Kuncan Nambyar, the exponent of tullal form of art, was born around 1705 in central Kerala. Legend says that Nambyar, who used to accompany the Cākyār in Kūṭtu performance, was scorned by the latter when he dogged off during a performance. Nambyar left the performance and created the tullal play, overnight. Nambyar’s tullal was not modeled on then highly influenced Katakali. But it was definitely away from it in every manner, because it catered to the lower rungs of society. The tullals of Nambyar were of three types, namely, the fast type called Oṭṭan tullal, the medium type called Śītānkan tullal and slow type called Parayan tullal. The tullal has a narrative form in verse, very much like the Katakali. But while Katakali has many actors on the stage, tullal has only one actor. Unlike in Katakali, the actor in tullal sings the songs also. The face
painting and costumes are picturesque and attractive. Narration and dancing go side by side. Regarding the form of poetry employed, it was overwhelmingly caricature. Humor formed the essence of Nambian's works. Nambian, it occurs to us, is gleeful when the portray scene of weddings, feasts and battles going into the details of human frailty, stupidity and greed. Nambian's works were essentially social criticisms, where we see in him the picture of a sarcastic observer. His themes were essentially purâñics with the characters symbolizing the contemporary stock. Tullals continued to be produced after Nambian's time too, but nothing excelled Nambian's work of cynical humor. In the nineteenth century Pûntoṭān (junior) Venmaṇi (junior) tried to re-establish the lost humor of this unique stream of poetry. At present tullal as a dance-drama has achieved a lot performance. But their merit as literary works is very inferior.
TULLAL

Tullal, the dance form of Kerala is yet another gem in the vast repertoire of Kerala's performing arts. It has from its very inception, enjoyed a ready appeal with both the commoner and the connoisseur for unlike forms such as Kutiyattam, Krishnanattam, Katakali and Mohiniyattam. It requires no initiation to intelligently respond to it. One can easily react and enjoy tullal without any prior exposure or sophisticated understanding. As this is composed in the language of the layman, it is known as the 'poor man's' Katakali.

The word tullal belongs to the Dravidian family of languages and literary means 'jumping'. This however can be extended to mean 'to leap about' or to 'cut a caper'.
Belief prevail that tullal, both as a form of dance and as an evolved literary expression, owes itself to the genius of one man Kuncan Nambiar. The poet, social critic and humorist who lived two centuries ago was the pioneer behind this dance form and he wrote the text of Tullal and choreographed the play. He tried to bring out through this dance form, the social conditions of this time, the distinctions of class and weaknesses and whims of the rich and the great. Tullal often reflects the literary, artistic and cultural life of the medieval Kerala. Here the stories from Epics are retold in Malayalam poetry with the stylized singing of the lines depicting the beauty of the Dravidian meters.

In its presentation, tullal is conceived as a solo dance. The dance is supported by two musicians, who stand a little behind him. One of them plays the Maddalam, a drum and the other small cymbals. Both musicians are also expected to sing
along with the dancer. No stage or any other formal arrangement is required for the performance. Unlike Katakali or Kūtiyāṭām, tullal uses no curtain for entries, exists or scenes, nor is there a formal seating arrangement. As is the practice with all the Kerala’s performing arts, a lighted brass lamp is installed in front of the dancer, even if the performance is held during the day.

Tullal presentation generally lasts two hours and is rendered at a pitch and pace that keep onlookers thoroughly gripped. The dancer dances and sings simultaneously and this entails a long period of rigorous training, an agile body and a communicative voice. The dancer must also be gifted with a sharp memory, for he must remember long poems some of which have over 1000 couplets. The emotions pertain mainly to valor, humor, pathos, anger and devotion. Śrīṅgāra, the erotic element, is virtually absent, but is rarely missed, for the
burden of the songs and the nature of the dance are hardly conductive to tender passions.

In make-up and costumes, tullal has the traces of color and the gorgeousness of Katakali. The tullal artist uses native pigments, called Manayola (yellow) Cayillyarîn (red) Nelaîn (blue) and Maşî (black) mixed with coconut oil or water, for his facial make-up. He inserts a specially processed floral substance into the lower eyelids that turns the eyes red. This is perceived as adding to the aesthetic colour sensations and it cools the eyes. In tullal face of the artist is painted with yellow arsenic mixed with blue. The eyes are blackened and lips are reddened. The dancer wears a breastplate adorned with golden pearls, necklaces and colorful tassels. The white waistcloths resemble skirts. The headgear is small, made of lightwood, studded with bright stones and decorated with
golden paper. The bracelets, amulets and waistlets are almost the same as in Katakali.

