

Chapter – 3

K.N.Panikkar

3.1 Early Life

Kavalam Narayana Panikkar was born as a Chalayil family member at Kavalam village in Aleppey district of Kerala in 28, April 1928. He is a nephew of Sardar Kavalam Madhava Panikkar and a cousin of Dr. K. Ayyappa Panikkar, a Malayalam poet. Kavalam is married to Saradamani and has two sons. He lives in Thiruvananthapuram with his wife. His sons are Kavalam Harikrishnan and Kavalam Sreekumar. Harikrishnan died in 2009. Sreekumar is a well known singer of folk songs of Kerala

Kavalam Narayana Panikkar was born into a matrilineal joint family where the system made the maternal uncle, the head of the family. This system gave him the first lessons of discipline in life. However, it was his father, late Godavarama, who introduced him to the world of literature. In fact, Shri Panikkar remembers that he was initiated to the fascinating world of great epics like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* by his father. Moreover, a system of intense and regular reading of the epics existed in the house where his mother, grandmother and women from neighbourhood participated. This tradition inspired him to organize poetry reading sessions in public later in life, at a time when it was argued that poetry was for private reading and enjoyment.

Shri Panikkar, after his initial education in local schools in Kavalam and in the nearby village Pulinkunnu, joined the famous CMS college in Kottayam, that had produced prominent personalities like KPS Menon and Sardar K M Panikkar, the latter being Shri Panikkar's own uncle. He

omics from S D College, Alappuzha and later
from Madras Law College.

3.2 Grown up as Poet

Taking inspiration from his surroundings and upbringing, Shri Panikkar had started writing poetry from his schooldays. The poems, rich with rural idioms, were the reflections of a young poet's mind on the archetypal imageries, myths and parables that had profound influence on him.

Shri Kavalam Narayana Panikkar has carved out a niche for himself in the evolution of a regional theatre movement, which is one of the major components constituting the national theatre in modern India. In a career spanning over four decades, Shri Panikkar has given a new lease of life for the age-old Sanskrit drama tradition on one hand and on the other, he identified the interrelations between the evolved art forms and folk arts, successfully creating a fusion that has enthralled the contemporary audience since then.

The rustic lifestyle of the agricultural community, closely identified with Mother Nature, the scenic beauty of the area where the sacred River Pampa ends its journey by merging into Vembanad lake-all provided an ideal background for the young Narayanan to develop his inborn artistic talents and vision. He believes that the whole ambience of the area played a decisive role in developing his personality in the early stages of life.

3.3 Societal Responsibility

After obtaining his Law degree, Shri Panikkar started his career as a lawyer in Alappuzha Bar and practised for six years from 1955. However, he continued to pursue his artistic interests and a breakthrough came when he was nominated as Secretary of Kerala in the year 1961.

The new responsibility at Sangeetha Nataka Academi gave him a chance to interact with artists from all over the state and get introduced to different art forms, both Sanskritised and folk-based. He remembers that the tenure helped him to expand his relations and facilitated the growth of the artist in him.

Shri Panikkar's tenure in the Akademi also saw the institution getting more organized and systematic in its functioning. During the period, the Akademi organized many festivals, which gave Panikkar more insights into the rich cultural heritage of the state and its deep rooted and indigenous folk traditions. He started his research in the folk and classical arts of Kerala, which ultimately saw him entering the theatre, inspired by folk and classical traditions.

Shri Panikkar admits that his first few experiments, to write plays in tune with the established and popular realistic theatre traditions were not successful. But the journey in search of his real identity continued.

A turning point in his theatre experiments, especially as a playwright came with the production of "*Daivathar*". However, Shri Panikkar did not direct the drama, but tried to actively collaborate with directors like Kumara Varma, interpreting his textual inputs to the director.

shifted his residence to the state capital Thiruvananthapuram and in this period his play *Avanavan Katampa*, was filmed by G. Aravindan. In contrast to Aravindan's known style of functioning while donning the mantle of a film director, he interacted a lot with the playwright as well as the actors in the production of "*Avanavan Katampa*". This resulted in what is termed as ensemble acting.

The structure of this play and its presentation were truly path breaking. The theme demanded an open auditorium with trees in the background having hanging lamps. The concept of proscenium and picture frame stage with roll curtain divide was broken. The acting area started growing beyond its prescribed limits, creating a sense of involvement and participation among the audience.

