

PART ONE



**kathakali
in a
nutshell**

Introduction

IN THE SOUTH-WEST corner of India lies the State of Kerala, comprised of the erstwhile princely States of Travancore and Cochin in the South and Malabar District of Madras State in the North. It is a beautiful part of the country, with its palm-fringed beaches, bright green paddy fields, endless coconut groves, backwaters, wide rivers and lush hills. It is one of the smallest States in India, but it has the highest density of population, for within its 15,000 square miles live over 21 million people, 85% of them in small villages. 61% of the population are Hindus, 21% Christians and 18% Muslims, and over the centuries they have lived side by side in perfect harmony. They speak Malayalam, a Dravidian language which has a high percentage of words derived from Sanskrit.

From this State comes that unique art form called Kathakali. Although literally it means 'story-play' it is far more than that, and it has at various times been likened to a ballet, a miracle play, a dance-drama, an opera and a pantomime. Yet it is none of these.

History

ELEMENTS of the art of Kathakali are discernible in the ancient ritual plays of Hindu temples and various dance forms that are believed to have been gradually developed in Kerala from as early as the 2nd century until the end of the 16th century. Many of its characteristics are very much older than its literature as they are a continuation of older traditions, but these did not crystallise until the 17th century when the Rajah of Kottarakkara, a small principality in central Travancore, wrote plays based on the Hindu epic Ramayana in Sanskritized Malayalam which could be understood by ordinary people; hitherto the stories had been enacted in pure Sanskrit, which was known only to the learned few.

Thus did Kathakali as an individual style of dance-drama emerge as a 'people's theatre' from the traditional dances of the past. The plays were performed by the Rajah's own company of actors not only in temples and courts but from village to village and house to house. The new art form (called '*Ramanattam*') soon became very popular all over the Malayalam-speaking area. The feudal chieftains of Malabar (as the area was then called) began to vie with one another in their efforts to produce the best Kathakali troupes, and this competition contributed to the rapid development of the art in a very short period. One important result of this development was the composition by the Rajah of Kottayam, in North Malabar, of four plays in verse based on stories from the more colourful Hindu epic, Mahabharata. These are regarded by many connoisseurs as the best examples of Kathakali literature.

Kathakali as we now see it therefore dates back to about the time that Shakespeare was writing his plays. The performances given in Malabar at that time by troupes of actors who were formed by and enjoyed the patronage of the local Rajahs and other noblemen (especially the Namboodiris, or Brahmins of Malabar) must in many ways have been similar to the Masques which were in vogue in England in the 16th and 17th centuries, in which masked performers acted and danced, developing into a form of drama with music. Since then Kathakali has passed through many stages of improvement in make-up and costume, dance forms and acting techniques.

Training

KATHAKALI is performed by men who in their youth have undergone an intensive course of physical training and a long period of instruction in *abhinaya* (acting) and *nritta* (dancing). The former is the representation of emotions and moods by expressions of the face supplemented by *mudras*, the descriptive and symbolic movement of the hands and fingers in a particular manner to signify an object or action. The Kathakali actor uses *mudras* in place of the spoken word.

To-day there are a number of Kathakali training schools in India. The main one is located at Cheruthuruthy, 65 miles North of Cochin, where in 1930 the Malayalam poet Vallathol Narayana Menon founded the Kerala Kalamandalam (or Academy of Arts) with a view to saving Kathakali from extinction, for it was at that time a dying art. The Kalamandalam, which is now a Government institution, turns out five or six trained actors and two or three trained drummers and singers every year, after they have undergone a rigorous course which starts at the age of thirteen and goes on for six years.

At the end of each year of his training the student has to pass a proficiency test, and only those who pass it are allowed to continue the next year of intensive training. In this way only the strongest in physical fitness and acting ability eventually turn out as Kathakali actors fit to perform in public. Once an actor or musician has completed his course, he receives a Diploma and is entitled to add the word 'Kalamandalam' before his name, an honour which is much sought after by Kathakali artistes.

The physical training which a Kathakali student has to undergo is very strenuous. In the cooler months of the monsoon season he has a daily session of eye exercises and gymnastics

from 3 a.m. to 7.30 a.m. which ends up with an oil massage. This is a special feature of the training in which the teacher, holding to a bar, massages the student with his feet and toes, working gingelly oil into every joint and muscle. The process is painful, but it does create the required fitness and flexibility of body that is demanded by the incredibly exacting tradition of the Kathakali stage.

