

## Addressing the Contrasting Perceptions of Vishnumaya Chathan

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**Summary:** *The article examines the legend of Chathan, its Hindu mythological connections, and its adaptations in popular culture as a mischievous entity through first-hand accounts and personal narratives.*

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“Friendly ghost? Evil spirit? Mischievous goblin? Who is this Kuttichathan? The answer to the question depends on who you ask. Part of the folklore and religious culture of north and central Kerala, for many people, he is an entity who can be used to do good or bad.” Mahalakshmi Prabhakaran explains in her article called *Reviving Chathan’s Lore* on Mint Lounge.<sup>1</sup>

## A Family Legend: A God Who Listens

“One evening, during your great-grandfather’s time,” my Mema<sup>2</sup> (aunt) recounted, “one of his labourers attempted to steal a plantain bunch from our ancestral property. As he fled, the labourer’s progress abruptly halted. He was frozen in place, unable to move forward or backwards.

The next morning, your great-grandfather discovered the labourer’s predicament and instructed him to submit the plantain bunch to Lord Vishnumaya with sincerity. Upon agreeing, the labourer was immediately released. He rushed to our family temple to present the offering. Every year since, the labourer’s family and its descendants have faithfully gifted a plantain bunch to Vishnumaya as a token of their devotion. It is said that no family who worships Lord Vishnumaya will ever be victimised by theft. That’s why the labourer’s attempt to steal the plantain bunch failed. That’s how powerful Vishnumaya is,” Mema concluded, a devout member of our family temple committee. As I listened, I was captivated, just as I had been by countless other tales of Vishnumaya.

Vishnumaya is a regional Hindu deity primarily worshipped in central Kerala. Often depicted as a nine-year-old boy wielding a *kuruvadi* (a slender weapon), and riding a buffalo, Vishnumaya is the son of Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvathy, and the adopted son of the Malayan tribal woman Koolivaka. Legend has it that he

was born to defeat the demon named Bhringasuran.



Figure 1. Vishnumaya Chathan is represented by Sree Avanangattil Kalari Sree Vishnumaya Temple. Image: Wikimedia Commons, 2008

Peringottukara, a village in the Thrissur district, is considered his divine abode. This is where my mother’s family originates. Although my mother’s family has never personally worshipped Vishnumaya, they grew up in close proximity to numerous Vishnumaya temples, such as the Sree Avanangattil Kalari Sree Vishnumaya Temple and those belonging to the Kanadi family.

In contrast, my father’s family has always been ardent devotees of Vishnumaya. Their family temple, Kakkanatt Bhagavathy Temple, is located in Chettuva, Thrissur, and is dedicated to Bhagavathy, the primary deity. However, Vishnumaya also holds an equally significant position within the temple.

## An Origin for Vishnumaya

Disguised as sages, Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvathy embarked on a pilgrimage that led them to the picturesque Kooli forests of Kerala. The Malayans, or Mala Arayans, a forest tribe, provided the divine couple shelter. It was there that Shiva encountered the beautiful tribal girl named Koolivaka. Mesmerised by her youth and overcome by desire, Shiva expressed his desire for her. Surprised by the request, Koolivaka used the excuse of her menstrual period to delay the encounter. Being an ardent

<sup>1</sup> Prabhakaran, Mahalakshmi. “Reviving Chathan’s Lore.” *Mint Lounge*, 3 Mar. 2024, [lifestyle.livemint.com/how-to-lounge/movies-tv/bra-mayugam-mammooty-kuttichathan-kerala-folk-lore-kandittund-111709374460417.html](https://lifestyle.livemint.com/how-to-lounge/movies-tv/bra-mayugam-mammooty-kuttichathan-kerala-folk-lore-kandittund-111709374460417.html).

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Rejini Deepankuran via voice call on 06/08/2024

devotee of Parvathy, she began a penance for the goddess to preserve her virginity.

