



Painkulam Rama Chakyar as Ravana performing the lifting of the Kailasa mountain in Abhishekanatakam.

Kootiyattam

(A General Survey)

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The Kootiyattam¹ of Kerala is perhaps the only form of the ancient Sanskrit drama that survives in performance today. It has been kept alive in the temple theatres of Kerala (which are known as Koothampalams) by members of the Chakyar and Nambyar communities. The Kootiyattam has a continuous tradition extending for more than a thousand years. A close comparative study of the stage practice of this theatre, with the prescriptions given in detail in Bharata's *Natyashastra* and the references to the actual staging of Sanskrit plays found in later works like the *Kuttanimata*, reveals that the Kerala tradition of staging Sanskrit plays follows, on the whole, the procedure adopted in other parts of India in ancient times. At the same time, it

¹ *Kootiyattam* is also spelt as *Kutiyattam* or *Kudiyattam*.

points to various special features mostly developed in Kerala to suit the taste of the audiences there. A detailed analysis of the descriptive and historical aspects of the Kootiyattam, is, therefore, essential for an understanding of the ancient Sanskrit stage in India.

The history of the Sanskrit stage in Kerala goes back to at least the tenth century A.D. This is when King Kulashekhara Varman of Mahodayapura, the author of the two dramas *Subhadradhananjaya* and *Tapatisamvarana*, is said to have reformed the Sanskrit stage with the help of a Brahmin scholar, who was popularly known as Tolan, and may probably be identified as the author of the *Vyangya* commentaries on them. King Kulashekhara Varman's innovations included the introduction of the Malayalam language by the Vidushaka to explain the Sanskrit and Prakrit passages of the texts. The Vidushaka often used a macaronic Sanskrit-Malayalam, a mixed language called *Manipravala*. In the case of the Prakrit passages recited by him or by others in his presence, he used to give the Sanskrit *Chaya* (rendering) and then explain its meaning in Malayalam. He also added his own parodies or *Pratishlokas* of some of the verses recited by the hero in his presence. He often inserted *Chayashlokas* or parallel passages, referring to his own condition.

Another innovation was the humorous element which consisted of such extraneous matter as the parody on the *Purusharthas*. This formed part of the narration of the early life (*Nirvahana*) of the Vidushaka. The four *Purusharthas*, sanctified by tradition, are replaced by the four aims of existence of a corrupt society. These are described as *Asana* (food), *Vinoda* (enjoyment of sexual pleasures), *Vanchana* (deception) and *Rajaseva* (serving a king). The Vidushaka is the most prominent and the most popular figure in Kootiyattam and Koothu. In course of time he came to overshadow all the other characters in a play.

Didactic and cultural elements were gradually introduced; stories from the epics and Puranas were added—and sometimes even when they were quite irrelevant—so that the stage was used in an interesting manner as a vehicle for adult education and for the moral uplift of the people.