3.4 Major Breakthrough

A major breakthrough in Shri. Panikkar's career as a director came when he was offered a chance to produce and present a Sanskrit drama at the prestigious Kalidas Samaroh in Ujjain. He selected *Bhāsa's 'Madhyama Vyayogam'*, which was his first directorial attempt. And on November 2, 1978, '*Madhyama Vyayogam*' was presented in Ujjain and received with a standing ovation. The culturally sound audience could feel the strength of the Sanskrit presentation, the usage of body dynamics by the actors and their ability to combine the "*Satvika*" and "*Vachika*" acting and above all the directorial contribution of Shri Panikkar.

of 'Madhyama Vyayogam', Shri Panikkar has with Ujjain in Madhya Pradesh, which has virtually become his 'second home.' Most of the years, his Sanskrit plays are performed here and almost all the debut shows of Sanskrit dramas are organized in the Samaroh at Ujjain.

The participation in the Samaroh also gave him and his team an opportunity to get exposed to a wider audience. The impression created in Ujjain had its effect in New Delhi also. Kamaladevi Chatopadhaya, the chairperson of the National Sangeet Natak Akademi, was instrumental in inviting Shri Panikkar to New Delhi and the play presented in February 1979, went to have repeated shows.

Shri Panikkar also remembers a special occasion when he was requested by Adya Rangacharaya, director of Kalidas Akademi, to present *Bhāsa's* Sanskrit play "*Dhootavakyam*" using artists from Madhya Pradesh. It was a great experience for him as well as the artists on the practical implementation of the techniques of "*Natyashastra*." Later, at the National School of Drama, he produced and directed plays in Sanskrit and Hindi for the students, overcoming the language barriers through creating a 'theatre language.'

3.5 Awards and Recognition

He has written over 26 Malayalam plays, many adapted from classical Sanskrit drama and Shakespeare, notably *Madhyama Vyayogam* (1979) Kalidasa's *Vikramorvasiyam* (1981, 1996), *Shakuntalam* (1982), *Karnabharam* (1984, 2001), *Bhāsa's Urubhangam* (1988), *Swapnavasavadattam* and *Dootavakyam* (1996).

Sangeet Natak Akademi Award in Direction by
India's National Academy of Music, Dance and

Drama, which gave him its highest award for lifetime achievement the
Sangeet Natak Akademi Fellowship in 2002.

Padma Bhooshan in 2007

Nandikar Award in 1998

Kalidasa Samman, Madhya Pradesh Government (1994-95)

National Award (Theatre, 1985)

Award for direction from Sangeet Nataka Academy, 1983

National Award of Circle of India

His 'Nataka Chakram' won the academy award in 1979

He has penned more than 20 plays. Some of them are: Sakshi, Avanavan
Kadamba, Daivathar, Karinkutty, Thiranottam, Prema Reshmi,
Bhootham, Thirumudi, Koima, Theyyatheyyam, Marukidathi. Childrens
drama: Kummatti, Chakki Chankaram. He also left his imprints in the
novel arena. He has to his credit three novels.

He has directed two movies about the greatest *Kuttiyattam* maestro
legendary actor Guru Mani Madhava Chakyar: The Master at Work
(1994) and Parvati Viraham (1993) in *Kuttiyattam* form featuring Mani
Madhava Chakyar as Ravana. As a lyricist in Malayalam cinema, he has
written for film like, Ulsavapittenu, Manjadikuru (2008), Vadakakkoru
Hridayam (1978) and Marmaram (1982) and has won Kerala State Film
Award for Best Lyrics for the latter two films. He has also remained,
Consultant, Asianet Communications and Vice Chairman, Sangeet Natak
Akademi, New Delhi.

countries, including the erstwhile Soviet Union. He collaborated with the Greek Theatre in producing "Iliayana" as a memorable experience worth mentioning. "Iliayana", which he produced along with Greek Theatre group Volos, was a combination of *Ramayana* and Greek epic Iliad. In the project that saw a wonderful fusion of two great ancient cultures of the world, he was supported by Greek director Shri. Spyros Wracorites, two specialists - Dr Ayyappa Panikkar and Prof. Andriades, a Greek scholar.

This Playwright - Director prefers to call his *Kalari*, "*Sopanam*", consisting of 20 artists, as his "Theatre laboratory". His wife Saradamani has been a perennial source of strength and inspiration to him. His two sons Harikrishnan and Sreekumar are also assisting him in his creative ventures, taking time off from their official responsibilities.

A well travelled personality; he had been to Japan, London, Poland, South Korea, Austria, Russia, and China.

3.6 Major Productions

Madhyamavyayogam (1979)

Kalidasa's Vikramorvasiyam (1981, 1996)

Shakuntalam (1982)

Karnabharam (1984, 2001)

Uru Bhangam (1988)

Swapnavasavadattam and Dootavakyam (1996)

Karinkutti, and, Ottayan

); and,

The domain of the sun, 1989.

