

Kathakali- The Mystic Dance of Kerala

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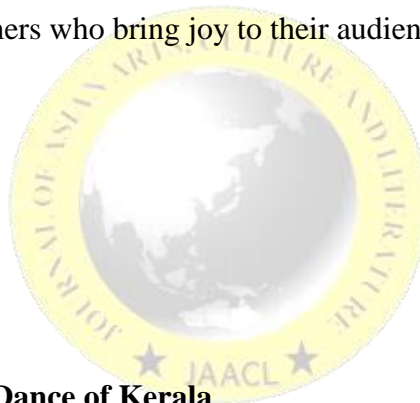
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Abstract

Kathakali, the unique musical dance drama of Kerala is inspired by epic, Hindu puranic literature. Its themes are superbly enacted at night on a bare stage, devoid of all props save a great oil lamp. Kathakali is famous for the spectacular costumes, colourful facial make up, resplendent head gear and the splendid jewellery of its characters. Kathakali artistes with their supple bodies, expressive faces and deep understanding of poetry and mythology are truly inspired performers who bring joy to their audience.

Keywords

Kerala, Dance, Kathakali



Kathakali - the Mystic Dance of Kerala

Of all the traditional art forms of Kerala, Kathakali is undoubtedly the most impressive and best known. This magnificent dance drama draws inspiration from the great mass of epic and puranic literature available in Hinduism, and Kathakali stories which enact ancient myths, are always about mighty Gods and Goddesses, kings and rishis, and demons and celestial maidens. The themes are timeless legends that take us back over aeons of time, and portray a surreal world where good and evil, light and darkness wage a titanic battle.

Kathakali dramas are never staged enacted by daylight. The shades of night are the ideal setting for the mythological heroes, demons and devas from another world. In that eerie,

mysterious setting, they take on a life of their own and heighten the sense of the supernatural and mysterious, which is such an integral part of Kathakali. The Kathakali stage is always bare, completely devoid of any scenery or stage sets. There is never any background, for the stage symbolises the world that has come into being from the dark void, by the primal act of the Creator.

A great brass oil lamp with two wicks is the only adornment on the stage. The thick wick turned towards the stage symbolises the sun, and the thinner one, facing the audience, the moon. This tall massive lamp, fed with an abundance of coconut oil, is also the only lighting on the stage, and it creates a small magic sphere of light that builds up the atmosphere of the drama. The dancing flame of the lamp, leaping high sometimes, flickering and fluttering at others, and casting deep shadows around, heightens the dramatic effect in a way that no electric bulb ever can.

The Kathakali actors generally have a good literary background, and a capacity to appreciate poetry and mythology. Since it is a mimetic art, with the body as the sole means of expression, every actor's body has to be tuned to become a perfect medium for his art. First it is prepared by a rigorous course of physical exercises, and a daily massage with medicated, herbal oils which ensure suppleness, and light, buoyant, and fluid movements. Eyes, brows, chin, lips, and neck have separate exercises for the numerous facial expressions. Unlike other dancers, and actors the Kathakali artist is not bothered much about his outward appearance. A few wrinkles, or a little flab on his waist doesn't bother him as they will all be concealed under his costume. What matters to him is the ability to retain his suppleness, and the vibrant spirit that guides his skill.

Kathakali dramas are poetic, musical dramas, and they are divided into ‘slokas’ or verses, which narrate the story, and ‘padams’ or songs embody the dialogue of the characters. They are sung in a slow, sonorous style called ‘sopana’ by two musicians who stand at the back of the stage. The leading singer, the ‘Ponani’, is the most important person in the drama, since he is not only the main narrator but also the director of the performance. He chooses the actors who will play the various parts, and regulates the pace of the performance, by keeping time on the ‘Chengala’, a thick gong of bell metal. His assistant, the ‘Sankiti’, supports the rhythm with a pair of cymbals, and relieves the ‘Ponani’, by repeating the verses wherever the actors are found to be lagging behind. Instrumental music to the drama is provided by drums- the ‘chenda’, and the ‘maddala’. The ‘maddala’ is a large mridangam, and the ‘chenda’, a cylindrical drum, played on both sides simultaneously by the palms and fingers, which is peculiar to Kerala. The two loud drums yield varying tones of spirited sound, and create a charged atmosphere as they rise to a crescendo, and accentuate the action on stage.

Kathakali is best known for the spectacular costumes and facial make-up, resplendant head gear, and splendid jewellery of its characters. The symbolic facial paint of each actor, which may take up to five hours to apply, creates a distinct and striking ‘character’. Colour is ground into a fine paste by the addition of coconut oil, and the colors used are white, green, vermilion, red, black, and yellow.