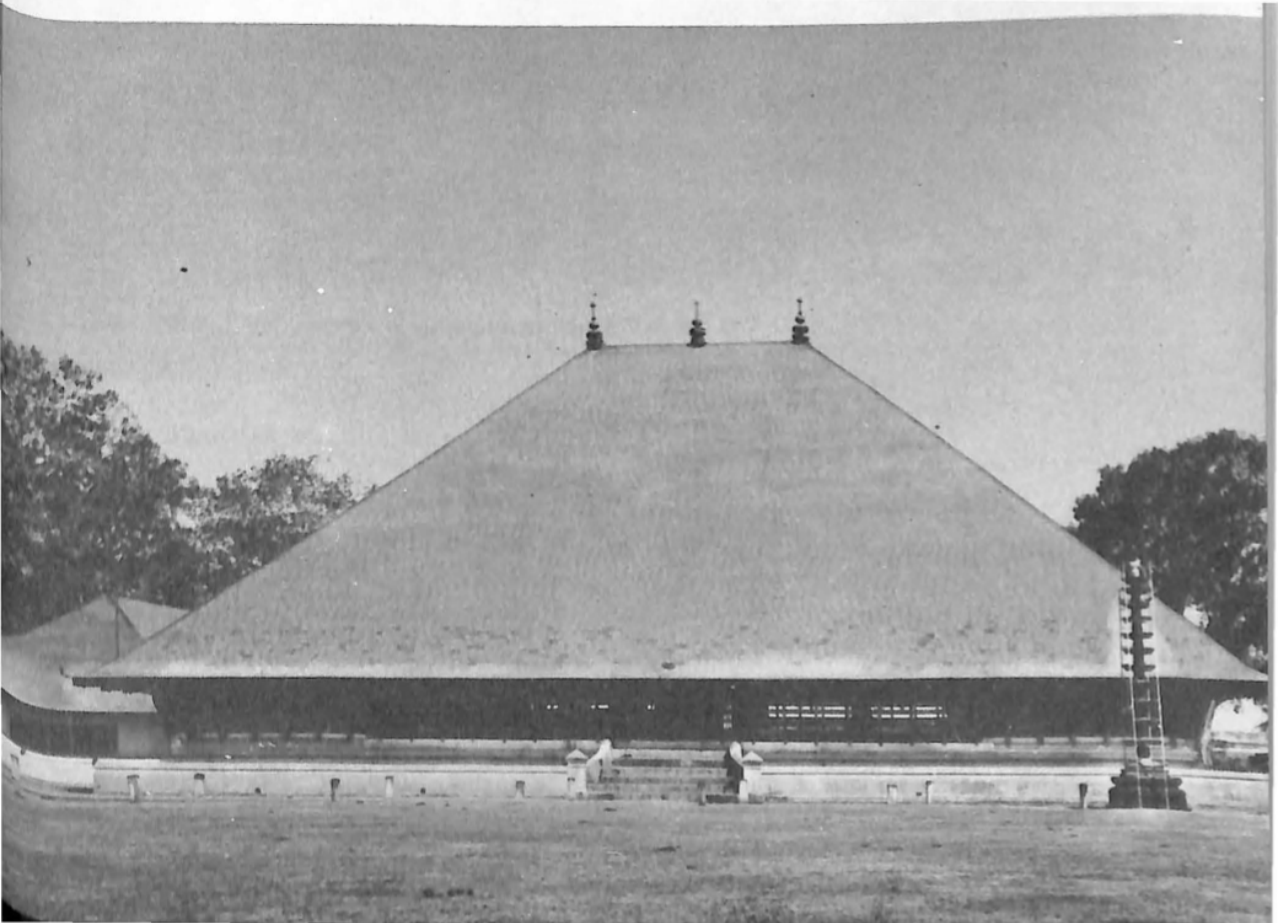
Thus in the *Mantraka* scene of the *Pratijnayaugandharayana* of Bhasa the Vidushaka is made to approach the mother of King Udayana and to console her by narrating the story of Rama. The Vidushaka expounded Puranic episodes, lacing the didactic element with humour, and making veiled references to contemporary problems. His role in a play developed as an independent temple art called Koothu; it included the exposition of Puranic stories without connecting them in any rigorous manner with a drama. The Koothu came to be performed in the temple theatres by the Chakyar dressed as the Vidushaka. This type of story-telling when it was performed outside the temple precincts by others came to be called *Pathaka*. Several Sanskrit texts were written by scholars like Melpputtur Narayana Bhatta for such expositions of Puranic stories.