Meanwhile, the megalomaniac Asura named Bhringasuran was wreaking havoc across the world. The Devas realised the urgent need for a powerful avatar to conquer Bhringasuran. Parvathy devised a plan to protect Koolivaka's purity and create a divine incarnation capable of ending Bhringasuran. She would disguise herself as Koolivaka and unite with Shiva, giving birth to a powerful child. Shiva, still in his sage disguise and blinded by lust, consummated his union with Parvathy (in the guise of Koolivaka). Due to godly powers, in just two hours, Parvathy became pregnant and gave birth to a boy.

Pleased by Koolivaka's devotion and loyalty, Parvathy revealed her true identity and explained the circumstances of the child's birth. She entrusted Koolivaka with the responsibility of raising her son. Delighted to be the foster mother of her goddess's child, Koolivaka accepts the proposal. Miraculously, her breasts began to produce milk.

The boy born to Shiva-Parvathy and raised by Koolivaka became a dear member of the Malayan tribe. They named him Chathan. Chathan grew up in the Kooli forests, roaming freely on his buffalo companion and playing with his brothers Karinkutty, Chekkutty, and Parankutty. He was talented at playing a musical instrument called *ezhara*. By the age of eight, Chathan also demonstrated expertise in weaponry. His preferred weapon was the *kuruvadi*, which he carried around constantly and utilised to kill demons and predatory animals that threatened his tribe. By this age, he also developed a fondness for alcohol and meat.

### Chathan Discovers His Divinity.



Figure 2. An *Ezhara*. Image: Amazon India e-commerce



Figure 3. *Kuruvadikal*. Image: Music Park online store.

When it was time for Chathan to discover his true purpose, Koolivaka told him who his parents were and told him to meet them at Kailasam. On reaching Kailasam, Chathan was stopped by the bhoothaganas (guards). However, taking the form of Lord Vishnu, Chathan convinced the guards to let him in. The magic (*maya*) he applied to take the form of Vishnu earned Chathan the name 'Vishnumaya Chathan'. Shiva and Parvathy bestowed upon their son the knowledge of warfare and gave him two *kuruvadikal* to use in his forthcoming battle with Bhringasuran. Leaving with their blessings, Vishnumaya Chathan and Bhringasuran battled for days in the Kooli forest.



Figure 4. Image of Kukshikalpam (Vishnumaya) and 390 Kuttichathanmar. Image: Kanadikavu Sree Vishnumaya Kuttichathan Swami Temple.

On the seventh day, Vishnumaya was wounded in his hand, which caused a few

drops of blood to fall. From the blood, 400 *kuttichathanmar* (little spirits) emerged to protect Vishnumaya Chathan from Bhringasuran's arrows. Ten of the arrows took away the lives of ten *kuttichathanmar*. Yet, with the help of the remaining 390 spirits and his *kuruvadikal*, Vishnumaya eventually triumphed over Bhringasuran. From that day forward, Vishnumaya and his 390 *kuttichathanmar* became the protectors of the Malayan tribe. Soon, they were established in the temples of central Kerala and became the guardians of Vishnumaya's devotees, who addressed the deity with adoration as Sree Vishnumaya Kuttichathan.

### Vishnumaya at Family Temples

Kannur-based doctor Tradib Jayapal describes him as "a god for the common man." He is the guy you go to when you want your prayer to be answered fast, says Jayapal.

In our family temple and other small temples, the most noteworthy festival honouring Vishnumaya is called *kalamezhuthupattu* or, less formally, *kalam*. "Ideally, it is to be held annually. However, being a small family temple, there's a lack of funds sometimes. That's why we conduct our *kalam* every two years," Mema clarifies.



Figure 5: A *Chuttuvilakku* in a temple. Image: Arppan

Mema also describes *Kalasham*, another important ceremony dedicated to Vishnumaya. While *Kalam* is a community

event organised by the temple committee and attended by all family members and neighbours, *Kalasham* is sponsored individually and typically involves only the closest family members and frequent temple visitors. One carries out a *Kalasham* with a particular purpose in their immediate life: to overcome an existing troublesome situation like a disease or a financial challenge, to bless a new venture in one's life like a marriage or a business start-up, to succeed in a certain task like an exam or a sport, or so on.

