Chapter III.

THE KATHAKALI SCHOOL

Introduction:

Kathakali means a musical dance-drama or a story set to music. The present form of Kathakali can be traced back from the time of Baja Kottarakkara (1575-1650 A.D.). Its roots are even traced in the ritualistic pattern of the Vedic age. Sri Mohan Khokar is of the view that although Kathakali, as found in the present form, is an art not more than three to four hundred years old, its actual roots can be traced at least fifteen hundred years earlier. Kathakali is a dance-drama represented through gestures. It will be worthwhile to study all the types of dance-drama which were in existence in Kerala prior to the genesis of the Kathakali in its present form. In Kerala the earliest type of dance-drama of religious ritual dances, such as Tirayattam,

   Also see: Shanti Swarup, The Arts and Crafts of India and Pakistan, Page 3.


   However K.P. Padmanabhan Tampy in his article 'KATHAKALI' has observed that Kathakali came into existence in the first half of the 16th century.
Tiyattam, Sāstrakali and Ezhamattukali, the last two being folk-plays. The modern Kathākali has incorporated many characteristic features of those earlier forms of dance-dramas which once existed in Kerala.

Chakiar Koothu is a dance performed only by members of Chakiar caste, who are a class of hereditary temple-servants of Malabar. This particular type of dance was performed only inside the temples and only high class Hindus could witness it. It was thus a form of temple-dance. According to Mohan Khokar the earliest written reference of this dance is found in the Tamil epic Silappadikaram, composed by the Kerala Prince Ilango Adigal in the Second Century A.D. In Chakiar Koothu dance drama generally a story is presented on the stage with the help of expression and hand-gestures. The Chakiars have based this art on Bharata's Nātya Sāstra. The stories which are thus described are derived from Sanskrit Texts, epics and Purānas. Later on episodes from the works of Kālidāsa, Harsha and other Sanskrit dramatists were also adopted.

The performance is accompanied by music. The Chakiar Koothu dance drama can either be presented as a solo or by a group of dancers. When it is performed by a group of dancers it

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is known as Kudiyattam. In Kudiyattam both men and women participate and the abhinaya plays an important role in its presentation. Normally in Kudiyattam a full play is performed and it may take several days. The Kathākali art came into existence much later. What is in vague today is attributed to the genius of a ruler who evolved the new technique out of an old form called Krishnattam. It is an all night function performed in the open without a backdrop or stage accessories. The elaborate costume and the art of make-up, which is a speciality in Kathākali and a hereditary vocation in which experts spend hours on each face, firstly with solid foundation forming new contours of the face and secondly with the application of different colours; had also its beginning in the Kudiyattam art. When Chakiar Koothu is performed in solo and it is explained only in Malayalam language and Sanskrit is not used, such performance is known as 'Pathakam'. Thus these three types of dance-dramas - Chakiar Koothu, Kudiyattam, and Pathakam have contributed a great deal to modern Kathākali.

Apart from these temple-dances there were three other types of ritual dances in Kerala in very ancient times, known as Tirayattam, Tiyattam and Mutiyettu respectively.

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These dances were intended to eulogise goddess Bhagavati and they generally represented the triumph of the goddess over the demons. In these performances the dancers wear high head-dresses and masks on their faces which are painted in conventional designs. These elements were incorporated in the Krishnattam dance drama, through which Kathākali has finally been developed.

In this Krishna Attam dance-drama generally the entire story of Lord Krishna is played in the course of eight nights continuously. Elaborate make-up, costumes, ornaments and paints are used. Abhinaya and gestures play an important part in the Krishna Attam too. The Krishna Attam inspired another variety of dance-drama, known as Ramanattam, which took stories from the epic Rāmāyana. The Raja of Kottarakkara, the originator of modern Kathākali took his stories from the Rāmāyana. Today, Kathākali is a living art, an art which is admired in India and abroad.

Like any other classical school of dance, the Kathākali in its archaic form was propounded in the Bharata Nāṭya Śāstra. The Bharata Nāṭya developed the femininī Lasya and the erotic śringāra rasa. The Kathākali has emphasized the vira rasa or heroics, the chief feeling of which is Raudra or anger. This rich

1. Faubion Bowers, The Dance in India, page 69.
school of dancing developed and flourished in Kerala specially in the Malabar coast. Geographically Malabar is surrounded by the Arabian sea on the west and by the Western ghats on the east but in this region there has been a mixture of the Aryan and Dravidian cultures. Many foreign cultures also had their first influence on the soil of Malabar. The present Kathākali dance-drama is practised mainly by the Nayars, the fighting men of Malabar. Originally it was performed in Kali's temples, to which the Nayar warriors were attached. Miss Beryl de Zoete is of the view that there is some relation of the Kathākali with the Kāli temples. According to her the Nayar warriors were trained in a place called Kalari, which is still a gymnasium where the Nayars are turned into dancers.