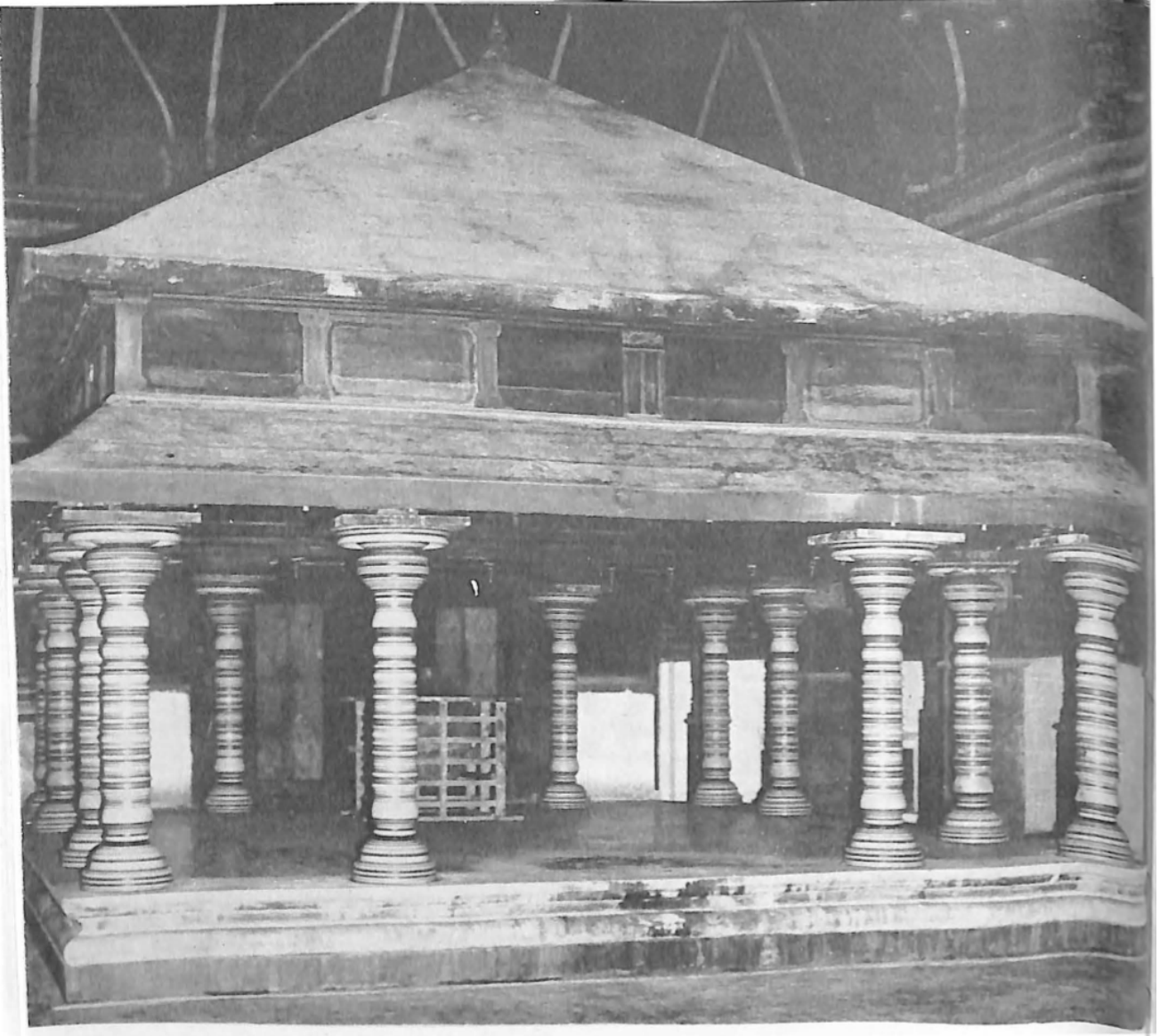
The Kootiyattam is a form of art restricted to the temple; it is performed only in the Koothampalams or theatres within the precincts of temples

and enacted by members of the Chakyar and Nambyar communities. The role of the hero or other male characters can be played only by a Chakyar. The women of the Chakyar community, who are called *Illottamma*, have nothing to do with the stage. The role of the heroine and other female characters is to be taken by the Nangyar, the women of the Nambyar community. The vocal music is also supplied by Nangyars, who keep the *tala* with the *Kuzhitala* cymbals. The Nambyar plays on the *Mizhavu* drum. He also acts as the *sutradhara* for the introductory *purappad* and narrates in brief (in Malayalam) the story which is to be enacted.

