

## BOOK REVIEWS

### Krishnattam

Martha Bush Ashton-Sikora and  
Robert P. Sikora

Oxford & IBH Publishing Company,  
Delhi

XIII + 185 pages, Rs 450

The book is mainly a history of Krishnattam, a unique dance theatre of Kerala, now based at Guruvayoor temple. Organized in ten chapters and ten appendices, it covers the history of Krishnattam performance, the training of actors, stage presentation, synopses of the eight plays, etc. A biographical sketch of A.C.G. Raja who was the superintendent of the troupe for a long time is also included. There are 18 photographs in the book: some of the group photographs could have been sharper.

Dr Martha Ashton-Sikora did her Ph.D. on the Yakshagana of South Canara. She first saw Krishnattam in 1970 at a temple festival near Trichur. She met Mr Raja there and started seeing more performances with his help and under his guidance. Her plans to do a documentary on Krishnattam did not materialize. She wanted to write a monograph on Krishnattam and started interviewing people connected with the art—the book is full of details of such interviews. She was the coordinator of the Krishnattam troupe that went to the United States in 1985 and on her insistence Mr Raja went as the troupe manager even though he had retired in 1983.

Except for the recent period, the history

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of Krishnattam is based on legends and conjectures. Started by the Zamorin of Calicut in the middle of the 17th century, Krishnattam has now found a permanent home at Guruvayoor Temple. A.C.G. Raja was the superintendent of the troupe from 1961 to 1983 and many significant changes took place in this period. Krishnattam started getting exposure outside Kerala and even outside India. The emoluments of the artists also improved. New costumes and masks were made and brochures explaining the stories were printed. In an attempt to improve the standard of music Mr Raja brought in some Kathakali singers as music teachers. More hand gestures were introduced. Unfortunately this produced some

undesirable results. But for the very strong dance base of Krishnattam it might well have become another Kathakali of Krishna stories. After Mr Raja's retirement Chandrasekharan Elayath became the superintendent. His attempts to rectify some of the defects has not yet brought much success. Mr Elayath has been searching for old recordings of Krishnattam songs (page 52). Martha Ashton-Sikora does not say whether she made available to him her own collection (page 16). At page 88 it is mentioned that "the audience was first drawn to the colour and design of the *dazzling* costumes". Actually, they were garish—new synthetic textiles were being used liberally instead of cotton and pure silk. Guruvayoor temple is not lacking in funds and it would be more in keeping with the nature of the art if silk is used.

Musicologists attach great importance to Krishnattam since *Krishnageethi* (the text) is the first known composition in Kerala where the *ragas* and *talas* are prescribed by the composer himself. In course of time some *ragas* were lost. Instead of trying to preserve whatever had survived, deliberate and unwarranted changes were made in the *ragas* as part of Mr Raja's attempt to improve the music. Mr Raja has admitted that there were negative comments from the public, but ignored them as negligible (page 54). The protests were voiced by organizations like the Kerala Sangeetha Nataka Akademi and eminent musicologists like Dr S. Venkitasubramanya Iyer. The matter was also discussed at length in a seminar at Guruvayoor and Dr Martha Ashton-Sikora had also attended it. The lead paper on music in that seminar was presented by this reviewer.

In the *Rasakrida* portion the actors (Gopis) used to sing *Gopika-gitam* along

with the singers (page 139). This shows an intermediate stage in the development of theatre arts in Kerala, between Kudiyattam where all the actors speak and Kathakali where none speaks. Unfortunately this practice has been stopped. The Gopis sit on the ground in a line silently with their elbows on their thighs and palms on their heads as if in mourning. The great Kathakali drummer Kalamandalam Krishnankutty Poduval, seeing this when he was a member of the Attaprakaram Rewriting Committee, quipped that one should distribute aspirin tablets to the Gopis. This is an instance of an interesting scene being changed into a boring one in the process of reform.

A Vadya Vidyalaya to teach temple instruments was established at Guruvayoor (page 48) during Mr Raja's time, but the credit for it should go to M.K. Raja (a former Manager and a past Secretary of Kerala Kalamandalam). He took the initiative in the matter and got the Zamorin to sanction it. (This reviewer was closely associated with Mr M.K. Raja in the establishment of the school and was also a member of the working committee during its formative days).