Image 1: Kathakali Performer



Image 2: Kathakali Facial Make-up-1

The colors are deep and radiant, and glisten on the skin. Each character has his own facial pattern determined by tradition. Green represents heroism, valour and excellence, and heroes like Krishna, and Arjuna come under this category. For depraved characters like Duryodhana, black will be predominant on the face. A sage will have a yellow face, and a passionate character, a deep red visage. Protruberances of a white composition of lime and powdered rice, called ‘cutti’ are first built up on the face of the actor, and in the case of an evil character, a round knob is put at the end of the nose, and spikes on the brow. In the case of heroes and avatars, a ribbed, beard like fringe starting at the ears is passed under the chin, and this frames the face, and makes it a stage to display changing emotions.



Image 3: Kathakali Costume

The most noticeable part of the costume of Kathakali actors is the enormous, billowing, circular skirt. This ample skirt, although appearing cumbersome, imparts ceremonious grace and majesty to the characters with its rhythmic sway, and gives balance to the oversized figures whose heads are crowned with heavy headgear. The body and arms of the actors are covered in a tight-fitting jacket of red. Red and white scarves glide around the neck to the waist, and together with the streaming hair of the 'character', add to the special effect.

The rich, gilded headgear which completes the make-up sits like a splendid crown on the head of the superhuman character, into which each actor is transformed. This headgear, generally made of light wood, is a flamboyant crown of superimposed domes, with an enormous, colorful halo like disc at the back. The final touch to the Kathakali actors make up, is to insert under the eyelids, the seeds of a solanaceous plant which produce reddening

of the eyeballs. In the flickering lamplight, these flaming, crimson eyes serve to enhance the fearsomeness of the character.



Image 4: Kathakali Facial Make-up-2



Image 5: Kathakali Dance

Kathakali costumes are indeed fantastic, and legend has it that Kalingat Nambutiri, the author of many Kathakali dramas was unable to decide how to dress his characters. One night he escaped all alone to the seashore, where he sat in deep contemplation, and prayed to God for inspiration. Looking out over the waves, he saw the forms of the Gods and Goddesses, demons and other characters appear over the waves from the waist upwards. The Kathakali characters are modelled on this divine vision. They are the forms in which they were revealed to human eyes, and the practise of draping all characters in the billowing, wavy skirt symbolizes the foamy, heaving sea surface over which all forms appeared. In fact, Kathakali relies heavily on the imagery of the sea, which runs through the entire drama. Rhythm remains predominant all through, and like the ceaseless waves of the sea, it surges forward, sometimes gentle, sometimes turbulent and rising.

Although Kathakali is a most entertaining form of dance, it is conducted like a ritual, and everything connected with it has religious significance. 'Sri Porkkali', or Durga is the patron saint of Kathakali, and the actors believe in the presence of the deity in the green room, while they get ready to perform. Actors know that theirs is a sacred calling, and they believe that they are only vehicles to portray the sacred sport of the Gods. In certain temples, Kathakali dramas were enacted at the expense of worshippers, as a devotional offering. At a certain temple at Camprakulangara, near Palghat, the deity is known to be very fond of Kathakali. No troupe passes this village without staging a play as an offering- failure to do so would bring bad luck and misery to those who defy this sacred convention.

When the performance takes place, the doors of the inner shrine, generally closed at night are kept open. The great Host is present at the show.

In Kathakali, the concentration of the actors is so intense, that they, the worshippers, and the celestial characters they represent, or the worshipped, often become one. At the temple at Tiru-vilva-mala, near Cochin, where the presiding deity is Lord Rama, episodes from the Ramayana are the favourite plays enacted. Once when the Khara vadha , or the slaying of the demon Khara by Rama was being enacted, Khara burst onto the stage sneering out a loud and provocative challenge to Rama. He mocked and boasted of his strength, and in a furious rage he raised fearful cries of wrath. The atmosphere was electric, as the dreaded Asura towered over the stage, and roared out a challenge “You worm! Do you dare to do battle with me?” The actor was no longer a mortal playing a part - he had become Khara himself! The audience cowered in fearful expectancy, and then suddenly the doors of the inner shrine of the temple flew open. A blazing column of flame surged out, blinding everyone for a moment. When the audience recovered from their shock, Khara was gone forever.

It is incidents such as this, of which there are many in Kerala, that make the Kathakali drama such a mystical, and magical spectacle. For to watch a dance drama where the characters have come from the heavens, or the nether world, is truly an awesome experience.

Acknowledgement

Images from various sources in public domain on internet

About the Author

Ms. Santhini Govindan is a widely published, award-winning author of children's literature in English. She has written more than fifty books for children, and has received two fellowships from the Government of India for research projects connected to Children's Literature in India.