At a time only a single act from a drama is staged. The actual staging of a whole act lasts three to five nights; the introduction of characters (*Nirvahana*) and the preliminaries alone often take up twenty to thirty days. Of the popular scenes, *Mantraka* (Act Three of Bhasa's *Pratijnayaugandharayana*) is the most important and is depicted very elaborately. Shaktibhadra's *Ascharyachudamani*; *Subhadradhananjaya* and *Tapatisamvarana*, the two plays of Kulashekhara Varman; *Mattavilasa prahasana* by the Pallava king Mahendravikrama and some more plays ascribed to Bhasa like *Abhisheka*, *Pratima* and *Svapnavasavadatta* and Harsha's *Nagananda* are also in the Chakyar's

The Koothampalam theatre in Vatakkunnatha temple, Trichur.





The stage inside the Koothampalam, Trichur.

repertoire. Stage manuals for *Bhagavadajjukiya* are available. There is a tradition that *Shakuntala* used to be staged in former times.

Probably the all-India tradition of staging Sanskrit plays was revived by the Pallava kings of South India in the sixth and seventh centuries, and it spread to Kerala from there. The Kerala tradition says that King Kula-shekhara Varman revived and reformed the Sanskrit stage. This means that it must have been in existence even earlier. The terms *Koothu* (dance) and *Chakaiyan* (dancer) are found in the ancient Tamil classic *Cilappatikaram*; but it is not certain whether these had anything to do with the staging of Sanskrit plays.

Koothampalam

Koothampalam is the Malayalam name used for the theatre structures in the precincts of temples in Kerala where single acts of select Sanskrit plays are staged. It corresponds to the *natyamandapa* of Sanskrit texts. More than a dozen such theatres are still preserved in various temples; the present structures of the Koothampalams are not much older than three hundred years, but the tradition of staging goes back to much earlier times. The theatre at the Vatakkunnatha temple at Trichur is the largest. Most of the Koothampalams are rectangular; the interior stage structure within the auditorium is square in shape. Chengannoor had an oval-shaped theatre, but now only its base is extant. These theatres do not conform strictly to the directions found in the *Natyashastra*, but follow the main rules of construction laid down in the Sanskrit texts of Kerala like the *Tantrasamucchaya* (fifteenth century) of Narayana and the *Shilparatna* of Shrikumara (sixteenth century). Koothampalams still stand at the Vatakkunnatha temple at Trichur, the Koodalmanikya temple at Irinjalakkuda, the Shiva temple at Perumanam (in ruins), the temples at Guruvayur, Kottappadi, Tiruvegappura, Tirumoozhikkulam, Trippunittura, Ettumanoor, Kitangur, Arpukkara, Harippad, Neeleswaram, Talipparamba and Panniyur (in ruins). Inscriptional evidence is available for the existence in former times of theatres at Avittathoor and Tiruvanchikkulam. Where the temples did not have a Koothampalam, the Kootiyattam was allowed to be performed in *agrashala* halls. At the Triprayar Rama temple where there is no Koothampalam, the *Anguliyanka* scene from Shaktibhadra's *Ascharyachudamani* is staged in the *mukhamandapa* right in front of the main shrine.

The Koothampalam is located in front of the shrine on its right side. It belongs to the class of *Prasada* structure. Though the sizes differ, all the structures follow a similar pattern. The roof is an enormous, four-sided structure, rectangular in shape, and slopes downwards in a steep manner; it is supported on beams resting on rows of pillars. The outer roof is either copper-plated or tiled with decorative flat tiles. At the top there are three finials or *tazhikakkudams*.

Inside the large auditorium is the raised stage; it is usually square shaped. It has a roof of its own, supported by round pillars. The outer edge of the stage which faces the god of the temple is built in alignment with the middle finial; thus the stage projects into the auditorium. In front of the stage is the special portion reserved for the Brahmins. The roof covering the stage is an independent structure, not part of the roof of the auditorium, and helps in the effective projection of the sound from the stage. At the back of the stage is the green-room, connected to it by two doors. Between these two doors are placed two *mizhavus* or big drums, with raised seats for the drummers.

The stage is very simple. There are one or two stools meant as seats and used for other stage business. A curtain is brought in by two persons at the time of the first entry of the main characters. During a performance the stage is decorated with palm and plantain leaves, red cloth

and a cylindrical vessel (*para*) filled with rice. A huge lamp, about four feet high, made of bell metal is placed in front of the stage; it is lighted with oil and wicks, two wicks facing the actor and one facing the audience.