"It's believed that the men in the family should do the *Kalasha-puja*, while the women prepare food for Vishnumaya and the participants," Mema tells me, recollecting the *Kalasham* that my Achan (father) performed this year in the Malayalam month of *Kumbham* (around February-March). Performing a *Kalasham* is considered inauspicious during the months of *Vrishchikam* (around November-December) and *Karkidakam* (around July-August).

When asked about the reason behind his *Kalasham* this year, Achan<sup>3</sup> replied, "This time, I wanted to thank Vishnumaya for ensuring my family's safe return from Mumbai after attending my niece's wedding." Achan's niece's wedding was in Mumbai in February. The wedding had been a joyous occasion, and we had the opportunity to explore the beautiful city. In our family, it's customary to express gratitude to the gods after successful events. "I do a *Kalasham* for Chathan every year to express my gratitude for a blessed and peaceful life," Achan resumes. "I usually do it in two parts. The first part involves a *chuttuvilakku* (a form of worship where all lamps in and around the temple are lit), usually done by our temple *shanthi* (priest) and other family members. And then the second part is when I bring liquor when I return to Kerala during my annual visit," says Achan, who works in Dubai.

When younger, I was taken aback to know that alcohol is a primary contribution of Vishnumaya. I couldn't fathom how a Hindu deity could consume liquor. It was only later that I realised there are several

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Kakkanatt Padmanabhan Durgadas on 07/08/2024

Hindu deities who are associated with the consumption of alcohol, meat, and fish. It is probably due to mainstream cultural influences that this fact often shocks many who believe only vegetarian food must be served to Hindu gods.

My cousin Nitin<sup>4</sup> narrates his admiration for Chathan: “I’ve been an ardent devotee since my childhood. I would keenly listen to stories of Chathan from my grandma about the power of this deity. Every time I return from Dubai for my holidays, I present a liquor bottle to Vishnumaya out of gratitude. Another way of expressing my devotion to him is by planning and supervising the renovations for our family temple.” Nitin Chettan (brother) is an important part of my father’s family temple. He, Mema, and others are constant members of the temple committee.



Figure 6. Bacardi Rum, an alcohol brand Nitin Chettan, presented to Chathan this year.

The architecture of my father's family temple facilitates the worship of different deities based on their respective food for them. The temple is primarily divided into two sections: one for Bhagavathy Devi, Lord Hanuman, Dhanwanthary Moorthy, and other deities, and a second section for Lord Vishnumaya, Karinkutti Chathan, Muthappan, and Veerabhadran. Only vegetarian food must be served to the first category of deities, while common offerings to the second category include alcohol, meat, and fish.



Figure 7. My father's family temple: Kakkanatt Bhagavathy Temple; the deities in the building on the left are believed to consume meat and alcohol; on the right, it is deities who are presented with only vegetarian food. Image: Nitin Prathap



Figure 8. Idols of Veerabhadran, Vishnumaya, Karinkutti, and Muthappan at Kakkanatt Bhagavathy Temple (left to right)

## Chathan in Popular Culture

‘Kuttichathan’ literally translates to ‘little demon’. In Malayalam oral tales, a character named ‘Kuttichathan’ is often associated with a little devil who inflicts damage on other characters. It is believed that a devotee could make a deal with Chathan by performing a puja and submitting food, and instantly *Kuttichathan* would manifest what that devotee prayed for. This process is often named *Chathan seva* (Chathan service). This is wonderfully demonstrated in the national-award-winning 2021 short by Adithi Krishnadas called *Kandittund!* (Seen It!).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Krishnadas, Adithi. “Kandittund! (Seen It!)” *YouTube*, Studio Eeksaurus, 14 Nov. 2021, [youtu.be/DxYbfJUOOMQ?si=iv-toVrgKSv3UYme](https://youtu.be/DxYbfJUOOMQ?si=iv-toVrgKSv3UYme).