One can understand the bias of Dr Martha Ashton-Sikora in favour of A.C.G. Raja as he was her mentor. The sincerity and hard work of Mr Raja are not questioned, only his aesthetic sense and knowledge of the technical aspects of music, dance and drama. The difficulty experienced by the present superintendent in restoring traditional usages is noted at page 52. It may be mentioned that the politicization of the temple management, the lack of leadership, and the trade-union activities of the artists have all contributed to the difficulties.

The authors have not said much about the musical aspects of Krishnattam.

They also show a lack of understanding of the *talas*. They have recorded the conflicting opinions of the artists who are good performers but poor theoreticians. Hence some absurdities are recorded in the book (e.g. Chempata Tala=16 beats: page 162); however the authors are in good company here as some other foreign scholars have also contributed to this kind of confusion (e.g. Dr Clifford Jones on Muriathantha: page 169). All this happens in spite of experts like K.P.S. Menon making things very clear in his book *Kathakali Rangam*. Kerala music may be poor in melodic aspects but its rhythmic base is very very strong.

As rightly pointed out by the authors (page 80), describing music or dance is difficult. Use of technical terms may be helpful but the authors have avoided it. On page 91 they mention that with some experience it is possible to recognize specific drum sequences for specific movements. It is this aspect which drummers in performing arts have to learn, whether it is Krishnattam, Kootiyattam or Kathakali.

One thought that since Dr Martha Ashton-Sikora has specialized in Yakshagana, there would be a detailed discussion of the similarities and contrasts between Yakshagana and Krishnattam. Except for a small reference to hand gestures (page 61), nothing is mentioned; and this is disappointing.

All of the original text (*Krishnageethi*) is not presented on the stage, but the authors have not discussed the way the text has been adapted for performance. The legend that it was a nephew of the author of *Krishnageethi* who edited it and presented it on the stage is also not mentioned.

Some of the statements of the authors

show lack of proper observation.

- i They say incense is waved during the elephant procession (page 2). Actually, there is no waving of incense during processions.
- ii The image of Lord Guruvayoorappan doing the rounds of the temple is stated to be two feet high (page 4). In fact, the image is only a few inches high. It is the stand holding the image that is two feet high.
- iii The authors have not realized that keeping awake during Sivaratri night is a votive offering (page 9). Besides, their understanding of the history of the Zamorins seems vague. The Zamorins lost their kingdom to the British at the beginning of British rule and not after India became independent (jacket cover). What the British returned to the Zamorin in 1927 was not his kingdom but only his family estate (page 32).

In narrating the training programme the authors say on page 64: "The first appearance of the dance student on the stage usually occurs after one year's training." The Assan (chief instructor) of the troupe has told this reviewer when he was a member of the committee for revising the Attaprakaram (page 53) that at times he is obliged to send a boy on to the stage after hardly 40 days' training. It was found that even several of the senior actors could not demonstrate particular dance steps to the committee. It was only with the help of a few dedicated actors that the committee could complete its work. That the temple authorities have not yet decided to publish the report is of course another matter.

The practice of carrying costumes and equipment as head-load and walking 15 or

20 miles are all things of the past and far from the present realities.

The summary of the plays and their way of presentation is given in the appendices. Here the authors have quoted portions from an unpublished manuscript from A.C.G. Raja. Actually this is a translation by V. Subramanya Iyer of Trichur and not by Mr Raja. Mr Raja got it from Mr Iyer, but there was some point about copyright and Mr Raja did not publish it.

Unfortunately the value of the book is reduced by the many mistakes and improper explanations in the text and glossary. These could have been avoided if the final script was examined by a suitable person. It would appear that Dr Martha Ashton-Sikora is unable to get over her Yakshagana-Kannada background as she uses some Kannada words in place of Malayalam words, e.g. Dharmaraya for Dharmaraja (plate 4), *gurusampradaya* for *gurukula-sampradaya*, Bhagavatha for Bhagavathar, *tale* for *tal*, etc. An Ambalavasi caste, Mari, is mentioned as drummers. Evidently the reference is to Marar.

There are some other serious mistakes. For example, *Narayaneeyam* of Melpathur was written in Malayalam, and not Sanskrit (page 115). Nangyar, described as a female of the Chakyar caste (page 26), is really a female of Nambiar caste.

The authors have not understood certain things properly. A few examples:

- (i) Ashtapadi is mentioned as the name of a poetic metre (page 162).
- (ii) The date of Onam, it is stated, is based on the solar calendar and that of Navaratri on the lunar calendar (page 55).

(iii) A Tamil Brahmin named Pattar is mentioned (page 84). Actually, Pattar is the caste name in Malayalam for Tamil Brahmins and is not a personal name. Pattar is the same as Iyer.