Stage Manuals

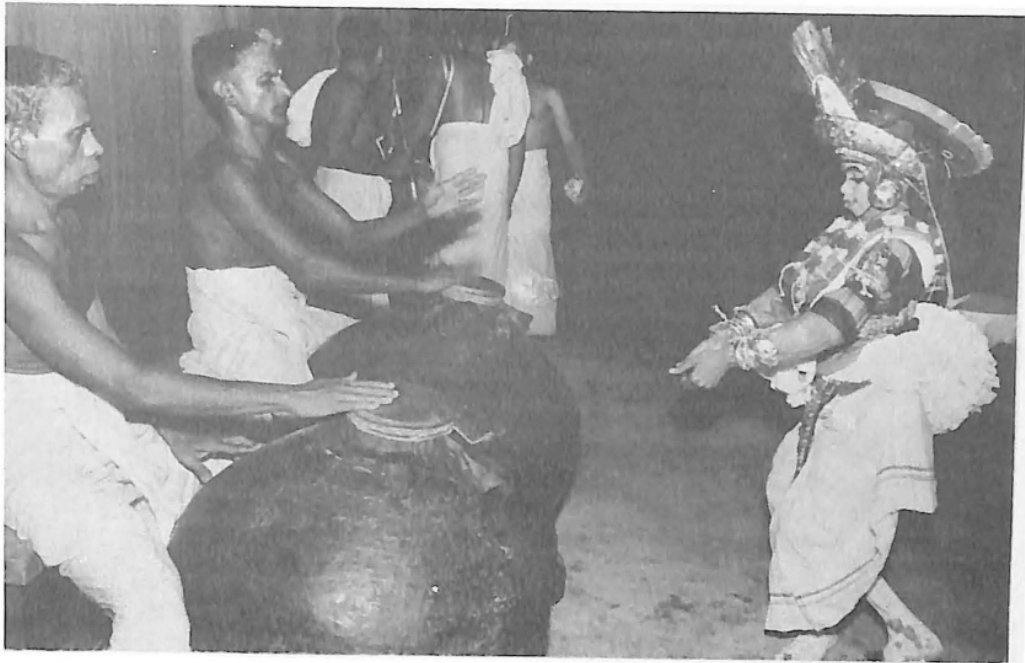
In addition to the continuous tradition of the method of staging handed down from generation to generation, there are actual stage manuals giving choreographic details and elaborate instructions regarding the staging of plays. These stage manuals are the *Kramadipika* and *Attaparakaram*. The former is written in Sanskrit or Malayalam and explains the procedure to be adopted for the staging of plays. It deals with the songs, dance-steps, *ragas* and various stage directions. The latter indicates acting methods, the meaning of passages in the text and is in the form of a continuous, moving story, enabling the actor to expound the text accurately. Besides, there is the text in Malayalam which is to be spoken by the Vidushaka; it explains the meanings of the Sanskrit passages spoken by the hero, and contains the matter which is added to produce humour. Some of the commentaries on Sanskrit dramas also contain much useful material for the actors. The story of the scenes which are to be enacted, is summarised in archaic, Malayalam sentences; this part is recited by the Nambyar at the beginning of the performance and is called *Nambyarute Tamil*; it is available for some of the select scenes, usually staged. There is a Sanskrit text called *Hastalakshana dipika*, giving the rules of hand poses; it is mainly based on Bharata's *Natyashastra*. It was prepared for the use of the Chakyars, and is used even today in the training of Kathakali actors. Another interesting work shedding light on the Kerala Sanskrit stage is a Sanskrit work called *Natankusa*. This work severely criticises the Kootiyattam for taking liberties with the text and for adding unnecessary and extraneous matter.

