

Ammannur Gurukulam

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The Kūṭiyāṭṭam Artistes of the Ammannur family

Among the Chakyar families, the Ammannur family has from ancient times occupied an outstanding position. The contribution of this family to the arts of Kūṭtu and Kūṭiyāṭṭam is invaluable. They have not only spread and popularized these two arts and preserved them from extinction, but have also scrupulously maintained their distinctive styles and modes of presentation in all their originality, without allowing them to be altered or adulterated.

The Ammannur Chakyar family, which has been practising Kūṭtu and Kūṭiyāṭṭam for centuries, originally belonged to the village of Koopam near Pattambi in Valluvanad. The ruler of Valuvanad has some quarrel with a Namboothiri and, in a fit of anger, he had the Namboothiri burned to death very secretly in an oven of Uttupura (the kitchen and dining hall attached to a temple). This crime was kept a close secret.

Once, in the course of Kūṭtu, a Chakyar of the Ammannur family made an oblique reference to the event in such a way as to bring the ruler's crime to light. Enraged by this the ruler ordered the Chakyar to be bound and brought before him. But the Chakyar got wind of this in advance, and so, to escape capture and punishment, he fled with his family from Koppam and settled down in the place called Muzhikulam in Travancore.

Thus the Ammannur Chakyars became permanent settlers in Muzhikulam. We have records only about the great exponents of Kūṭiyāṭṭam since the time of their coming to Muzhikulam. From the records we know that in 1874 a branch of the Ammannur family settled down at Irinjalkuda in Trichur District.

Among the distinguished masters of the art from the Ammannur family are Parameswara Chakyar, a contemporary of Melphuthur Narayana Bhattathiri, Ittiyamman Chakyar, an expert Parakkum Kūṭtu (in *Nagananda*) and a contemporary of the poet Kunchan Nambiar, Valia Parameswara Chakyar and Cheriya Parameswar Chakyar, both of them legendary figures.

The next two illustrious Kūṭiyāṭṭam artistes of the Ammannur family were Valiya Madhava Chakyar and Chachu Chakyar. Madhava Chakyar was born in 1876. He showed unequalled excellence in playing the parts of Sri Rama in Surpanakhanka, Sugriva in Balivadham and Hanuman in Toranayuddham. Chachu Chakyar, born in 1881, easily became the greatest Kūṭiyāṭṭam actor of his time. The real name of Chachu Chakyar was Parameswara Chakyar, but very few people knew him by that name. He was known more by the name Chachu Chakyar. The younger brother of Chachu Chakyar, Madhava Chakyar (1884-1932), was an accomplished Kūṭiyāṭṭam artiste, both in Parabandha Kūṭtu and *abhinaya*. In 'Anguliyankam' Kūṭtu, he was unequalled.

Chachu Chakyar distinguished himself in playing the role of Vidushaka. In the whole

history of Kūṭiyāṭṭam it is doubtful whether there was ever a better Vidushaka actor than Chachu Chakyar. While performing Kūṭtu he showed remarkable ingenuity in inventing suitable occasions that fitted very well into the story, for ridiculing or satirizing people. There are several stories still current among lovers of Kūṭiyāṭṭam of Chachu Chakyar's extraordinary skill in this respect.

Some of the great living exponents of Kūṭiyāṭṭam of the present age are disciples of Chachu Chakyar. Two of his greatest disciples, Ammannur Madhava Chakyar and Ammannur Parameswara Chakyar are successfully maintaining the Ammannur Kūṭiyāṭṭam tradition. They are endeavouring to keep the art of Kūṭiyāṭṭam alive. Another famous disciple of Chachu Chakyar was Painkulam Rama Chakyar. His contribution to the development of Kūṭiyāṭṭam can never be forgotten. Chachu Chakyar died in 1967 at the age of 86.

The two great living exponents of Kūṭiyāṭṭam of the Ammannur family are Madhava Chakyar and Parameswara Chakyar. Both of them live at Irinjalakuda in Trichur district. Born in 1917, Madhava Chakyar learned the art of Kūṭiyāṭṭam from his own uncles, Chachu Chakyar and Madhava Chakyar, and received intensive training under them. His *arangettam* (first public performance) took place when he was only fourteen years old at the Kūṭiyāṭṭam of Tirumandhamkunnu temple at Angadipuram. He played the part of Sri Rama in the play *Surpanakhankam*. He studied Kūṭtu and Kūṭiyāṭṭam in traditional style for several years under his two uncles and took part with them in all the important performances in the various temples of Kerala. Madhava Chakyar is the recipient of several awards and prizes from numerous temples and patrons. In recognition of his invaluable contributions to the development of Kūṭiyāṭṭam, the Sangeet Natak Akademi honoured him with an award in 1979. In 1982 the Government of India conferred upon him the title of Padmashri. In 1993 the Madhya Pradesh Government honoured him with the prestigious Kalidas Samman. Under the leadership of Guru Madhava Chakyar a troupe of Kūṭiyāṭṭam artistes presented performances all over India and visited countries like France, England, Switzerland, Holland and Japan several times.