Folklore of Kerala from National Book Trust, 1991.

Karimkutty ; and, The lone tusker, 1991

3.7 Bhashabharati – “*Sopanam*”

He is the founder-director of theatre troupe, *Sopanam*, which led to the foundation of '*Bhashabharati*: Centre for Performing Arts, Training and Research, in Trivandrum

"*Sopanam*" has tried to discover the basic principles of theatre through various dance and music forms like *Sopanam Sangeetam*, Mohiniattam, contemporary recreations of epics etc. It seeks to interweave dramatic action with music and dance patterns, so that the spectator can discern the philosophical meanings inherent in epic tales like those of the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*.

3.7.1 Panikkar and Actor's Training

In India we still have a very lively tradition, almost in every region. Panikkar introduced a training method right from the beginning of his theatre work. There were living practices like *Kalaripayattu*. “In our method of acting the bodily movements become a language of expression. That is a basic thing in theatre. Theatre is to be taken as something to be seen. If you accept that, then you have to work on the possibilities of building an actor, bringing up an actor. How the actor's body can be used, for which I started searching when I did Karim Kutty.

at tradition was there which could come to his
came upon traditional sources like Padayani
movements. Basically I made the actors undergo *Kalari* training and we
have added to it certain vocal exercises, for which he added source
materials from our Velas, tantra, etc says Panikkar in an interview with
KS Narayana Pillai.

The body is of paramount importance to an actor. It is his chief
instrument of expression. So Panikkar chose the *Kalaripayattu* system as
the basic method of training. *Kalari* is the martial art of Kerala. In CVN
Kalari, Guru CV Govindankutty Nair, always used to stress *sharira*
bhava, the term used to denote a cardinal principle in *Kalari* training. It
clearly lays down the basic functions involved in the used of the body. In
the process of training, Panikkar tried to combine body movement with
the *bhava*, the inner state of being.

He selected this discipline because it is a neutral form in which one can
train a modern actor. It is not like *Kathakali* or *Kotiyattam*. There are
neutral areas in *Kathakali* and *Kuttiyattam* as well. These areas are also
sources worthy of adoption for the training of an actor. *Kalari* is not an
art form, the movements involved in this discipline – jumps, walks,
throws of the body, frozen positions or *vadivu*, etc. – do not constitute the
grammar of any art form.

“In theatre a language has to be created using the alphabet. This alphabet
comes from the body of the actor. We use the elements of tradition or
rather the strength of tradition to create a language of our own”. says
Panikkar.

3.8 Panikkar's Theatre

According to him from childhood he had developed a liking for art, writing poems in his native language with a lot of rustic images and imagination. Even from childhood he started his liking for the folksongs of his native land which was basically an agricultural area, waterlogged ; having the cool breeze coming always from the Arabian sea through the vast expanse of the lake that boards the village. His love for folk poetry and folk songs was not something acquired; but integrated and inborn in to his psyche. The theatre man in him also had acquired this native quality which remains in him with its rudimentary throbs and latent potential. The quality of his theatre naturally had been inherited from this folk philosophy and ideology and practice which were nurtured in its natural environment and experience.

In the beginning of his career in theatre his work has been viewed by many as experiment. To him it was not an experiment; but a genuine and creative exercise of dramatic representation based on the vibrant practicing tradition and the directives as prescribed in *Natyasastra*, the authoritative text on Indian aesthetics. His personal concept is that art makes life as its springboard; but when it is recreated and represented it appears to be more than life in form and content.

In his later career in theatre he has been able to transcend the folk parameters and reach out to the more evolved and stylized theatre practices, creating a congenial set up for enactment of the celebrated classics of our country as available in the age old Sanskrit dramatic literature. These plays of the past written by the great Indian playwrights like *Bhāsa* and Kalidasa were interpreted on stage by him to cater to the

responsibility. The subtexts of such plays created as
ts, were of great significance and they remain in
his repertoire as sources of inspiration for further growth and
development.

He was immediately influenced by the regional artistic traditions of
Kerala and the regional language, Malayalam. Which have a rich folk
tradition preserved and practiced in a variety of vibrant and colourful
music, dance and theatre forms. All these are rich source materials for
creating the tools of expression for contemporary theatre.

He says that “My theatre is a total theatre” dance and music play an
integral role as applied components to work as effective tools of
expression. *Kalari* or martial art is the basic discipline that helps the
actors to create the alphabets of the theatre language for interpretational
purposes. Plastic arts also play a decisive role in creating the details of the
stage-scape and also the makeup and costumes.