Actors

It is said that formerly there were eighteen Chakyar families; but now there are only about half a dozen families which preserve the tradition: (1) The Ammannoor Chakyar family at Irinjalakkuda, (2) The Koypa Chakyar family at Painkulam and also at Tirumoozhikkulam, (3) The Maniyoor Chakyar at Killikkurissimangalam in Lakkiddi, originally part of Talipparamba in North Kerala; (4) Kuttancheri Chakyar at Nalluvay, (5) Potiyil Chakyar and (6) Kitan-goor Chakyar. The late Cacchu Chakyar belonged to the Irinjalakkuda family; Padmashri Natyacharya Mani Madhava Chakyar belongs to the Maniyur family and Painkulam Rama Chakyar, now teaching at the Kerala Kala Mandalam, belongs to the Koypa family. Many of the Nambyar families are related to the Chakyar families through hypergamous matrimonial relationships.

Instrumental Music

The instruments used for the Kootiyattam include: (1) The *Mizhavu*. The two drums called *mizhavu* are of slightly varying sizes; they are two to three feet high, and are made of copper. The mouth is tightly covered with calf skin. Members of the Nambyar community sit facing the audience



Sthapana Sutradhara performing the Nityakriya. Two Mizhavu drums and the players.

on seats arranged near the top of the drum stand. They play on them with their hands: one of them keeps the *tala*, while the other plays the *vinyasas*, using both the palms and the fingers. For Koothu just one *mizhavu* is sufficient. (2) The *Kuzhithalam* or a pair of bronze cymbals is used for keeping the *tala*; it is used by the Nangyar who also chants the verses for the introductory *Nirvahana*, the *dhruva* songs recited at the time of the entrance and exit of characters. (3) The *Kuzhal* or *Kurumkuzhal*, a double reed pipe, is employed to suggest the rhythm or play the *jatis*, and indicate the proper tunes or produce a melodious refrain in the background. (4) The *Idakka* or 'a tunable, double-faced, pressure drum' is held by means of a piece of cloth hanging from the left shoulder of the standing drummer; the tension strings are manipulated by the left hand and the drumming is continued with a thin stick held in the right hand. This delicate and sensitive drum is also played in temples, and for the *Panchavadya* type of instrumental orchestra. (5) The auspicious *Shankha* or conch shell is blown when important personalities appear for the first time on the stage.

Abhinaya

The *abhinaya* for Kootiyattam is highly conventionalised and to a great extent follows the precepts of the *Natyashastra*. The *Purappadu* and the preliminary rites such as the dance sequences shed considerable light on the way the Prologue was performed in ancient Sanskrit dramas. The songs which invoke the deities, Ganapati, Saraswati and Shiva are known as *akkitta*. Then the Nambyar fetches sacred water from the green-room and

sprinkles it on the stage, reciting the *mangalashloka*. These preliminary rites last for one day. The introduction of the earlier life of the hero (prior to the incidents to be actually staged) is called *Nirvahana*; it is very elaborate in its scope and continues for a few days. These earlier portions are expanded or reduced to suit the actual circumstances. The actual Kootiyattam or combined action takes place on the last three nights.

There are four types of *abhinaya*:

(i) *Angika* is the technique of using hand poses and gestures and stage movement to represent ideas. It is mainly based on the teachings of the *Natyashastra*. For example, in the first act of *Subhadradhananjaya*, Arjuna saves the heroine without knowing who she is. Her beauty casts its spell on him. He says:

नवकुवलयधाम्नोरञ्जनस्निग्धमक्ष्णोः
भयचलधृति युग्मं केयमालोलयन्ती।
मुखपरिमललोमाद् भृङ्गदत्तानुयात्रा
शिथिलयति सुमद्रामुद्रितं मानसं मे ॥

The actor who plays Arjuna needs four hours to explain this verse through gestures. He gazes at Subhadra, describes her, beginning with the hair. He stops when he comes to the eyes, and recites this verse very slowly in the *raga* called *Arttan* indicating the meaning of each word through hand gesture. Then the gestures are repeated, but the verse is not recited. Not only the number and gender of words, but even the nature of the compounds is suggested through hand gestures. Then the verse is taken up the third time. This time it is the syntax, the *anvaya* which matters. He says the words, *iyam ka*, "What sort of a girl is she? What is her name? Who is her father?" His gestures indicate these queries. Then he stops. "Why should this bother me?" Then he goes on to the words *me manasam shithilayati* and again expounds it in detail till he comes to *Subhadramuditram*, when he assumes the posture of Subhadra and suggests how she enters his heart. Her eyes are beautified by collyrium, *anjanasnigdham*. To explain the idea, he enacts a story. The heroine calls her attendants to adorn her body. The entire procedure is described, from the combing of her hair to the tying of the anklets round her feet. But something has been forgotten—applying the collyrium to the eyes. The Chakyar becomes the heroine, her attendants and even Arjuna himself.

