

## KATHAKALI

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*The theatre of imagination*

*Kathakali is a luminous dance-drama and a classical pantomime which sustains exhilarating artistic aspects such as acting, music and rhythm.*

The word Kathakali means story-play. Elements of Kathakali are well perceivable in the ancient rituals of Hindu temples and others places of worship.

Various folk arts of Kerala like Theyyam, Padayani, Mudi yettu, etc. have influenced the origin and developments of Kathakali, apart from classical arts like Krishnanattam (a devotional dance-drama mainly performed at the precincts of Guruvayoor temple in Kerala) and Koodiyattam (the stylized Sanskrit theatre tradition which is more than 2000 years old). The influence of Kalaripayattu, the martial art of Kerala, is also discernible in the training exercises and movements of Kathakali.

During the 17th century, the Kottarakkara Thampuran (the ruler of the kingdom Kottarakkara) wrote eight plays on Sri RaIna and staged them in a new theatrical style by laming it as Ramanattam, duly inspired by Krishnanattam which depicted the story of Krishna in eight plays. {Attam in Malayalam means. The dance and the action packed performance, with unrefined singing of the librettos by the performers themselves, were improved upon by Vettathu Raja. This was substantially improved by Kottayath Thampuran of North Kerala (of the Pazhassi family in Kannur and not the town Kottayam in South Kerala) who adapted the stories of the Mahabharata (four plays) and refined the technique with subtle and slow movements, giving scope for 'rasabhinaya' and punctuating the abhinaya with kalasams (pure dance punctuation).

Basically Kathakali is a luminous dance-drama and a classical pantomime which sustains exhilarating artistic aspects such as acting, music and rhythm. To be a performer, one has to undergo strenuous physical training for eight to twelve years.

Kathakali is known for its acting style, the simplicity of the stage, limited accompanying instruments (only two percussion instrument called Chenda and Maddalam and the gong and the cymbals used by the vocalists) and the style of background singing.

The make-up and the costumes are highly artistic and complicated and time-consuming, and lend significance to the type of characters being portrayed. One can well notice the similarity between Kathakali and Yakshagana.

The characters of Kathakali are from mythology and epics, such as Ramayana, Mahabharata, Bhagavatha devas (from the upper world), humans (middle world) and the asuras (nether world). They are not mere individuals but a symbol of a broad personality types three gunas (qualities) as well 'satwa', 'rajas' and 'thamasa'. They are recognizable by their costumes and make-up. Broadly, they can be grouped into four

main classes: pacha (green), kathi (knife), tadi (beard) and minuku (radiant).

Pacha represents the divine type with the satwa qualities. Their faces are painted green, with a white decorative border called chutti. The Pandavas, Nala, Sri Rama, Lakshmana, Krishna and the like come under this type. pazhuppu (ripe) characters with their faces painted orange instead of green (like Shiva, Balabhadra, etc.) also fall under this category.

Kathi characters are arrogant having rajoguna. Even though they are evil, they have a high degree of valour in them. Their make-up is similar to pauha but with a knife- shaped red drawing on the cheek like a moustache and attractive white knobs on the tip of the nose and forehead. Ravana, Duryodhana, Keechaka, Narakasura and others are kathi types.

In tadi there are three distinct types: Chuvanna thadi (red beard) represents the vicious and vile characters like Dussasana, Bali, Baka, Sugreeva; Vella Thadi (white beard) is for characters like Hanuman and Karutha Thadi (black beard) denotes primitive beings like the forest dwellers and hunters. The characters representing the demoness are known as Kari (black).

The minukku (radiant) type generally represents gentleness and has spiritual qualities, distinct from the above three types. The female minukku characters are the heroines, maids and so on, and also the demoness (Kari) temporarily disguised as beautiful women to entice men. The male minukku characters are messengers, craftsmen, sages, brahmins, etc.

In addition to these, there are about 20 special types of characters like Jatayu and Hamsa (birds) Karakotaka (the serpent) and half-lion Narasimha whose make up is distinct.

Traditionally, a Kathakali performance lasted all night, starting around 8 p.m. But now, a seven to eight hour story is shortened into 3- 4 hours, sometimes even less. Because, of this, even in temple festivals where all night programmes are conducted, two to three stories are scheduled.

The orchestra consists of two drummers, the Chenda and Maddalam players who stand on the right side of the stage, and two singers who stand at the back. The main singer (ponnani) sings the story in Sanskritised Malayalam verse which is repeated by the supporting singer (sinkidi). The actor performs according to the verses with facial expressions, hand gesture and dance steps. He also uses his manodharma (power of imagination) by acting out some sights, incidents or the characters thoughts and feelings, where there won't be any vocal music.

To understand and appreciate Kathakali, one needs at least some knowledge of the technique as well as our mythology? However, it can be very enjoyable for any one with aesthetic sensibility, thanks to its spectacular costumes, dance pattern, abhinaya style and musical richness.

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