The early morning exercises are followed by the main classes in which the stories of the plays are rehearsed. These go on from 8.30 until mid-day. After a rest in the afternoon, there are a further two hours of work in the evening, including lessons in the art of make-up once a week. After the monsoon the schedule is less strenuous, but in addition to his training in Kathakali, time has to be found for the student to be instructed in Malayalam and Sanskrit literature and other subjects, for by opting to become a Kathakali actor the student is denied the opportunity of a normal education. This is a serious disadvantage to him if, at the end of his training, he is unable to get regular work as an actor, which is often the case these days. In every twelve months the student gets a holiday for only two months—April and May, when the weather is at its hottest.

The Characters

KATHAKALI characters represent the mythological beings of the three worlds—the upper world of the *devas* (gods), the middle world of humans and the nether world of the *asuras* (demons). The characters are grouped under certain clearly defined types; they are not only individuals but also symbolic personalities. The striking make-up and costume are designed to transform the actors both mentally and physically into the types of characters they are to portray.

With the exception of the female characters and the gentle ones like sages and holy men, all characters have their faces painted over in bright colours: basically green for the heroes, gods and kings, red and black for those who are wicked and fierce, and various elaborate designs for the animal types.

The Make-up

IN many forms of Asian drama the actors wear masks, and as it is not possible to express any movements of the face or eyes, changes in emotions have to be portrayed by movements of the mask. In Kathakali, however, the actor's make-up is thick enough to give the appearance of and provide the advantages of a powerfully painted mask, but as it is applied direct to the face it also allows full expressions of the face and eyes, thus enabling him to portray the different emotions which are an important feature of all Hindu dramas.

The colourful patterns that are painted onto the actor's face are made from various stones and powders which are mixed with water or coconut oil and ground into a fine paste in the green room prior to the start of the process of making up. The actor applies the

outline pattern and the preliminary colours to his face. He also does the finishing touches and fills in the colours, but the most elaborate part of the make-up, the *chutti* (a series of white ridges built up from the chin to either side of the cheek, marking off the face and forming a frame within which the actor can express his emotions) has to be applied by a make-up artiste. He is a man who has undergone a long period of training in this particular aspect of Kathakali and is a most important member of the Kathakali troupe. Whilst the *chutti* is being applied, the actor lies on his back and often goes to sleep.

No matter how important or trivial the occasion, or how minor the character in the play, the same meticulous care is always taken over the application of the make-up, a process which takes two or three hours to complete for each individual actor.

Just before going on to the stage, the actor places a small seed in each eye which turns the whites of his eyes red. This redness, which is not painful and lasts for about five hours, greatly enhances the expressions of the eyes which play such an important part in Kathakali acting.

The make-up falls into five main classes: *Paccha* (meaning 'green'), *Katti* ('knife'), *Tadi* ('beard'), *Kari* ('black') and *Minukku* ('radiant'). Let us look at each of these classes separately:

Paccha (green). These are the heroic, kingly and divine types. Their faces are painted green, and they have large black markings around their eyes and eye-brows, the sacred mark of Vishnu on their foreheads and vermilion around their mouths. They wear a *chutti*, the ridges of which are made of white paper fixed into layers of rice paste. On their heads they wear a golden crown called the *kesabharam kirita* (hereafter referred to by its more common name, *kirita*).

Within this class come the incarnations of Vishnu—Krishna and Rama—and Rama's brother Lakshmana and twin sons Lava and Kusa, also Krishna's grandson Aniruddha. They have an identical make-up, but instead of the golden *kirita* which the others wear they have a vase-shaped silver crown with tips of peacock feathers on top called the *Krishnamuti* or *muti* for short. Four other characters, Balarama, Brahma, Siva and Surya have a similar type of make-up and wear the same *kiritas* as the *paccha* characters, but their faces are painted orange-red instead of green; their make-up is called *pazhuppu* (ripe).

Katti (knife). These characters are arrogant and evil, but have a streak of valour in them. They wear the same *chuttis* and *kiritas* as the *paccha* characters, and their make-up is basically green, to indicate that they are high-born, but a red mark like an upturned moustache or knife of a shape popular in Kerala is painted on each cheek. They have white knobs on the tips of their noses and on their foreheads to show that they are evil.

Tadi (beard). There are three distinct types in this class: *Chuvanna Tadi* (red beard), *Vella Tadi* (white beard) and *Karutta Tadi* (black beard). All three wear artificial trimmed beards in their appropriate colours which just cover the neck.

The Red Beards are vicious and vile characters, whose faces are painted mainly black on the top half and red on the lower. They have an enormous white paper moustache curving up to the ears. Their circular red and white crowns are far larger than those of the *paccha* and *katti* characters, and they have much larger knobs on their noses and foreheads than the *katti* characters. The great monkey chiefs of the Ramayana—Bali and Sugriva—are included in this category because although they are not wicked, they typify the brute force of wild life.

