

# Tholpavakkoothu

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**In news :** A shadow leather puppet in Kerala's famous temple art Tholpavakkoothu is being animated by a robot. For the first time, the famous shadow leather puppets will tell stories of the epic Ramayana with the help of robots.

## About the Tholpavakkoothu

- Tholpavakkoothu is a traditional temple art in Kerala having its roots in Palakkad and neighbouring regions.
- State: Kerala
- Tholpavakkoothu, literally meaning 'leather puppet play', is a ritual art performed during the annual festivals in the Kaali temples of Palakkad district
- Tholpavakkoothu performed in temples at a permanent stage called koothu madamsin front of badhrakali temples.
- **Origin:** It is said to have originated in the 18th century is also known as pavakkoothu (puppet play) or nizhalattam (shadow play).
- This entertainment art is performed on a special stage called koothumadam in the temple courtyard.
- It used to be performed in the Bhadrakali temples of Palakkad, telling tales from the Ramayana.
- **Other names:** It is also known as Nizhalkkoothu and Olakkoothu.
- This art is confined largely to Pulavar families from Shoranur region of Palakkad district.
- The Central government honoured one of the members of Pulavar family, a doyen of Tholpavakkoothu, awarding him Padma Shree this year
- As a part of the geographical region Tholpavakkoothu is fully consists in the areas of the river Nila (Bharatha puzha).
- Among the ancient artform of Kerala tholpavakkoothu or shadow puppet play occupies a prominent place. It is a

fine example of the integration of Aryan and Dravidian cultures.

## **Puppets**

- The puppet plays are based on selected verses from the famous Tamil Epic "Kamba Ramayana'. The language used is a dialect of Tamil with an admixture of Sanskrit and Malayalam words.
- The Puppets are made of deer skin and are held by a thin stick in one hand while the limbs are manipulated by a thinner stick held in another hand of the puppeteer.
- Each puppet is of an average height of 80 cms and is cut out in different postures. The puppets are arranged behind a long white curtain stretched across the Koothumadom. The chief puppeteer is known as 'Pulavan'
- Pulavars
- The lead puppeteer is usually a pulavar which is an honorific given to a puppeteer who is also a scholar. Pulavars undergo intensive training in puppetry and have a deep knowledge of Malayalam, Tamil and Sanskrit.

## **How is it performed?**

- Puppets (pavakal), usually representing four characters from the Ramayana, are arranged behind a long white screen, in front of bright wick lamps.
- The puppets made of deer skin are made to dance to songs from the Kamba Ramayana (the Tamil version of the epic). The performance starts late at night and continues up to daybreak.
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- The play covers the whole gamut of events from Lord Sree Rama's birth to his coronation as the King of Ayodhya.
- The shadow play is presented in the 'Koothumadam', a specially constructed oblong play house on the temple premises. The puppets are fashioned out of the hides of

buffaloes and deer, the former for evil characters and latter for noble ones.