Tullal is of three kinds: Ottan, Parayan and Sitaankan. The distinction between them lies mostly in the make-up and costumes and to some extent in meters and ragas of the text. Of these Ottan tullal is the most popular.

In recent years, there have been many efforts to rejuvenate interest in tullal, both as a literary form and as a performance. Some 30 years ago in Malabar, Raman Nair, a gifted performer, did much to improve the tullal art. Kerala Kalamandalam, a leading training center for Katakali and related arts has for some years included tullal dance in its curriculum. Time has effected improvements in the tullal performance. It has now become a popular entertainment in the cultural programmes.
Performance

Tullal is conceived as a solo dance. The dancer is supported by two musicians who stand a little behind him. One of them plays the madhalam, a drum, and the other, small cymbals. Both musicians are also expected to sing along with the dancer. No stage or any other form of formal arrangement is required for the performance, which can be held with equal facility in the compound of a temple or the courtyard of a house. Unlike katakali and küdiyattam, tullal uses no curtain for entries, exists or scenes, nor is there a formal seating arrangement. As is the practice with all of Kerala’s performing arts a lighted bell metal lamp is installed in the front of the dancer, even if the performance is held during the day. Though not strictly observed now, parayantullal was generally presented in the forenoon śālānkan in the afternoon and ottan after dusk.
The player sings a verse and while the lines are repeated by his musical assistant, he brings out the meaning through facial expressions, and gestures and bodily postures. The role of the raconteur and actor are perpetually interchanged with tremendous aesthetic effect. On one moment he is the narrator, but in the next he completely identifies himself with the narration.

In tullal the primary importance is attributed to dance. Throughout the performance the dance element predominates but lacks variety. In order to avoid monotony, the dancer executes some vigorous footsteps and rhythmic movement of the body.

Tulall presentations generally last for two hours and are rendered at a pitch and pace that keep on lookers thoroughly gripped. The dancer dances and sings simultaneously and this entails a long of rigorous training, an agile body and a
communicative voice. The dancer must also be gifted with a sharp memory, for he must remember long poems, some of which have over 1,000 couplets. One memorized, it is left to the dancer’s discretion what to take from a poem, he must link lines and relate them to this theme in order to convey the literal meaning as well as his own interpretation of each poem.

The emotions pertain mainly in valour, humor, pathos, anger and devotion. Srīṅgāra, the erotic element, is virtually absent, but is rarely missed, for the burden of the songs and the nature of the dance are hardly conducive to tender passions.

Whilst the style of dancing, singing and presentations is common to the three types of tullal, each has its own distinctive costumes and ornaments.
The songs and dance in this form of tulūl are slower than Ottan tulūl in metre and rhythm and in tempo. The dancer uses a piece of black cloth tied tightly round the head and his is circled with a band of tender, palm leaves giving the impression of a crown. Ornaments representing the full-blown lotus, made once more of palm leaf, adorn the upper arms and wrists, ankle belts, and the feet. The chest is covered with a profusion of bead necklaces and over this is tiled a cross-belt. A red cloth is draped round the waist and a long of white cloth, rather like a bandage, is looped again and again around a waist-string and fixed above this.
2. PARAVAN TULLAL

This has the slowest in tempo along the three tullals. Even the stance and posture of the performer is different from that of the two tullals. In this, the dancer stays erect and explains the meaning of the songs by gestures. There is very little dance element as well as action.

The dancer wears a conical crown that is topped with the hood of a serpent. The eyes are boldly outlined in black to heighten their expression and the body is anointed with sandal paste. The legs are covered with a red cloth over which is tied a white cloth that falls down to the knees. Necklaces and ankle-belts, as in the case of setakan, complete outfit.
3. OTTAN TULLAL

Ottan tullal is known as the poor man's katakali because of its ready mass appeal. It is combined with the humorous elements of kuthu and an element of katakali. In ottan tullal, the symbols and gestures are same as those of katakali.