The *Angikabhinaya* consists not only in explaining the meanings of the text, but also in indicating the nature of the character whose role is played by the actor. Thus in *Abhishekanataka* as soon as Sugriva enters, he holds the tree-branches, shakes them, scratches his head, smells the tip of his tail to show that he is a monkey. After he has done this he assumes the posture of Sugriva, king of the monkeys. In Kootiyattam the actor has to confine himself to the space between his shoulders during the hand gestures. This is unlike what happens in Kathakali where the actor can stretch his arms to any length.

(ii) *Vachika* or *verbal* recitation. Here the actor himself slowly recites his text, and then uses the language of gesture in detail.



Mani Madhava Chakyar in Asokavanikanka in Ascharyachudamani.

There is no regular music in Kootiyattam but there are different modes of reciting the verses or even the prose passages; the modes depend on various factors, such as the type of the character who is reciting them, the nature of the situation described and the sentiments conveyed. These modes of recitation have different technical names such as *Indala*, *Tarkan*, *Veladhooli*. These are called *ragas*, even if these *ragas* have very little to do with the *ragas* of Indian music. Some of these like *Srikamaram*, *Poranir* and *Tarkan* are found in the *Panns* of ancient Tamil music; some like *Indalam*, *Srikanthi* are again preserved in modern Kathakali songs. It is very difficult

to identify and distinguish these Kootiyattam *ragas*; the modes of recitation have been handed down from teacher to student, without any precise theoretical definitions. However there are detailed instructions as to the usage of these recitation *ragas*: *Antari* is used for narration; *Veladhooli* is for shouting and indicates fear and perplexity; *Srikamara* suggests unexpected joy; *Tarkan* indicates anger; the use of *Veera Tarkan* denotes enthusiasm; *Kaisika* is for *hasya* and *bibhatsa*; *Poranir* is used in describing the rainy season, *Korakurinji* is used for the words of monkeys. *Indala* is the normal *raga* for the Vidushaka. Some correlations between *ragas* and *talas* are formulated in the stage manuals. In *Vachikabhinaya* the Vidushaka sometimes explains the significance of even the pure sounds of words uttered. In *Subhadradhananjaya*, the Vidushaka hears the words *Sakhe Kaudinya*. First he hears the sound *eee*; he says it is like the waves in the pond. Then *khe* which he thinks is like the croaking of frogs in a pond. He is reminded of his boyhood prank of wounding frogs and finally it strikes him that it is his friend Arjuna calling out to him. The hero gives prominence to those scenes where there is scope for *Angikabhinaya*; the Vidushaka to those where there is scope for *Vachikabhinaya*. He speaks his own lines and also those of the hero and explains them.

(iii) *Aharya* denotes costume and make-up. This is similar to that of Kathakali, but simpler. The *Chutti* (the lining made with rice flour paste) which is applied round the cheek and the chin is narrower, and the headgear is also smaller. Different types of make-up like *Pacca*, *Pazhukkua*, *Kari* and *Katti* are used. The magnanimous have the *Pazhukkua* make-up, with the face painted in a reddish colour. The haughty types like Ravana have the *Katti* make-up, with a round ball painted at the tip of the nose.

Formerly certain spectacular stage effects were achieved. In the Fourth Act of the *Nagananda*, thousands of strings were tied to the artificial wings of the actor playing Garuda and he used to slide down from above the stage space. The strings were manipulated by the Nambayar. In *Tapatisamvarna*, the river was depicted by thousands of strings kept tightly in a horizontal way and the idea of *ozhukal* (flowing) was suggested. The suicide scene in *Nagananda* with Malayavati trying to hang herself, or the sequence in *Ascharyachudamani* where Lakshman deforms Surpanakha were staged with an eye for realistic detail.