Shri Panikkar's creations, though experimental and non-conformist
feature using non-realistic tools, have themes in close proximity to real
life, its anxieties, struggles and confusion. This gives a durable nature and
makes them suitable for Lokdharmi / Natyadharmi treatment. Another
salient feature of his plays is the absence of exhaustive use of language as
a medium of communication. Instead, the "bhava" or expression is
utilized as a powerful vehicle to provide ample space for improvisation as
well as interpretation. All the plays are part of the author's experiments to
develop the structural patterns and explore its possibilities in the Indian
context. He still continues to do the same. Shri Narayana Panikkar has

indigenous music of the regional -Sopana
c accompaniment to Mohiniattam.

Training in *Kalari* basics helps develop stage presence. It is training in basic exercises to keep the body in proper control. It's a must for theatre people as well. It helps maintain the concept of *sarira bhava* (expression of the body). Manipur has been able to maintain a strong tradition of dance because of its roots in the regional martial system "Thangtha".

Kuttiyattam cannot be made a popular art and it is not for thousands of people to see at a time, but it should be made people friendly with due rehabilitation. Arts are of two types, open for all and only for a few. The latter has a decisive function in creating new sense of appreciation. Also we lack space. Where is the space for performance unless we create space? Existing Koothambalams (traditional theatre for performance) are not open to all, due to rigorous dictates of the orthodoxy. We need a few theatre houses with a congenial atmosphere in tune with the local architecture of the land.

Habib Tanvir has influenced him through his folk presentations with a contemporary thrust. According to him his actors belonging to a tribal community in Chatisgharh are extremely talented and his theatre was vibrant with the folk culture of that region. Even while using the folk tradition effectively he is contemporary in his outlook and output.

3.9 Panikkar and Kuttiyattam

Panikkar adopted elements from Chakyar Koothu and *Kuttiyattam*. The Chakyar's presentation as such may not be interesting to the modern audience. But their method of elaboration is significant. A very small event like Kailas Udharanam will not be sufficient material for theatre. But the Chakyar could make it a well structured play, not in the written sense but as an enactment, a situation developed into full fledged dramatic work. This method of elaboration by the Chakyar, he wanted to adopt in order to enlarge the creative possibilities of the script. It was not in the same way as it is done by the Chakyar in *Kuttiyattam*. But the principle involved in the Chakyar's art is based on the use of the body. It was the fascinating experience for Panikkar to find the Chakyar using his body to communicate the concept of Kailasa to the audience, a comprehensive treatment using all aspects of the vachika, the angika and the satvika. A feeling of the bigness of Kailasa, its 'mountainness', is given by the Chakyar. The vachika comes to his help but cannot in itself from the drama. So a treatment of a written text, even the non-textual elements of the text, in terms of movement is attempted by the Chakyar. A text which is taken from outside the text of the play can sometimes be used to make the text aesthetically effective. This approach has been adopted by Panikkar consciously in playwriting and direction in order to make the play literally as well as theoretically valid.

In our theatre the very entry of a character is meaningful. Sandilya's entry in Bhagavaddajjukiyam gave him an insight into the possibilities of this Eastern technique of establishing a character. Even at the time the character makes his first appearance is fascinating. The basic nature of the character, his approach to life, can be communicated through this

with a stick on his shoulder, with all his belongings attached to it. His character is such that he has no concentration. He does not stick to anyone discipline; he has been going from one guru to another in search of food. He is interested only in material things. Just for the sake of food he is willing to become the disciple of Buddhist monk, a Hindu Yogi or a Charvaka. While directing the play Sandilya's entry was designed to bring home to the audience this aspect of his character. He looks here and there like a monkey. The other movements also reflect his unsteady nature. Such a communication through the entry of characters is characteristic of Eastern theatre. It is found in Japanese theatre forms like Noh and Kabuki. Panikkar understood it from the experience in directing *Bhagavadajjukyam* and from *Kuttiyattam*.

3.10 Panikkar and Use of Rituals

Panikkar have made use of rituals in many of his plays. Critics view it as a type of revivalism. Panikkar uses ritual as of the most powerful forms of theatrical expression.

According to him there are basic differences between the rituals of sophisticated societies and those of tribal. The former are devoid of emotion. In contemporary theatre the relationship between the individual and society necessitates a restructuring of the dynamics of ritual. A ritual is not just an anthropological curiosity, nor is it a mere restoration of social behaviour. Our concept of ritual has to be understood as the individual's mental approach to something hidden in his innermost self. On the neutral level, the actor passes through an experience which we have in tantric art. The act of transformation from actor to character and from

...a ritualistic process. Anything that comes your
...creative endeavour should be made your own
before using it as a tool of self expression.” Says Panikkar.