The White Beard represents a higher type of being, and is seen mainly in the character of Hanuman, the monkey-man of divine nature. His make-up suggests that of an animal, with its complicated red, black and white patterns on the face. The patch of green on his nose tells us that he is pious and virtuous. He wears a furry coat and a wide-brimmed head-dress rather like a *topi*, which is believed to have been copied from the helmets worn by the French troops fighting in India in the 17th century.

The Black Beards are the character-types in which black predominates in make-up and costume. These are the primitive beings—the wild hunters and forest dwellers. Their faces are painted black with red and white patterns on them. They wear a flower on the tips of their noses, and on their heads they have bucket-shaped head-dresses of black, white and silver fringed with peacock feathers, called *Karimuti*.

Kari (black). These female characters are the demonesses—the most gruesome figures on the Kathakali stage. Their faces are jet black with dotted red and white markings on them. They wear comic false breasts and have the same bucket-shaped head-dresses and black costumes as the Black Beard characters.

Minukku (radiant). This class, which symbolises gentleness and high spiritual qualities, is in sharp contrast to the preceding four classes. The costume is very simple and the face is painted a warm yellow tint. The female *minukku* characters are the heroines, servants etc., and also demonesses who assume the form of beautiful maidens (called *Lalitas*) in order to entice men. The male characters are messengers, craftsmen, charioteers, sages and brahmins. The sages wear small conical head-dresses and most of the others wear turbans. The brahmins have little or no make-up and wear a cloth on their heads because a Kathakali actor's head is never uncovered.

In addition to these five main classes of make-up, there are eighteen special characters whose make-up cannot be fitted into any particular category. These include the birds Garuda and Jatayu, the swan Hamsa, the serpent Karkotaka, the man-lion Narasimha and various special elaborations of the standard patterns to meet other requirements.

The Costume

THE COSTUME of the Kathakali actor is most decorative. The male characters (apart from some of the *minukku* characters) have an enormous 'skirt' which contains 55 yards of cloth, on top of which is a thick woollen jacket draped with lengths of cloth. This seemingly cumbersome dress is in fact functional, as the rhythmic sway of the skirt imparts a certain majesty to the movement of the actor, and its volume gives the right balance to these oversized figures. The ample space it provides allows for ease of leg movements, which are an important part of this masculine art.

The costumes of all the major characters are almost identical, but various fascinating head-dresses are worn, as we have mentioned in the preceding paragraphs. The golden *kiritas* worn by the *paccha* and *katti* characters are encrusted with gold foil, mirrors and imitation stones whilst the enormous red crowns worn by the Red Beard characters add to their ferocious appearance. Although made of light wood, this extraordinary head-dress is

extremely heavy, and adds very considerably to the weight of the costume that a Kathakali actor has to wear for hours on end in a very hot and humid climate.

The Stage

THE KATHAKALI stage is as simple as it can be. No scenery is required as the actors describe everything by their *mudras* and facial expressions. At the front of the stage, which traditionally is an open space of ground or the forecourt of a Hindu temple, stands a large bell-metal lamp from which two cotton wicks floating in coconut oil give out a mellow and exciting light. This is as it should be, but now-a-days performances are usually given in halls with footlights, microphones and the other impedimenta of the modern stage. But the lamp, which has a religious significance, is always in the front of the stage, and all movements converge on the lamp.

Apart from a table and one or two stools, the only item of equipment used is the *tirassila*, a large rectangular curtain of bright colours, which is held up by two stage hands before the performance starts and between scenes. Whenever powerful or evil characters appear for the first time, they stand behind the curtain and slowly bring it down as they look over the top of it, emitting weird sounds. This is a traditional formality known as the *tiranokku* or curtain look, and it is accompanied by an exciting atmosphere created by the musicians and drummers.

The Musicians

AT THE BACK of the stage on the left as seen from the audience stand the two drummers. One plays the *chenda*, a cylindrical drum held vertically and for the most part played with sticks, the other plays the *maddalam*, held horizontally and played with the hands. The left end is played with the palm and the right end with the fingers, each of which has a finger-stall made of rice and lime applied to a strip of cloth. The drummers accompany the action, supply the rhythm and emphasise the *mudras* and dance steps of the actors.

The orchestra is completed with two singers who stand on the right of the stage. The leader plays a gong and his assistant a pair of cymbals. The singers tell the story of the play, verse by verse, in Sanskritized Malayalam which the actors interpret word for word through their *mudras* and facial expressions, after which there is a period of pure dance called *kalasam*, when part of the first verse is repeated. After this the next verses are sung, and in this way the whole story of the play is told.