Whatever be the connection between the Kāli temple and Kathākali, it is no doubt true that Kathākali dance-drama was based on the great epics, the Rāmāyana and the Mahābhārata. K.P. Padamanabhan Tampy thinks that Kathākali was originally called Ramanattam, because from the very beginning the story of Lord Rama was presented through this dance-drama. The Raja of Kottarakkara took for all his eight plays incidents of the Rāmāyana, right from the birth

1. The Other Mind, Study of Dance in South India, page 92.
of Sri Rāma to his coronation after killing Rāvana; and these episodes were graphically represented. Originally the Kathākali drew stories from the Rāmāyana, so much so that it was itself known as Ramanattam. The Raja of Kottarakkara, the great pioneer of Kathākali, also adopted the stories from the Rāmāyana. Kathākali, as it took its present form, was also known as Krishnattam (Krishna Play), a drama originated by the Zamorin of Calicut. The tradition says that Ramanattam came out as a reaction to a cultural insult offered by the Zamorin of Calicut to the Raja of Kottarakkara. It is said that the Raja made a demand for some dancers from the Zamorin of Calicut. The latter, however, refused this on the ground that there were no scholars at Kottarakkara who could appreciate the Krishnattam. This insult infuriated the Raja of Kottarakkara and he created a dance form, which he called Ramanattam and this name was later changed into Kathākali or Attakatha. Apart from these two earlier forms:

   Faubion Bowers, The Dance in India, page 69.
   Beryl de Zoete, The Other Mind, A Study of Dance in South India, page 91.
(Ramanattam and Krishnattam) of Kathākali, there were various other dance-forms in Kerala, performed in temples as well as outside, such as Chakiar Koothu, Kalyanakali, Mudiyattam, Koodiyattam, Yatrakali, Kolamthullal, Kalikettu, etc. It may, therefore, be admitted that Kathakali, as it is found in the present form, is a product of various dance-dramas found in Kerala from quite early times. Mohan Khokar holds the same view.

Kathākali is a dance form, usually performed by men and not women. The Tāṇḍava aspect, predominates in it, but it should be noted that Kerala has not neglected the Lasya aspect of the dance. The dance now a days practised by women in Kerala is called Mohini-Attam. Mohini is the name of Viṣṇu's voluptuous incarnation. In course of time this dance form (Mohini Attam) fell into disfavour, because it came to be practised largely by prostitutes in order to attract patrons. Attempts made to revive the Mohini Attam could not find favour with the people, because of its association with prostitutes. The endeavour of the poet Vallathol to revive it led to its total ban by

3. Faubion Bowers, The Dance in India, page 69.
the Maharaja of Cochin. It was in the middle of the present century that this ban was finally removed. Mohini-Attam gives prominence to the sensuous elements of the dance. In its technical structure it resembles a good deal the Bharata Nātyam. It combines in it the nritya and nritta elements of the dance. The music used in its performance is the classical Karnatic and the songs are in the Malyalam language. The dance can be presented anywhere and at any time. The costume and make-up are simple and the ornaments and the clothes are those traditionally used by Kerala women.

Originally the Kathākali was just a religious dance-drama, confined within the precincts of temples. As such, it could not be witnessed or performed by members of the low castes. Gradually with the secularisation of this dance-drama, the limitation was removed. At present the Kathākali is performed on the stage and can be witnessed by all grades of people. But this dance is performed only by the traditional dancers of this art. When the Kathākali programme was to be performed, immediately after sun-set, there used to be a loud drumming in the village indicating that the Kathākali dance-drama would be held on that night.

Since Kathākali is mainly a dance-drama, the participants have to prepare themselves for their respective roles. The costumes and make-up, though old fashioned and queer, are none the less impressive and contribute to the dignity of the performers. Some critics have observed that a distinct Muslim influence is noted in the costume and make-up of the female characters. It takes about three to five hours in completing this cumbersome make-up. An actor has to tie at least eighty knots in the process of dressing. In Kathākali, the make-up plays the most vital part than in any other dance form. A spectator who is well versed in this dance form, can easily make out the role of a particular artist in the drama only by observing his make-up.