This is the most popular among the tullals. In this performance, the actor wears a long tape of cloth of white and red colour looped around a waist-string to form a knee-length skirt. A chest plate adorned by various types of coloured beads, glass and tinsel, and other ornaments are used. Wooden bangles painted with bright colours are worn on the wrist and wooden ornaments are worn on the shoulders. Tinkling bells are tied to the legs just above the calf. A black cloth is tied around the head and over this worn a very decorative crown representing a many-headed serpent. The real distinguishing feature of Ottan tullal is the painting of the face. This is done
as in the pucca type in kattakali make-up, and accentuated with a bold white line running around it, the lips are reddened, the eyes and eyebrows thickly blackened, and a caste mark is added to the centre of the brow. The metre and rhythm of ottan tullal songs are fast paced and the dance too has a high tempo.
Kuncan Naribiar (1705 – 1770)

Before he came to the court at Tiruvanantapuram, Kuncan Naribiar had spent his early childhood at Killikurišimaingalam, his boyhood at Kudamālor and his youth at Arñbalapuzha. In 1748 he moved to Tiruvanantapuram, first to the court of Mārtāṇḍa Varma and later to the court of Kārtika Tirunāl Rāma Varma. He had already written several of his works before leaving Arñbalapuzha. The chief contribution of Naribiar is the invention and popularization of a new performing art known as tullal. The word literally means “dance”, but under this name Naribiar devised a new style of verse narration with a little background music and dance-like swinging movement to wean the people away from cākkiyarr kūtta which was the form popular till then. He was to use Malayālam as opposed to the stylized and Sanskritized language of kūtta. He also adopted many elements from
Pañayani or Kolam tullal and certain other folk arts. It is reasonable to assume that he was himself a performer. The first hand knowledge of the various talas and ragas and even the practices of drummers is a pre-requisite for the writing of a tullal. Kuncan Narbiyar possessed of this in abundance. Each tullal composition consists of a puranic tale retold in simple rhythmic verse, fit for loud recitation before an audience. There are three kinds of tullal distinguished on the basis of the performer's costume and the style of rendering, viz. Ottan, Śētanikan and Parayan. Dravidian metres are used throughout although there is nothing to prevent the insertion of a quatrain in a Sanskrit metre. Namibiär also developed new metres (e.g. Vaytari metres) based on the vocal notation for various talas. The language also is predominantly Malayalam with a large admixture of colloquial and dialectal forms. Humour is
invariable the dominant mood: other bhavas are brought in for
variety and to suit the situation.

Kuncan Nambiar is believed to have written over forty
tullal composition. Some scholars allot a larger number to
his credit. They belong to all the three types: 21 Ottan,
11 Sfantaikan and 9 Parayan. The most important of Nambiar's
tullals are: Syamantakam, Ghoṣayatra, Kiratam,
Santanogopalam, Patracaritam, Kartiavirarjunavijayam,
Bakavadhaṁ, Kalyana Saugandham, Harinismayamvaram,
Tripuradahanam and Sabha Pravesam. Nambiar was an
extrovert and observed the life around very closely. He was
also very critical of the social evils he saw around him. Thus
even when the main story is from the purañas, he would
introduce digressions in plenty and use such occasions to
comment on life in his own time. He did not worry about the
charge of anachronism. He knew his audience very well: not
scholars and poets, but laymen, especially soldiers, barely literate. In one of his works he says:

It is impossible to entertain without laughter

Those soldiers who think they should stay

If it is a comic tale, or else should leave the place.

He certainly succeeded in his aim. He is comparable to Chaucer and Rabelais for his boisterous humour and knowledge of contemporary life. Like them he too borders on the obscene at times, as a matter of concession to the audience or readers. All classes of people and all professions come in for sharp criticism in his compositions: Namūdiris, Tamil Brahmins, Nayars, Courtiers, Courtesans. Nambar is undoubtedly the greatest satirist in Malayālam. An example of how he introduce a satire on contemporary life into a text based on a purāṇic episode may be found in the following passage from Kārtavīrjuna Vijayam. Rāvana is speaking to
Nārada about his own prowess that has reduced other kings to utter misery:

The kingdom of the Gandharaka rules

Has turned into a mere desert.

The land of the Simhala King

Is now filled with lions and leopards.

The lord of the Cera people

Feeds himself on cheap vegetables.

The Cola King has nothing to eat

Except the maize of low quality.

The kings of the Kuru house

Have nothing but jackfruit seeds.

The lord of the land of Kāśmir

Is busy eating cucumbers.

The ruler of the Campeya land

Eats only tubers and broken rice.
The Konkan prince is about to die
Thinking of his wives' breasts.