The Actors

THE FACIAL expressions used by the actors express the nine principal aesthetic emotions—love, valour, pathos, wonder, derision, fear, disgust, fury and tranquillity. The *mudras* supply them with a complete language of gestures which enables them not only to interpret the lines of the story, but also to communicate with each other on matters relevant to the occasion.

In Kerala, most members of the audience of the older generation can follow the sign language of the *mudras*, but their number is dying out and very few of the younger generation have the same fanatical interest in Kathakali as their forbears. Although the *mudras* may seem complicated, even the uninitiated can understand the meaning of many of them if one knows the story being enacted, because they are so explicit. Not a word is spoken by the actors, though the evil and animal characters emit weird sounds from time to time to emphasise their self-importance.

In the 36 plays included in this book there are 209 different characters who appear in 340 different roles: and in addition there are many more in other less frequently performed plays. As every actor must be able to perform any role in any play, it needs little imagination to appreciate the vast repertoire that all the actors must learn by heart. And the musicians must be able to sing all the words of all the stories, whilst the drummers must be able to accompany the actors with set rhythms.

The Performance

A TRADITIONAL performance in Kerala begins at 8 p.m. and goes on until dawn the following morning. It is preceded at sunset (between 6.30 and 7 p.m. all the year round) by the *kelikottu*, when the silence of the evening is broken by the sound of the two drums, the gong and cymbals, played in the open air near the place where the night's performance is to take place. This tells the local people that there is a Kathakali show on that night.

Before the first play begins, there are four preliminary music and dance demonstrations:

1. The *arangu keli*, a period of invocatory drumming, played by the *maddalam* player, standing in front of the lamp.
2. The *todayam*, which essentially is a rite performed to propitiate the gods, but is loosely translated as 'beginning'. This is the first invocatory dance performed behind the curtain by two or more junior actors with no make-up on. It is important in the training of an actor as it has all the dance patterns of Kathakali, but it is usually omitted these days.
3. The *purappadu*, meaning 'going forth', an introduction in pure dance which in its original form was intended to introduce the main character of the play being performed. Now-a-days it is usually merely an opportunity for one or two junior actors—this time in full make-up and costume—to show their dancing skill, whilst the musicians sing an appropriate song.

4. The *melappadam*, a display of drumming by the two drummers accompanied by the gong and cymbals which lasts for over half an hour and enables the drummers and the singers to demonstrate their skills. As the first part of the *melappadam* the musicians sing a *padam* (song) from the Gita Govinda, which begins with the word *Manjutara*, by which term it is sometimes known.

Only when all or some of these various demonstrations are over does the play begin. In the old days, only one play was enacted in its full form which lasted throughout the night, but now-a-days it is usual for selected scenes from two or three plays to be performed. The opening scenes are quiet and seem very slow to the uninitiated, but they are technically the most difficult to act. The love scene which appears at the beginning of most plays does not necessarily have a bearing on the story: it is intended to stress the importance of *sringara-rasa* (the sentiment of love) and to enable the actor to display his virtuosity. As the night goes on, the action gets faster and faster until the final scenes just before dawn bring the performance to an end with loud drumming and great excitement, usually with fierce fighting and the killing of demons.

At the conclusion of the final scene, when it is just getting light, one of the actors in that scene performs the *dhanasi*, a short solo dance sequence offering thanks to god for the successful completion of the night's work and asking for blessings on the audience.

In Kerala the audiences know the stories of the plays and are familiar with the make-up and costume. Their interest is in the interpretation of a role by a particular actor who they probably know well, and they watch his performance most critically for hours on end. When Kathakali is seen by Western audiences, however, the main interest is in the fascinating make-up and the overall spectacle of the performance, and less attention is paid to any individual actor.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, as we have seen, Kathakali performances were given by troupes who worked under the patronage of feudal rajahs and *Namboodiris*. Now things are very different as most of the performances are given by individual actors and musicians—past students of training schools and others conversant with the art—who may never have acted together before. No rehearsals are needed, and it says much for the firm structure of Kathakali and for the training when one realises that twenty or so men can meet in a remote village to perform three plays (which ones, they will not be told until they have arrived from their homes after a long bus journey), never having acted with each other before. Yet they are able to perform these long plays together as if they had rehearsed them together for several weeks.

In Kerala a night's performance given in the traditional manner is a most exciting experience, provided one knows what is going on. Herein lies the secret of Kathakali and the reason for writing this book. It is hoped that the outline stories of the thirty-six most popular plays which follow will enable the reader to understand what is happening on the stage, thus enabling him or her to appreciate and to enjoy the enthralling and mesmerising experience of a Kathakali performance.