The characters in the Kathākali portray various good or evil force in the drama. We notice that there are three broad categories of forces or āyugas. The first is the Sāttvika, i.e. goodness. It is a quality found in gods or in the highest type of a hero, such as Dharmarāja Yudhisthira or among the Rishis or Brahmanas. Hanumāna,


2. Beryl de Soete, The Other Mind, A Study of Dance in South India, page 111.
despite his fantastic disguise of a monkey, belongs to the Sāttvika order. When an actor portrays any character of Sāttvika order, his make-up is of a distinctive type. Generally the front part of his face is painted with green colour and a broad white ridge of rice and lime runs over the lower jaw and goes upto the head touching the head-dress on the forehead. This type of painting is used for the hero of the play or for such characters as the five Pāṇḍavas, Indra, Nala, Rāma, Krishna and other noble personages.

The second guna is Rajas (passion). Heroes of passionate nature belong to this category, such as Bhima or Duryodhana. In their make-up their physical features are enhanced, for example large halos are made around their heads. Normally red paint is applied round the nose upto the forehead and over the eye-brows. The rest of the face is again painted with green. This type of make-up generally represents a powerful and fierce character. Rāvana, the demon king of Lanka, belongs to this category.

The third guna is 'Tamas', which symbolises

darkness. The character is terrifying and destructive. The Kathākali demon looks most formidable and fearful. He strikes terror into the minds of youngsters with his terrifying make-up. The characters, who play their role of this force are generally painted with black make-up, for example the character of Bali. Barbaric forest-hunters are represented by the black-beard make-up. When a character represents terrifying and destructive element, the upper part of his face is painted black and the lower one with the red along with a red beard. The female demon characters (e.g. Śūrpanakhā or Rūtanā) are painted on the face with the black colour and their lips are also painted black.

Such characters as the rishis, messengers and the minor ones are painted in the light yellow or the buff colour. The character of Nārada, Parasurāma and Viswamītra belong to this category. There are, however, a few special styles of make-up which are adopted for particular roles, such as the peculiar make-up of Nrisimhāvatāra of Viśnu, the lion type make-up of Bhima and the mutilated make-up (with ears and nose cut-off) of Śūrpanakhā. Apart from these paintings

on the faces of participants, there is a distinct type of head-dress and ornaments for each type of character. Since Kathākali dance-drama is essentially performed by male dancers, no female takes part in it. All female characters are represented by males, who have their make-up like that of females to suit their roles. These characters have their costumes of the most ordinary kind.  

Since Kathākali is an expressive dance-drama, every character expresses himself in 'mudras', to which life is given by appropriate expression on the face. At the end of each conversation there is a bit of marching about and dancing, known as 'Kalasa'. That is why Kathākali has been described as 'drisya kavya'. It is a poem interpreted through abhinaya (acting) and nritham (dance). It is the only performance which combines music, acting, gesture, language and dance into one so as to make each element an essential ingredient of the whole performance. It combines in itself all the three fundamental aspects of Indian dances namely nritya, nritta and nātya. But abhinaya or expression is the backbone of


Kathākali. The singers in their beautiful verses explain what is happening and the actors with their gestures and codified movements of the hands, known as 'Hasta' or 'Mudra' interpret the musical dialogues. They have, therefore, all the different movements of the body as given in the Nātya Śāstra and there is hardly any actor who can beat the expressions of a Kathākali dancer. These gestures can be grouped into the following four categories:

I. **ANGIKABHINAYA**:

   The expression of the bhāva by using various parts of the body (angas).

II. **VACHIKABHINAYA**:

   The expression of the bhāva by slokas and padas.

III. **AHARYABHINAYA**:

   The expression of the bhāva with the aid of costumes, ornaments and make-up.

IV. **SATVIKABHINAYA**:

   The expression of the different mental states known as 'Manodharmam'. Psychic conditions are represented in this category such as trembling, perspiration, tears, change of voice, fainting etc.