In his article on “Theatre in Sanskrit: Federation in Culture’ Panikkar has clearly defined the role of tribal rituals in actor’s training. According to him one common feature of the regional theatrics traditions is the transformation of the actor into the character. This happens at many levels and in varying degrees, even in the forms practiced by the tribes. A tribal actor never feels any inhibition to come out of his shell in a trance and transform himself into the otherness in him.

In most ancient tribal forms this transformation is closely associated with rituals which form a vital aspect of social life.

The process of transformation exemplified in tribal forms reveals many of the basic elements of acting as represented by the indigenous theatre. It explains the fundamentals of the conflict often mentioned as an essential element of drama. The conflict begins at the inner plane of the performer’s mind when he assumes the role. It is not merely external. It emanates from within, at the level of bhava; then only is it physicalized. Even that physicalization is suggestive and symbolic, and not naturalistic. Again in traditional performances, the same actor, once transformed into a particular character, transforms himself into an entirely different character in the course of the performance and later returns to the original character, or even to the actor. In the enactment of the external conflicts of life, too, the traditional actor makes it a conflict of the states of mind or bhava. Thus the conflict inherent in the duality of the actor appearing as a character is extended to the portrayal of all kinds of conflicts. This is a

of transformation of the ritualistic performer. In conflict, the means of physicalization naturally becomes aesthetic images created with the entire combination of the actor's psyche and body. This is the essence of the lokadharmi / natyadharmi concepts of acting. The Natyasastra gives only a concise description of the nature of these concepts, citing certain practices precisely. Their total picture and application in varying degrees can be found in the innumerable theatrical forms in all the regions of India and in other related Asian countries. Therefore, the contemporary theatre artist who takes up the challenge of interpreting a traditional Sanskrit text will have to draw lessons from the living regional traditions if he has to produce a meaningful work of art. The process of transformation takes place through the language of theatre. While experimenting with tradition to evolve a language for theatre, we find the actor at the pivotal point and serving as the most powerful component of the theatre.

Theatre draws strength from the process of transformation in ritual, but makes it an aesthetical dynamics, in which the actor becomes capable of utilizing the trance for the definite purpose of conveying the bhava of a character without full identification. This link of acting with ritual is valuable in the sense that it helps the actor to come out of the shell of his personality and realize the otherness in him.

The dynamics of getting into the possessed state is the same both in ritual and theatre.

In the process of training a modern actor the experience which he can gain by participating in ritual will ultimately prepare him for successful mental application in theatre.

and ritual that dominates the Sanskrit theatre makes it relevant to us not only in moulding the tools of self-expression, but also in identifying the guidelines to probe complex human problems. Myth has played a decisive role in contemporary literature and art as an effective and significative source in the illustration of human life.

We come across strange versions of the *Ramayana* gaining currency among tribal communities. This happens as a result of highly imaginative re-creation of an existing myth. Sometimes new myths are also born out of the creativity of village communities.

In the vast tribal regions lying throughout our country, the so-called aboriginals have preserved a culture which has many common features contributing to the rich heritage of each region. It is through this pan-Indian cohesion of cultures, having variables and variations but common links, that India can claim a confederation of the regional cultures. The concept of a national theatre exists on his foundation. Asserts Panikkar.

3.11 Conclusion

Pannikar has its unique style of direction. His process of training his actor and use body as medium of language makes his work differs from the other Indian director. The base of his production is *Natyashastra* and traditional theatre of Kerala. He uses the mudras of *Kathakali* and acting manual of *Kuttiyattam* in effective way. The dance movement and music also an integral part of his production. Indian classic play has been reached to the doorstep of theatre lover is been his biggest achievement in the field of Theatre. We may say in modern time it just because of him our classic theatre came in light of world map.

The concept of visual poetry implies a strong sense of structure, rhythm, and measured movement, as well as the integration of elements such as lighting, set design, costume, and makeup into the nonverbal sapratext. We can understand his work only studying his major plays like *Urubhangam*, *Karnabharam*, *Madhyam Vyayoga* etc.. Which we are going to discuss in his next chapter.



PDF
Complete

*Your complimentary
use period has ended.
Thank you for using
PDF Complete.*

[Click Here to upgrade to
Unlimited Pages and Expanded Features](#)



SHRI RATAN THIYAM