone, a piece of stained glass, a mud-burnt old pitcher, a soot-covered palm-leaf *Grantha*, deserve careful preservation as valuable relics of a bygone civilisation, how much more precious are the monuments of a nation's individuality and inherent strength, for both of which the men of Kerala now stand at a discount. Disdaining to touch even the very fringe of a once glorious heritage as if it were a plague or a pariah, running at a tangent from the old traditions of time-honored family

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and custom, cast off in foreign waters to drift in whichever direction the wind blows, the modern son of Kerala, fresh from the barber's hands and decked in his borrowed feathers of tell-tale poverty, presents a spectacle sorrowful to behold. Whence comes this degradation; whence this fall of a once sharp-witted and enterprising race; whence this mania for all that is foreign; why this aping, which but tends to prove the Darwinian theory of the origin of man; why this detestation for all that is one's own; are a few of a thousand and one questions which will suggest themselves to an impartial student of social history. These the writer neither undertakes to answer, nor thinks necessary to do so, in view of the subject under his immediate consideration, except, of course, to state the fact that games have gone the way of other national institutions and that their decay affords very important testimony to the national downfall. Obsolete in the main our military games are; and the civil games have become more or less child'splay or the poor man's friend.

Adhering to the division which has been outlined previously, the civil portion of masculine

physical games comes for our next consideration. Speaking broadly, these games can be treated under two heads, viz. those which played on land and those which have their field in water. Among the former those played with the ball stand prominent. *Kolati* (കോളി) or game with the sticks, *Dandippu* (ദണ്ഡിപ്പു) or rope dancing, *Ammanakali* (അമ്മാനകളി) or throwing and catching balls, *Machankali* (മാച്ചാൻകളി) and *Kolamthullal* (കോലത്തുള്ളൽ) varieties of masquerades, *Andiyattam* (ആണ്ടിയാട്ടം), *Kalyanakkali* (കല്യാണകളി), *Ayvarkali* (അയ്വർകളി) and *Kuthiyottam* (കുതിയോട്ടം) all varieties of dancing, and *Tookam* (തൂക്കം) or kite flying, are the other more important games played on land. Boating, swimming, diving, jumping form the main diversions in water. A general outline of each of these games will be given in the sequel.

While dealing with the *Pandukali* (പന്തുകളി) or games with the ball, it would be indeed a heresy not to allude to one of most important national festivals, *Tiru-Cnam* or *Sravana Utsavam*, when these games are in full swing. This festival falls in the month of Avany i.e.,

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August-September on the day when the moon is in the star of *Sravana*. Tradition has it, that on that day every year, the great King Mahabali, who once ruled over the whole earth in peace and plenty, but was for his pride at last subdued and sent to the nether world by Lord Krishna in his fifth incarnation as Vamana, is allowed to visit his kingdom upon earth, and that all inhabitants, old and young, should receive him happy, contented and cheerful. Hence all houses are made tidy and neat adorned with pictures and flowers from almost a month before the date. New clothes are worn by all, and the well-to-do make many presentations of them to kinsmen and the poor. Though the festivities generally continue for over a month, the four days commencing from the previous day of *Sravanam* are the most important ones. They are made real gala days with plenty of feasting and play. Even the poorest family sells its all to keep the Onam, though it comes to begging for the rest of the year. All the hours except those for feasting and rest are occupied by games. Of the several games which are played, foot-ball, or giving it the vernacular name, head-ball or

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*Thalapandu* (തലപ്പന്ത), is the most important out-door game.

The foot-ball, as in the case of its English namesake, is played with a ball made mostly of thick leather, or occasionally of woven flax, stuffed with cocoanut fibre or cotton. In size it will not be more than half that of an English foot-ball. The rules of the game bear little comparison to it, except that there are two parties and a goal on the winning side. An extensive open level space forms the play-ground. There is a boundary marked only at one end ie., the playing side, the other three sides being determined only by the length and breadth of the field. When the players have all assembled, they divide themselves into two parties by casting lots. There is neither restriction as to the number of players on either side, nor that the players on either side should be equal in number. Equality in strength, not in number, is the rule. There may also be neutral players (പൊന്നല) who do not belong to either party, but assist the party who is in. The two parties are designated, the ons and outs, the former who play on the winning side and the latter