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Angikābhinaṇaya is the most important in the Kathākali dance. Many exercises are prescribed for the dancer to acquire the required flexibility of the body and the gracefulness of the movement in order to achieve mastery in this aspect. A trained Kathākali dancer is normally required to know a minimum of at least 500 Mudras. Each deity who is depicted in the Kathākali dance-drama has his or her own gestures, symbols and functions expressed through Mudras. Partly because of the changes in language and partly because of the change in religion, Mudras have been confined to a few sets of hand-movements only in the Kathākali dance outside Malabar. The abhinaya of Kathākali was codified as late as the first part of the 19th century and that is why it indicates some marked deviations from ancient texts.

Mudras or gestures have been divided into three categories in the Kathākali dance.

I. PRĀKRITIKĀ (natural):

Natural expression of any particular mood or idea.

II. PRATIRŪPĪ:

Imitation of any feature.

III. PRASĀRITA:

Expression of any kind of feeling, such as worship or donation.

1. Faubion Bowers, The Dance in India, page 81.
2. Ibid., page 84.
All these three categories of mudras are given effect to by various limbs of the body. Gestures expressed by the head consist in the movement of eyes, eye-brows, lips, teeth, neck, etc. Movements of legs, waist and chest combine to give effect to these expressions or mudras by the body. Fingers play a vital part in Mudras.

It is apt to mention once again that gestures portray quite a close relation to a man's inner thought and the emotions to be expressed. The arch of a brow, the glance of any eye, the throb of a cheek, a sharp turn of the neck, a shake of the hand - all these quickly and vividly portray thoughts and emotions far beyond the reach of words. Actions with the help of gesture of the face, limb and hands are able to illustrate the beautiful thoughts expressed in the literature of a drama, which is performed in the Kathākali. In the Kathākali dance-drama the psychological elements of action are brought to the fore-front through gestures and the elements of song and music are not so dominant in this dance-drama. The technical knowledge required for these expressions is absolutely necessary for a Kathākali dancer and such knowledge is also necessary even for a spectator. Thus

where an actor signifies a mountain, a lion, deer, a serpent, a king or a beautiful maiden, he will readily subject himself to a hallucination and we are shown the same feelings as we would experience on seeing these objects in life; the feeling of the actor are naturally reflected in our own minds.

Each dance gesture is accompanied with an aesthetic sentiment (Rasa) and it is performed under a particular aesthetic emotion (Bhāva). Bharata in his Nātya Śāstra has mentioned eight types of Rasas. Abhinava Gupta, who has commented on Bharata's Nātya Śāstra, has added one more, thus making the number nine. Sāmrājadeva has also adopted Abhinava Gupta's nine types of Rasas. The following are the nine types:

1. ŚRĪNĪVARA
2. ḤĀSYA.
3. KARUNA.
4. RUDRA
5. BHAYANAKA.
6. VīRA
7. VIHATSA.
8. ABHUTA.
9. SĀNTA.

I. **SRINGĀRA**:
The principal mood is love. It reflects feelings associated with sex and the erotic sentiments are expressed by the movements of the eye-brows, eyes, lips and cheeks. The Śringāra rasa predominates in Lasya.

II. **HASYA**:
The principal mood is hāsa (laughter). It is used in expressing laughable gestures. Usually it is performed with open eyes, raised eye-brows and smiles. It is often used to ridicule or contempt some character. The neck and head are also shaken in a jerking manner.

III. **KARUNA**:
The principal mood is grief (Śoka). It is used to express pathos by dropping the eyes down without effort with cheeks dragged down and neck turned to the right and left slowly with pale face.

IV. **HUDRA**:
The principal mood is Krodha (furiousness or wrath). It is an expression of excessive anger combined with furiousness. The eyes are wide open, giving fiery and piercing look, the cheeks through and the teeth rub each other.
V. **BHAYANAKA**:  
The principal mood is fright (bhaya). It is represented by constantly moving the eye-balls on sides, while keeping the eyes wide open, nostrils widened and by trembling of the cheeks with a pale face.

VI. **VĪRA**:  
The principal mood is Utsāha (courage). It is expressed to denote heroic deeds. The expressions are: a forward powerful look, wide open eyes and raised eye-brows, neck and face are held erect with a red face.

VII. **VIBHATSA**:  
The principal mood is unbearable attitude, i.e., disgustful expression, eyes and eye-brows are contracted, nose shrunk bringing the neck down-wards.

VIII. **ADbhUTA**:  
The principal mood is surprise. It exhibits the sense of wonder, raising both the eye-brows gracefully, looking gradually forward, cheeks and neck slightly forward with a gladdened face.