(iv) Siva holds a ram in his hand (page 145), the authors say, whereas he actually holds a deer.

(v) The Nangyars perform Pathakam (page 31)—probably a generalization from a single example.

Several words are wrongly spelt, probably due to a faulty understanding of Malayalam: *meyyurappu* is given as *meyyarappu*, Rugmi (Rugmini's brother) is spelt Rugma, *cherikkalam* is given as *cherkkal*, *chayilyam* as *chaliyam*. These are only a few examples; there are many more.

Two relevant books on the subject do not seem to have been consulted by the authors—*Krishnageethi* (in Devanagari script) edited by P.S. Ananthanarayana Sastri (Mangalodyam, Trichur, 1914) and *Preparing for Krishna* by Rustom Bharucha (an article published in the *Journal of Arts and Ideas*, later incorporated in his book *Theatre and the World*).

The book under review is quite readable and provides a good introduction to Krishnattam. However, lack of attention to details reduces the value of the book as a research work. The printing and get-up of the book are good but the calendar-like picture of baby Krishna on the front cover is incongruous. The index is very useful.

How one wishes that the various funding agencies in India would help Indian scholars to bring out authoritative books on our various art forms.

L.S. RAJAGOPALAN

## Kuchipudi Bharatam or Kuchipudi Dance

K. Uma Rama Rao

Sri Satguru Publications, Delhi

80 pages, Rs 300

When scholarship is scarce and critical writing meagre, even a short book on Kuchipudi dance, the unchronicled asset of Andhra, is most welcome. The author, K. Uma Rama Rao, would seem to be a person well qualified to write such an introductory account. Born in 1940, this monographer grew up in the early years of the revival and recognition of Kuchipudi dance as a classical dance tradition. She had her training under Nataraja Ramakrishna, Vedantam Lakshminarayana Sastri and C.R. Acharyulu, who along with others were instrumental in firmly establishing the classicism of Kuchipudi and putting it on the dance map of India. The author was a performing artist till her twenty-second year (1961) and then opted to teach. She is probably the first dancer from outside the traditional families of Kuchipudi village to establish herself as a teacher. She was with Sri Thyagaraja Government College of Music and Dance, Hyderabad, as Senior Lecturer and now chairs the Department of Dance, School of Arts, Telugu University, Hyderabad.

Writing on matters of dance is not new to her: she has apparently contributed several articles on dance to leading journals and newspapers. The present work contains fifteen chapters titled 'Origin of Kuchipudi Dance', 'History of Kuchipudi Dance at a Glance', 'Classicism in Kuchipudi Dance', 'Kuchipudi Dance Today', etc. She has tried "to pour all [her] ideas, feelings and



views on this subject within [her] limits". Her 'limits' are not wide in the fields of history and theory.

Devoid of first-hand knowledge, Ms Rao has depended on myths, legends, recently concocted accounts and 'traditional' half-truths to present the origin, development and history of Kuchipudi dance. Baffled by the bizarre narratives she has gathered, the monographer honestly says, "... after going through these different versions . . . any student of Kuchipudi Dance History would get confused . . . it is best left to the scholars in the fields of literature and culture-studies to study this" (p. 31). She should have done so, instead of venturing to pass on useless and baseless information as historical truth and scholarly broth.

Nothing that the derivation of the name Kuchipudi is variously explained, the monographer has chosen to rely on the opinion of one Yeleswarapu Suryaprakasa Sarma, considering him "a person with vast knowledge and experience in this art

form". According to him, 'kuchi' means Manmatha (the lord of love) and 'pudi' means hero-heroine relationship (p. 17). She repeats this preposterous etymology elsewhere (p.32). Actually 'kuchi' means dancer and 'pudi' a village on accumulated soil on a river-bank; consequently, Kuchipudi means the abode of dancers.