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who play the losing. A stick one foot long is planted on the ground on the winning side and it marks the boundary there. Should the ball thrown by the adversaries hit the stick or by any kick from them it passes beyond the stick unstopped previously by those who play on the winning side, then that side loses and the adversaries gain. The rules of the game are briefly; (1) the party to begin the game is determined by casting lot, (2) there are seven minor games, each consisting of three consecutive kicks, to constitute one round; and these are (a) *Talappanthu* (തലപ്പന്തു) or the preliminary game, (b) *Otta* (ഒറ്റ) or first game, (c) *Eratta* (ഇരട്ട) second game, (d) *Kettu* (കെട്ട) game with tied hands, (e) *Thalam* (താളം) or game with intermediate clapping on the thigh, (f) *Kalumkeel* (കാലംകീഴ്) game by throwing the ball from below the leg and (g) *Ittuvettu* (ഇട്ടുവെട്ട) or game with the foot; (3) whichever party is first in taking collectively the whole round and also repeats the preliminary game and one blow of the first game is declared victorious and the defeat is indicated by drawing a circle called

*Pattam* (പട്ടം) round the stick and derisive hisses by the victorious party ; (4) each one of the players on one side play in continuation of his predecessor; (5) when all one side have played out, the other party is in ; (6) for the preliminary game the adversary can defeat the player by catching the ball by hand before it touches the ground or by hitting the stick with the ball ; during all the other minor games, the adversary can use his feet also by kicking the ball in motion beyond the stick. Besides these general rules there are several minor restrictions which the reader can understand only by actual experience. The game gives much exercise to all parts of the body and is so exciting that very often feuds arise in consequence. Betting is freely done on such occasions by spectators and players.

There are several minor games with the ball. *Kuzhippandu* (കുഴിപ്പന്തു) or pitting the ball, is a game played very commonly with much zest. Any number of persons can partake in this game. Each one the players has a pit assigned to him. These pits are small round ones four or five inches in diameter



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and depth dug at one end of an open ground with plenty of running space for the players. These pits are laid two or three or as many rows as will make a square or oblong. In front of these pits, some twelve places away is seated the umpire or *Ganapati* whose duty it is to roll the ball into these pits. He should do his duty impartially and leave to chance into what pits the ball falls. Each player should stand with one foot on the brink of his pit before the ball is rolled. When the ball falls into one pit, all except the owner of the same run away within the specified area. The owner of the pit has the right to take the ball and throw it from his place against any one of the other players. Should it hit any one he, or if it does not, the player who aimed the hit, gets a black mark, which is indicated by putting a small stone in his pit. Again the game is repeated. Whoever first gets twelve black marks is black-balled and made the victim. The punishment of the black-balled victim is to shew his either foot-pad upturned on the brink of the uppermost pit, and each of the victors hit it with the ball violently from the umpire's seat as many times as he had not black-marks to make up

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twelve. In other words; if a player has no black-mark he can have twelve hits. One hit will be deducted for each black-mark standing against him. The penalty for him who hits the victim on any part of the body besides the foot-pad is to undergo a similar punishment as the victim.

*Otupandu* (ഓട്ടപന്തു) is somewhat similar to the English foot-ball, though not so refined. In this game, each party kicks the ball and there is much of wrestling. The forwards begin the game. When the ball goes beyond the goal on one side, that party fails. There are several local variations for each of the above games, with which it is not proposed here to tire the reader.

*Kolati* (കോലടി) or game with sticks is an amusing diversion. Around a lighted lamp a number of persons stand in a circle with a stick one foot long and thick as the thumb, in both hands and begin to sing, first in slow and gradually in rapid measure. The time-measure is kept by each one hitting his neighbour's sticks with his own on both sides. Much dexterity and precision are required as also

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experience in combined action and movements, lest the amateur is hit on the knuckles by his neighbours as the measure is accelerated. There is only one refrain for every song so that it becomes monotonous after some time. The songs are invariably in praise of God or man. Experts often remove the ennui of the spectators by variations of strokes and motions.