IX. **ŚANTA**:  
The principal mood is calmness (Sāmya-mana). In the original text of Bharata, this Rasa has no place because calmness has nothing to do in a lively dance or acting. However the Kathākali school of dancing has kept
this rasa alive today. It is expressed through half-closing eye-lids, by the head and neck in natural position and expression of meditation on the face.

These are the nine principal rasas which express nine main ideas or sentiments. These rasas are also expressed through bhavas (emotions), which may also be classified in the same order as rasas. Mention has already been made of the four broad categories of bhavas, namely angikabhinaya, vachikabhinaya, aharyabhinaya and satvikabhinaya.

There is thus a mingling of various emotions to produce a particular sentiment or rasa. The dancer absorbs himself in characterising or representing the real thought of man's imagination, which has to be expressed not by words alone, but by gestures or mudras.

**MUSIC:**

Although Kathākali is primarily an abhinaya form of dance-drama and it emphasises hand-gestures and expressions, nevertheless the music and orchestra play an important part in its performance. The expressions and hand-gestures only translate the ideas contained in the song, which accompanies the dance. It may be said that

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the song and music provide the basic material which is interpreted on the stage through abhinaya. The story adopted for a Kathākali performance is rendered as a song bound in tāla or rhythm and the music is presented in specific rāgas. Thus, a knowledge of the rāgas and tālas is essential for one who plays music in Kathākali performance. The rāgas popular in the Kathākali performance are based in the Tamil music and are sung in the Sopāna style. This style of music is famous for its slow tempo. As Kathākali dance-drama is mainly abhinaya, singing in a fast tempo is not desirable either. However, a fast tempo may be adopted when battle scenes, etc. are described. A Kathākali musician does not indulge in musical acrobatics. Preserving the broad features of the rāgas and adhering meticulously to the tālas, the musicians sing the songs in such a manner as to give the actors full scope for their abhinaya. Generally two persons accompany in the singing, out of whom one is the main singer, known as 'Ponani' and the other is minor accompanist known as 'Sinkidi'. Both are experts in their art and they accompany the whole performance of the Kathākali dance-drama.

It is to be noted that no stringed or wind

instruments are used in the music. The most important instrument used is a large drum called 'Chenda', which is beaten on one side by stick. There is another type of drum used in the Kathākali dance, known as 'Maddalam', played on both sides with the hands. A pair of metal 'Cymbals' is also used to beat the tāla. These instruments bring out one distinguishing feature of the Kathākali music viz. that the tāla is the most important element in this dance-drama. The musicians are required to sing for the whole of the night and they beat the drum throughout the performance of Kathākali dance-drama. The fascinated spectator, attending a Kathākali performance, is apt to be carried away by the abhinaya, the exhuberance and vitality of the dances, the colourful costumes and the weird make-up, and he is liable to ignore the attractions of the music which is an integral, yet unobtrusive, part of the magnificent dance-drama. The Kathākali music indeed deserves a much close attention than has so far been bestowed upon it.

OTTAN THULLAL:

As has been observed earlier, a Kathākali performance requires a great deal of preparation in make-up, dresses, stage, etc. This necessarily implies that a Kathākali dance performance is a costly affair. As such it is not a dance-drama which can be staged by poor people. Ottan Thullal can best be described at the outset
as a poor man's Kathākali. In this type of dance-drama there is no costly make-up or dress or stage, but everything is simple and can be managed even by ordinary people. Its stories are not based on Sanskrit texts but merely narrate events of everyday life and the language used is not Sanskrit but Malayalam. Generally three dancers participate in performance of an Ottan Thullal. Out of these one is the chief dancer and he sings the song in Malayalam and then explains the meaning of the line with the help of expression and hand gestures. As the song develops, the singing part is taken up by the other two accompanist dancers on the stage and the chief dancer concentrates on expressions and gestures. The main dancer presents best make-up and the other two only have ordinary make-ups. This performance is mainly rendered by Kunjan Nambiar of Kerala and it is merely a crude derivative from traditional Kathākali of Kerala. It was performed with the sole purpose to give entertainment to the poor without spending huge money on costume, make-up, etc. As in Kathākali, an Ottan Thullal is also accompanied in music by a small drum and metal Cymbals which beat the tāla. Although Ottan Thullal is not as popular in Kerala as Kathākali, it is still performed in some parts of Kerala today. Also, because of its simplicity of presentation
and lack of the 'other worldliness', it has been relatively more popular and it has, therefore, come to be known as 'the poor man's Kathākali'.

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