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Nitin Prathap via voice call on 06/08/2024



Figure 8 . Kuttichathanmar in the animation short *Kandittund!*. Image: Studio Eeksaurus

These acts are committed by the 390 *kuttichathanmar* of Lord Vishnumaya<sup>6</sup>. As punishment for neglecting regular offerings or as a lesson for troubling a devotee, Lord Vishnumaya commands his minions to perform small acts of disruption while remaining invisible: dropping hair in food, throwing stones at houses, putting idols in shitholes and spitting holes, setting fire to things, or transporting sleeping girls from their beds to the rooftops. Achan recalls several incidents where he ended up in trouble, which he believes are because he had missed performing puja for Vishnumaya. He reminisces about the incidents with a great sense of humour, yet those incidents taught him never to take his deity for granted or forget to perform his duties as a devotee. While devotees associate the name ‘Chathan’ with veneration, many non-devotees experience a sense of distress and hesitation as the name reminds them of black magic.

The major reason is how Chathan is depicted in popular culture like films and magazines. Aravind<sup>7</sup>, my close friend from Thrissur, shares how his perception of the deity has evolved based on the films he has watched. “I loved watching the old movie *My Dear Kuttichathan*<sup>8</sup> and its TV series.” In it, Kuttichathan tags along with his young human friends on whimsical adventures. “Chathan was shown as a

very naughty boy but always ready to help his friends,” Aravind continues. “At that time, the figure of Chathan brought me a sense of safety, joy, fun, and friendship. But after watching *Bramayugam*,<sup>9</sup> I realised that what I thought of Chathan before was different from what he probably is. Now, I can’t help but perceive him as vengeful, cunning, and manipulative.”



Figure 9. A scene from *My Dear Kuttichathan*; Kuttichathan (far left) and his friends. Image: Youtube.

Malayalis outside Thrissur may not be familiar with the legend of Vishnumaya, but they are sure to have heard of Chathan. “My parents and I haven’t heard of Vishnumaya. But yes, we’ve heard of Chathan from many movies,” states my friend Antony<sup>10</sup> from Kochi. “What comes to mind when I hear ‘Chathan’ is black magic and a demonic figure who has shapeshifting powers. I guess movies give the idea that Chathan is an evil form, worshipped only for immoral needs like making money unethically or destroying the lives of one’s enemies.”

My dear friend Sruthi<sup>11</sup> from Kozhikode recalls, “I remember this character called Luttappi in the *Mayavi* comics in *Balarama*<sup>12</sup> (a children’s magazine). “He was this red-coloured, bald, little imp with two horns and a long tail similar to the portrayal in *Bramayugam*. In both, this figure is portrayed as someone who is deceitful and villainous. Overall, we get a negative picture about this figure.”

<sup>6</sup> Sankunni, Kottarathil. “Aithiyamala”. *D. C. Books*, 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Aravind Nandakumar Pisharody via Whatsapp voice recordings on 27/07/2024

<sup>8</sup> Punnoose, Jijo. *My Dear Kuttichathan*, 24 Aug. 1984.

<sup>9</sup> Sadasivan, Rahul. *Bramayugam*, 15 Feb. 2024

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Antony Jaimon via Whatsapp texts on 13/07/2024

<sup>11</sup> Interview with T Sruthi via Whatsapp voice recordings on 28/07/2024.

<sup>12</sup> Mohan, NM. *Mayavi. Balarama*.



Figure 16: Luttappi (old and new versions).  
Image: On Manorama



Figure 17: Chathan in *Brahmayugam*

### A More Scholarly View

In his *Lectures on Ethnography*<sup>13</sup>, LK Anantha Krishna Iyer has a section called ‘Positive Magic and Sorcery’. Under it, Iyer defines, “Kuttichathan is... like Shakespeare’s Ariel—little active bodies and most willing slaves of their masters who happen to control them... As for remuneration for his services, Chathan wants nothing but food. In the event of starvation, Chathan would not hesitate to remind the master of his power and of others like him; but if ordinarily cared for, they would be most willing drudges.”