Rope-dancing or *Dandippu* (ദാമിപ്പു) partakes more of military games than civil, involving as it does several of the physical feats pertaining to the former. It would have been classed as such, had it not been for the purely civil purpose of diversion for which it is always practised and exhibited. A strong thick rope is tied end to end on the ground and raised by cross bamboo props at both ends to not less than eight feet above the ground or even higher when experts play. The play begins with the beating of the drum and the clamping of cymbals which supply music to the game. The dancer is attired in tight trousers and a waist cloth with a number of superfluous ball-thread hangings reaching up to the knee, a decorated tie at the lower end of each of the ankles and

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a head-dress similar to that of a *Velakalikaran* described previously. After paying reverence to the Power above, the Melakkar (മലക്കാർ) or the drummer and the cymbal sounder, who represent his *gurus*, and also the audience, the performer jumps upon the rope and perching thereon, as on horseback, tries the strength of the rope by swinging up and down and to and fro. This done, the real game commences. The melakkars ask him a number of questions as to whether he is capable of performing certain feats. He answers them first pointing out the dire consequences of falling down and the easy way in which those who stand on safe *terrafirma* can ask one on a flimsy small rope to perform break-neck feats. These questions and answers are often full of wit and humour and afford food for laughter to the audience, besides giving them an idea as to what will be the next performance. After some argument, the performer consents to shew the feats required by crying out *Thithai* (തിതൈ) which means "here goes", and he does them to the astonishment of the spectators. In this wise he goes on for an hour or two. High jumping, walking, and somersaults on the rope, jumping

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through rings and on swords from the rope, mounting with loads on pole supported on the rope, sword-play and a number of other feats are shewn. Some very expert rope-dancers do these feats on thin wire; and recently one of them performed feats on the bicycle on a wire rope. It is a pity that for all his pains, the rope-dancer is paid but a dole of rice and sometimes a rupee or two in addition, while circus players, who shew little more, are remunerated amply.

*Ammanakali* resembles *Valeru*, only instead of poniards balls are used. Sometimes these balls are made of bell-metal; but more often they are made of some heavy wood and coloured. They are in size slightly less than cricket balls. The game which is played to the accompaniment of the inevitable drum, consists of throwing not less than three balls up and catching them alternately by the right and left hand. Not unfrequently the player of this game shows other tricks, such as turning a brassplate on the tip of a long cane. Holding one end of the cane in his hand, he turns the plate so swiftly at the other end that it appears almost motionless; then bending the

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cane gradually he brings the plate down, and again by unbending it takes it up. Then he throws the plate up and catches it at the tip off the cane. Another trick which he exhibits is making two paper butterflies fly like the living ones by blowing his breath on them.

Next we return to the masquerading games, *Machankali* and *Kolamthullal*; the former is generally played by the barber caste and the latter by *Kanians*. In the first, the players, put on the mask of various animals and birds, and mimic their habits to the delight and laughter of the spectators. In *Yathrakali* too this game is played by making contortions of the body and face without wearing masks. *Kolamthullal* is a game played for a whole night. It is believed to have a propitiatory effect in warding off the evil influences of devils and demons and is often vowed by devotees for the cure of hysterics and similar maladies. By eight or nine at night, for be it noted that it should be played only after the first quarter of the night, a number of *Kanians*, men and women, gather and begin the preliminary incantations and songs. A metallic bow with a

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number of bells attached ~~is~~ struck with a stick to supply the music, while a burning faggot gives the light. This preamble occupies a good two hours. By midnight, mask after mask begins to appear. They represent the several demons of the forest and glade, *Marutha* or the spirit of small-pox, *Madan* or the demon of the woods, and the rest of the horrible crew come in quick succession. Their terrible appearance with torches in hands and mouth, fierce gestures, fearful roarings make the scene indeed so weird that the weak-minded will be frightened out of their wits. To the beating of the drum these pantomimic ghosts and spirits dance their horrible rounds of midnight revelry. Powdered dammer is often thrown into the flambeau to give a flash and make the scene more horrible. Blood scenes are got up by preparing a boiled solution of chunam and turmuric. Altogether this is a demoniac game enjoyed mostly by the unrefined rural population, whose imagination soars no higher than the appreciation of vivid and fantastic representation of strong passions.

Dancing supplies the basis of several physical games. In its aesthetic aspect it is

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the foundation for many refined and superior games. *Kalyanakali* (കല്യാണക്കളി) or marriage game, *Ayvarkali* (അയ്യർക്കളി) literally the game of the five (Pandavas) and *Andiyattam* or pantomimic dancing are the three more common games under the head.