(iv) *Sattvika* is the representation of moods and the emotions. With the help of delicate movements of the eyes, brows, lips, and cheeks, but without any gestures of the hand, the actor is able to produce facial expressions which correspond to a particular mood. In this *Sattvikabhinaya* the Chakyar is supreme and has not been surpassed or even equalled by the Kathakali actors.

Since music and recitation are integral to the Kootiyattam, *talas* or rhythmic patterns play a very important part in the performance. The female musician, Nangyar, keeps the *tala* with the help of the *Kuzhitalam* cymbals. The drummers, seated at the back of the stage, behind the actor, and facing the *mizhavu* keep the *tala*; one of them merely keeps the *tala* and the other

plays the appropriate *jatis* or *vinyasas* for the various *talas* to give proper effect to the acting. Six different *talas* are generally used, depending on the *raga* (mode of recitation) employed. There are detailed rules prescribing particular *talas* for particular *ragas* and specific occasions.

1. *Ektala* of four beats (*matras*) is used for the *ragas Srikanthi, Thondu, Poranir, Kaisika, Indala, Bhinna Panchama* and *Dukkha Gandhara*. It is used also for *hasya* and *bibhatsa rasas* and for the *adbhuta rasa* of *dhirodatttha* characters.

2. *Dhruvatala* of fourteen beats is used for the *ragas Muddan, Tarkan* and *Korakurinji*, and in *adbhuta, bhayanaka, sambhoga shringara* (of *rakshasas*) and *vipralambha shringara* of *dhirodatttha* characters.

3. *Triputatala* of seven beats, used when *veladhooli* is the *raga* and for *bhayanaka rasa*. *Triputa* of slow tempo is used in *Ghattantari raga*; it is in a fast tempo in the case of *Srikamara* and *Paurali ragas*.

4. *Champatala* of eight beats is used for the instrumental orchestra before the start of the play.

5. *Thampatala* of ten beats is the same as *Jhampa* of Karnatic music.

6. *Atanta* of fourteen beats is used while repeating what another has said. For different types of dance pieces or modes of gait different *talas* have been prescribed.

Till very recently the Kootiyattam, being a religious art, was strictly confined to the precincts of the temples of Kerala. It was only in 1960 that the first public performance of the Kootiyattam outside the temple precincts was staged at Calicut before a select audience invited by All India Radio. A portion from Act One of the *Subhadradhananjaya* was staged by Paikulam Rama Chakyar and his party. I made a preliminary survey of Kootiyattam in 1960; this survey was published in the *Sanskrita Ranga Annual*, II. Other public performances of the Kootiyattam followed—at the Kalamandalam in 1962 arranged by Dr. Clifford Jones of the University of Pennsylvania; a show was arranged in Madras under the auspices of the *Sanskrita Ranga* in 1963, and in New Delhi under the auspices of the Sangeet Nataka Akademi and the Pederewski Foundation. It was Natyacharya Mani Madhava Chakyar and his party who gave the performances at Madras and at New Delhi. Enthusiastic encouragement was given to this activity by scholars like Dr. V. Raghavan. My paper on Kootiyattam was republished as a booklet by the Sangeet Nataka Akademi. The Madras University produced a M. Litt thesis on Kootiyattam and another doctoral thesis was written in Poona. In 1966 a seminar on Kootiyattam was arranged at Cheruthurutti; it was sponsored jointly by the Kerala Kalamandalam and the American Institute of Indian Studies, on the enthusiastic initiative of Dr. Clifford Jones, the well-known Western scholar of art and theatre history. Mani Madhava Chakyar has prepared a scholarly work in Malayalam on the theory and practice of the Kootiyattam, and it is to be published by the Kerala Kalamandalam, where

a department of Kootiyattam was started in 1967, with Painkulam Rama Chakyar as professor. Dr. Clifford Jones is now in India preparing a documentary film and a descriptive monograph on the technique and practice of this one surviving form of the classical Sanskrit-based dramatic tradition. The Kerala Kalamandalam and other scholars in the field are co-operating with him in this effort and it is to be hoped that more light will be shed on our ancient drama as a result of this awakening of interest in the subject.

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