Parameswara Chakyar, who is about one and a half years older than Madhava Chakyar, has studied minutely and mastered all the techniques of Kūṭiyāṭṭam. He is very eager to keep Kūṭiyāṭṭam strictly as a temple ritual which means that its performance must be confined to the precincts of the temple. Not even once has he shown any willingness to perform Kūṭiyāṭṭam on a public stage outside the temple. In presenting the Ramayana story in twelve days and especially in enacting fully and perfectly the portion called *Anguliyankam*, which is presented as a solo performance, Parameswara Chakyar has no equal today. Kochu Kuttan Chakyar, a member of the Muzhikulam branch of the Ammannur family, is another talented Kūṭiyāṭṭam actor. He has already achieved considerable fame as a Vidushaka actor. He is now teaching at Margi, Trivandrum. Thirty-eight-year-old Ammannur Parameswaran, known as Kuttan Chakyar, nephew of Madhava Chakyar and Parameswara Chakyar, is the representative of the new generation of Kūṭiyāṭṭam artistes of the Ammannur family. Kuttan Chakyar, who has received intensive training under his uncles since his boyhood, is the great hope and promise of the future of Kūṭiyāṭṭam.

Ammannur Gurukulam

The Ammannur family of Chakyars has always been devoted to their hereditary art Kūṭiyāṭṭam. There has always been a training school in their ancestral house itself. This was the reason why the members of that family became first-rate Kūṭiyāṭṭam artistes. The training centre, called Ammannur Gurukulam gives not only practical instructions to its pupils; it also devotes much time to preserving the old works of acting and the production manuals written on palm-leaves by copying them anew from time to time. The result is that there is now a rich collection on manuscripts in the Gurukulam.

It was during the time of Chachu Chakyar that boys of other Chakyar families were first admitted to this Gurukulam. In addition to his two nephews, Madhava Chakyar and Parameswara Chakyar, there were Rama Chakyar, of the Painkulam family, and Parameswara Chakyar of the Potiyil family. These pupils were educated and trained at the Ammannur Gurukulam. Many members of other Chakyar families, like Narayana Chakyar of Painkulam, used to come to this Gurukulam and to take part in the performances there. During the annual festivals of the temples at Thrissur, Irinjalakuda and Muzhikulam, Kidgangur Rama Chakyar used to come and give special training to the pupils of the Gurukulam.

Ammannur Chachu Chakyar Smaraka Gurukulam

Under the changed social set-up and circumstances, the Chakyar families were compelled to give up their hereditary art and seek some other profession for their livelihood. This affected the Ammannur Gurukulam also; the Gurukulam became defunct. It was at this critical time in 1977 that I came into close association with the Ammannur family. The only relics of the Gurukulam were a bundle of tattered costumes and ornaments, two Gurus and one pupil.

In 1982 I began to study Kūṭiyāṭṭam in a serious way directly under the guidance and supervision of Madhava Chakyar and Parameswara Chakyar. The Ammannur Chakyars have consistently refused to give instruction and training in Kūṭiyāṭṭam to any person who does not belong to the Chakyar community. I was fortunate and privileged in this matter for I was the first exception to this age-old custom. In October 1982 we started a new Gurukulam as a memorial for the great Ammannur Chachu Chakyar. This centre has been established with the object of giving training in Kūṭiyāṭṭam to selected candidates strictly in the traditional Gurukula style and also to bring back to popularity many of the ancient classical dramas by presenting them through Kūṭiyāṭṭam in all their original splendour. Nine students are at present receiving intensive training at the centre. Madhava Chakyar and Parameswara Chakyar are in charge of their training. The Gurukulam devotes itself to the preservation of the famous Ammannur style of Kūṭiyāṭṭam. One creditable achievement of this school is that it revived and enacted three Kūṭiyāṭṭam plays—Ashokavanikankam, Jatayuvadhankam and Kalyanasaugandhikam—which had long been forgotten. The school revived these plays and presented them in all their originality and detail in the years 1982, 1983 and 1984 respectively. The Gurukulam has also revived the enactment of the 'Sree Krishna Charitam' Nangiar Kūttu on the solid basis of about 207 *slokas*. A group of Kūṭiyāṭṭam artistes trained at this institution, led by Guru Ammannur Madhava Chakyar, presented Kūṭiyāṭṭam performances at the Festival of India held in

Switzerland in 1987 and in Japan in 1988.