*Kalyanakali*, as the name indicates is a game played during marriage festivals in Nair families. The players are Nairs of the village, who, clad in neat white cloth and headdress of the same stuff in the antique fashion and the body adorned with sandal paste, sing merry songs and dance to the time in many merry-go-rounds. There are several harmonious steps, measures and symbolisms to be acquired of a *Chattampi* (teacher), lest the performer be hooted out by his comrades. This game is most prevalent now in Chirayinkil and some southern taluks of Travancore. *Ayvarkali* is a two days' game performed during the day time only, the actors being Ezhavas or Tiyas. It is a musical representation of the story of the five Pandavas, each of whom is represented by one person. The whole story of the Mahabharata is epitomised in songs, and they



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are sung and acted to the accompaniment of the hand-drum called *Thappu*. The *Asan* sits on a raised platform (ഓട്ടം), and on the closing day a big piece of jaggery is hung in the middle of the dancing ground and is divided according to custom among the players and their kinsmen assembled. This pastime is mostly found in the Cochin State and the southern taluks of Travancore. *Andiyattam* is a game played at night before a lighted lamp. It has some resemblance to *Kathakali*. The difference consists in that there is only one pantomime without the usual crown or headgear, and there is little of hand symbols and expression. In these respects, it resembles the *Tullal*, a narrative dance initiated by the famous Kunjan Nambyar and extensively played everywhere in Kerala. Although these games are predominantly physical, they have an aesthetic value and will be alluded to under that head in the sequel.

To complete the survey of the field of masculine physical games, there remain to be noticed only those played on water. Of these swimming, diving and jumping and other cognate pastimes are too common ~~and widely~~

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known to need any special description. Boating is no less so ; but there are certain special features about it which could not be passed over. Studded with a large number of streams and rivers, lagoons and lakes, Travancore and Cochin afforded from very early times all natural facilities for boating. These inland waters form the most important highways of commerce and communication. Even after the advent of the fast running railways and buses, the country *Vallams* or *Vanchies* (boats) ply their traffic with no diminished activity, and to speak truly, monopolise the greater portion of the trade of the country. The natives, especially those inhabiting the littoral, (and let it be noted that it is the most thickly inhabited portion of the country) are so much accustomed to water, that even a pigmy boy goes from place to place in a tiny craft, which even the smallest ripple will capsize, unassisted except by his rough oar made of the stem of the cocoanut or palmyra frond. In some places, where during high floods the country will be but one vast sheet of water, there are no other means of communication except these country crafts. No wonder then that water carnivals

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and boating have become very important events. Among the several important regattas which are annually held in Travancore, the one at Aranmula for the Uthrittathi in August-September has acquired a celebrity beyond others. Its importance rests partly on the sanctity of the shrine in honor of whose presiding Deity the regatta is celebrated and partly to the large crowd it attracts. Coming soon after the Onam festival, preparations for it are made many days in advance. Long snake-boats, (they are more than fifty feet long) are launched in dozens into the broad stream. Adorned with golden knobs at the high helm, golden umbrellas resplendent in the sunshine, flags unfurled waving merrily in the breeze, rowers by hundreds in gala dress seated in two rows, songsters, pipers and a number of people standing in every available space inside, these snake-boats afford a spectacle simply grand and picturesque. Soon the hurrahs fill the air echoed by the large multitude who swarm on both banks of the river. Each boat belongs to a clan or *Kara*, and the competition is very keen, so much so that not unfrequently collisions of boats occur with sad results. It is indeed a pretty

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sight to see the long rows of boats dressed and manned to the full ploughing the waters of the stream in unison with flying speed. The boat-songs have acquired such importance that they form a substantial addition to the Malayalam literature: They are so very exciting that their rapid measures steal away the weariness of the weakest. The beauty of the scene surpasses every description and can be fully appreciated only by those who witness it. Frequently vows of boating are made to the Diety, and then a grand feast always precedes it. Besides the one at Aranmula, there are less important annual regattas in Travancore, such as the one at Champakulam in the Ambalapuzha taluk, another at Tirumulam in the Tiruvella taluk, the latter of which is celebrated in honour of His Highness the Maharaja's Birthday.