It is indeed a conflicting thought because although he could be a troublemaker, Chathan seems to be loyal to those who offer him food and/or respect. Nirmal Sahadev’s *Kumari*<sup>14</sup> (2022) is a suitable example representing this. In it, the ‘good’

<sup>13</sup> Iyer, LK Anantha Krishna. “Lectures on Ethnography.” *Internet Archive*, 1 Jan. 1970, [archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.70013](https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.70013). p.197

<sup>14</sup> Sahadev, Nirmal. *Kumari*, 28 Oct. 2022

Chathan, called Illimala Chathan, assists those who provide him with food and have good intentions. Chathan is compelled to carry out his problematic acts due to orders from his ‘master’. Is he good or bad then?

On Manorama, the English online news portal, describing Rahul Sadasivan’s *Bramayugam* (2004) and Jijo Punnoose’s *My Dear Kuttichathan* (1984) depict the manipulation tactics of power-hungry people who ensnare gods and demigods like Chathan, Karinkali, Yakshi, etc., exploiting their vulnerabilities to instill fear and exert control over fellow beings.<sup>15</sup>

Gilles Tarabout<sup>16</sup> remarks about the confusion behind the name ‘Chathan’ in his work *On Cāttan. Conflicting Statements about a South Indian Deity*, “I shall use here ‘deity’, but Cāttan has also been variously described as a ‘spirit’, a ‘ghost’, an ‘imp’, a ‘demon’, and a ‘god’. The terminology itself implies a moral judgment— a condemnation, a disregard, a fear, or a devotional feeling, that is, socially and ideologically marked viewpoints. How then is the social scientist supposed to write about Cāttan? I take the case of this deity only as an example, as I trust that the question equally concerns the description of many other ones.”

### So, Reverence or Fear?

“Yes, there is a negative perception about Chathan. But it stems from popular culture. People fail to realise that Chathan is beyond this,” Mema strongly expresses her faith. Through my interviews and observations, I have noticed how devotees find solace in

<sup>15</sup> Mohan, Sajesh. “‘Bramayugam’ and ‘My Dear Kuttichathan’: Depicting the Struggle of Gods and Demigods for Freedom from Humans.” *On Manorama*, 26 Feb. 2024, [www.onmanorama.com/entertainment/movie-reviews/2024/02/26/bramayugam-movie-analysis-my-dear-kuttichathan-demigods-rahul-sadasivan-jijo-punnoose.html](https://www.onmanorama.com/entertainment/movie-reviews/2024/02/26/bramayugam-movie-analysis-my-dear-kuttichathan-demigods-rahul-sadasivan-jijo-punnoose.html).

<sup>16</sup> Gilles Tarabout. “On Chathan. Conflicting Statements about a South Indian Deity”. Manu V. Devadevan. “Clio and her Descendants. Essays for Kesavan Veluthat”. *Primus Books*, 2018. p.454. 978-93-86552-97-6. fffhalshs-02937007

Chathan. “There are lots of reasons why I worship him,” says Nitin Chettan. “Anything that I have prayed for has been manifested by him. So many miracles have happened in my life, which I’m sure are thanks to Chathan, and they are all proof of why I should be loyal to him.”

I too have grappled with this complex identity of Chathan. How can someone with such a mischievous personality be considered divine? Are gods not supposed to know what is ‘right’ and ‘wrong’? Should a god not protect his devotees like a child instead of inflicting harm when they miss a day of worship? Only later did I understand that these questions arise from a Western or Christian ideology of good versus evil or the father-child relationship between a god and a worshipper. While the idea is beautiful, it is not universal, as different cultures have diverse religious practices.

I guess, in Eastern cultures, the notions of good and evil are not as black and white. They exist on a spectrum. While it may seem amusing, this topic is worthy of study within the context of the religious culture and the film culture of Kerala and how both impact Malayalis’ beliefs.

Both my mother's and father's families hold different opinions about the deity, reflected in whether they worship him or not. I am fortunate to be in a position where I can observe both sides of this spectrum and experience all perspectives. And I intend to maintain a connection to both the inside and outside of the circle of worship. This duality allows me to approach the deity with a sense of both reverence and fear, recognising the complexity of human beliefs and the enduring power of faith.

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