System of Training

It has been proved that an ancient classical theatre like Kūṭiyāṭṭam, which requires of every student at least 15 years of practical training to become an artiste of professional standard, can be taught only through the Guru Shishya Parampara training system. In this system, there is no specific syllabus or a course limited to a certain period. The knowledge of a master, acquired through a lifetime of dedication, has to be handed over to his disciple. Training always progresses according to the disciple's ability to imbibe.

The practice begins at 4 a.m. in the morning with voice training. Different *slokas* to be sung in different *ragas*, have to be recited by the students. *Kannu-sadhakam* (eye-exercises) is given only after sun set. For other exercises, times are fixed to suit the convenience of the pupils and Gurus. Practical training is given more importance than other aspects of the art.

Training is chiefly confined to the following plays: 1. *Balacharita* (Sutradhara) of Bhasa; 2. *Balivadhama* (First Act of *Abhisheka* of Bhasa); 3. *Toranayuddham* (Third Act of *Abhisheka* of Bhasa); 4. *Surpanakhankam* (Second Act of *Ascharyachudamani* of Shaktibhadra); 5. *Jatayuvadhankam* (Fourth Act of *Ascharyachudamani*); 6. *Subhadra Dhananjaya* of Kulasekhara (First Act); 7. *Tapati Samvarana* of Kulasekhara (First Act); 8. *Nagananda* of Harshavardhana; 9. *Kalyanasaugandhika* of Nilakantha; 10. *Mattavilasa* of Mahendra Vikrama (Sutradhara and Kapali); 11. *Anguliyankam* (Sixth Act of *Ascharyachudamani*); 12. *Ashokavanikankam* (Fifth Act of *Ascharyachudamani*).

Boys have to be trained to play all the roles of the male characters of these plays. Girls are trained to play all the female roles in these plays; in addition, they must also become proficient in enacting *Sri Krishna Charitam* Nangiar Kūttu.

The Staff

Guru Ammannur Madhava Chakyar (Acting); Guru Parameswara Chakyar (Acting); Ammannur Parameswaran (Acting); G. Venu (Research and Teaching Theory); K. Parameswara Chakyar (Sanskrit); C.K. Krishnan Nambiar (Mizhavu); V.K. Hariharan (Mizhavu).

Students in Acting

P.K. Usha Nangiar, T.R. Sooraj, Ammannur Rajaneesh, Ranjeeth R., Sreejith, T.R. Saritha, Kapila Venu, Aparna P., Ravi Kumar.

Research

Under the auspices of Natana Kairali (a research and performing centre for traditional arts), another institution working parallel to the Gurukulam in the Ammannur family, theoretical study and research are undertaken, especially in the manuals of *Kramadipika* and *Attaprakaram*. As a result of this intensive study and research, Natana Kairali has already published two volumes in the Documentation of Kutiyattam series (*Production of a Play in Kutiyattam* by G. Venu and *Nangiar Koothu* the classical dance theatre of the Nangiar by Nirmala Paniker. Besides, many symposia and workshops have been held to

discuss the relevance of Kūṭiyāṭṭam to modern times, and the study of other allied arts in comparison with Kūṭiyāṭṭam. Working in collaboration with such national bodies as Sangeet Natak Akademi, Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, and the Centre for Cultural Resources and Training, video and film documentation of Kūṭiyāṭṭam of about sixty hours have also been completed.

Performance Opportunities

Every year, the Gurukulam organises a Kūṭiyāṭṭam Festival. The 12-day festival gives its trainees a valuable opportunity to work with senior artistes and thereby gain better familiarity with the subtleties of performance on the stage. Already seven such festivals have been conducted. The Gurukulam students also give performances in the Kūttampalams of Trichur and Irinjalakuda. Gurukulam is the only troupe now which performs Kūṭiyāṭṭam Kūttu, and Nangiar Kūttu in the Kūttampalams inside temple premises.

The Gurukulam is currently financed by the Sangeet Natak Akademi as part of its activities towards the promotion of Kūṭiyāṭṭam.