After Rāvana reaches Hehaya, his messengers announce that
everybody should own allegiance to him:
Tributes must be paid from time to time;
Half the yield should be given to me.
The whole of pepper yield should be handed over
Coconut, arecanut, mango, jackfruit:
All the trees should be confiscated.
There will be no place in my country
For the pomp of local barons.
Double the seed crop should be given
To me by every house owner.
The Tamil Brahmins (Pattars) staying here
Should also give one fourth to me.
The Nairs who stay at home
Should take their bows and spears  
And sty at the residence of Rāvana
And do whatever chores are assigned.
Nairs who drink toddy
Would be beaten up, beware!

Nambiar's poetry lacks the high seriousness such as we find in Ezhutacan. The difference here is significant. The two are complementary. Just as Kilipâṭṭu seems to express the total personality of a writer like Ezhutacan, the thullal brings out the characteristic features of the personality of Nambiar. Between them they cover the entire spectrum of humanity, the entire gamut of human emotions. No other Kilipâṭṭu has come anywhere near Ezhutacan's Rāmāyaṇam and Mahābāratam, no other thullal composition is ever likely to equal the best of Nambiar's compositions.
After Nambiar

There has been a great lull in the field of literary creation in Malayālam for nearly a century after the death of Kuncan Nambiar. No great work of literature was produced during this long and uneasy interregnum. There was a consistent and steady development of prose at this time. Several regional versions of Keralolpati, tracing the beginnings of Kerala history, began to appear. Father Clement’s Saṅkṣepa Vedārtam came out in 1772. Paremakkal Toma Katanār (1737 – 1799) wrote the first travelogue in Malayālam, Vartamānapustakam (Book of News). It is perhaps the most sustained piece of prose writing written till that date. The works of Christian missionaries like Arnos Pātirī (John Ernestus Hanksalden, 1699-1732) and Paulinose Pātirī (John Philip Wesdin, 1748-1806) also led to a widening of the range of topics and themes in Malayālam literature.
The transmission from 18th century to the 19th century did not immediately lead to any great spurt of literary activity. The intrusion of European influence was beginning to be felt in the national life at large. The starting of schools on the British model and the introduction of English as a subject of study were to have a tremendous impact in the years to come. Mahāraja Śwāti Tirunāl (1813-1847) is a symbol of the process of modernization that was beginning to be set in motion at the time. Like Kārtika Tirunāl Rāma Varma who was not only a patron of literature and the arts but also a distinguished writer of attakkatās, Śwāti Tirunāl was both a patron and a poet-musician. He is perhaps the most distinguished music composer in Kerala. The foundations of modern education were laid in the former State of Trāvancore during his reign. Among the great writers at his court, the most talented was without doubt Irayimman (Ravi Varma)
Tampi (1783-1856). He is chiefly remembered today for two things: one, a delicate and exquisite lullaby poem ("Is it the darling baby moon") and three well designed and superbly composed āttakatās (Kīcakavadham, Utaräswayamvaram and Dakṣayāgaṃ). Like his patron, Tampi also wrote a number of songs to be set to music. As a writer of āttakatās Tampi has only one formidable rival, Uṇṇāyi Wārrīr. His padas are themselves exquisite musical compositions. Tampi has an unerring ear, and for sheer verbal felicity, his āttakatās have few rivals. He was a master of words and melody. The famous dandaka (long stanza) in Kīcakavadham reveals Tampi’s exquisite artistry with words; it describes in graphic and dramatic terms, the response of Draupadi to the queen who had asked her to go to kīcakas’s place with his food:
Hearing the words of the queen
The deer-eyed on shuddered,
Her eyes turned red-she was overcome with fatigue
She offered many excuses to her
But harsh words made her quiet.
Servitude, she thought an object of derision for all;
She lowered her eyes,
She, superior to heavenly damsels-but now
Benefit of joy
Her clothes became soiled and wet
With tears and sweat;
Her body trembling, she stood there
With the vessel in her hand
Then started walking-then stopped on the way
She felt exhausted like a deer
That goes to the den of the enemy of all deers.
Kilimeñūr Vidwan Rajaraja Varma Koyitaampuran (1812-1846 also known as Karīndran) was also at the court of Śwāti Tirunāl. He is chiefly remembered attakata, Ṛavaṇa Vijayam, one of the most popular of attakkatas. The roles of Ṛavaṇa and Rambha are particularly suited to the Katakali style of presentation, and although part of the play represents a rape, its crudity is considerably toned down by the highly stylized gestures and movements and the lyrical quality of the verse. In the hands of inept actors it can lead to excessive vulgarity. Critics at attakkata literature will take these as signs of decadence, as a true representation of the erotic exuberance characteristic of elitist feudal class of the time.
CHAPTER V

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