Among the many historical inaccuracies in this work, the following are glaring.

a. "Pada composer Sarangapani belonged to Ghantasala of this region" (p. 15). He did not. He belonged to Karvetinagaram in Chittoor District.

b. Among the deceased artistes and gurus of Kuchipudi, the name of Pasumarthi Krishnamurthi has been included (p.25). This 66-year-old is hale and hearty.

c. "Gollakalapam was written by Bhagavatula Ramayya in the last quarter of the 19th century" (p. 39). In the corpus of Yakshaganas (libretti for dance), there are ten Gollakalapams and Ramayya enlarged one earlier version (vide Prof. S.V. Joga Rao's *Andhra Yakshagana Vangmaya Charitra*).

d. The Konangi of Bhagavatamela is equated with Dauvarika in Thyagaraja's *Prahlada Bhakti Vijayam* (p. 46). No. Dauvarika is Katikam or Kattiyakaran of Bhagavathamela. For the legend of Konangi, my article 'Bhagavathamela—The Telugu Heritage of Tamil Nadu', *Sruti* No. 22, may be referred to.

e. "During the period between 850 and 1100 A.D., the Cholas ruled Andhradesa" (p. 54). Wrong. The Vengi Chalukyas were in power during 615 and 1076 A.D. and the Velanati Cholas ruled between 1115 and 1186 A.D.

f. The writer asserts that "Kshetrappa had direct connection with Kuchipudi

artistes and contributed so much to the development of Kuchipudi Dance, in general, through his padams" (p. 61). This unsubstantiated statement is irresponsible.

g. Vempati Venkatanarayana is placed in the 18th century (p. 17). He was a famous artist and poet of recent history and his times are 1871-1935 A.D. (vide my *Samagra Andhra Sahityam*, Vol. XII, p. 70).

Notwithstanding these specimen examples of blunders, there is one positive aspect to this monograph. It gives an account, though sketchy, of the *adavu* system of Kuchipudi dance as preserved by Vedantham Prahlada Sarma. Since the demonstrations of this age-old *adavu* system was documented on video by Telugu University, a detailed description of the foot and body movements would have been the most valuable asset and redeeming feature of this otherwise superficial effort.

In this book, the author observes "... of late, there is a craze among the choreographers and dance teachers with little knowledge of theory and practice to evolve a separate dance system for their personal ends" (p. 2). This is equally true of people who rush into writing books on the dance dialects they teach.

This monograph would not have deserved a review but for the disturbing fact that the author heads the Department of Dance in a University where graduate and post-graduate courses are conducted and degrees bestowed. If the standard of instruction is also of the same calibre as this slender work, it is high time Telugu University set things right. The University Grants Commission may take cognisance of the matter. Under no circumstances should the quality of scholars produced by a university be compromised.

ARUDRA



## Lucknow ki Bhand Parampara

Raushan Taqi

Vishwa Prakashan, Delhi, 1993

106 pages, Rs 152

After the breakdown of the Sanskrit dramatic tradition during the ninth and tenth centuries there arose a class of reciters, story-tellers, puppetters, entertainers, and all kinds of itinerant performers who provided rich entertainment in the early medieval centuries. During the 15th and 16th centuries the spread of vaishnavism as a cultural movement greatly enriched the arts of poetry, music, dance and pictorial arts; and temple-based dance-dramas evolved in different regions of the country.

Along with the temple-based performances of religious orientation the tradition of popular, secular performances continued. It was sustained by a whole class of reciters, story-tellers, Swangis, Bahurupias, Bhagatbazes, Dastangois (Kathakars), Kathaks, Bhands and Naqqals. They provided robust entertainment, and became an integral part of people's social life, specially on festive occasions in the life of a householder.

The tradition of Bhands, as one of the main groups of entertainers, was most active during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They are said to have migrated from Kashmir during the mid-19th century and settled in Lucknow, as they got patronage from the Nawabs, and in Banaras where the aristocracy extended support. These two cities remained strong centres of Bhand. It was only in the 1930s that the tradition declined with the advent of radio and cinema. Taqi, author of the book, himself a Bhand performer, how-



ever, claims an indigenous origin for the Bhands of Lucknow.

This is the first book on the Bhands and their art and life in Lucknow. Covering all aspects of the tradition it gives an account of stories performed by the Bhands, techniques of performance, and patronage by the Nawabs and the aristocracy.

In tracing the history of the Bhand tradition, Taqi quotes from several earlier works such as *Begamate Awadh ke Khatoot*, and *Bani* by Wajid Ali Shah, a great patron of the arts of music and dance, and himself a performer. Taqi provides a vivid picture of the social and cultural milieu which sustained the Bhand tradition that was part of the popular entertainment of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Some of the famous Bhands of the nineteenth century were Khilauna Bhand, Jangali Bhand, Jahaz Bhand, and Churmur Bhand. Most of them received monthly

stipends from the Shahi Sarkar. Aftab, Bhikhu and Timmu were the famous Bhands of Lucknow in the twentieth century.

Taqi's history of the Bhand tradition of Lucknow begins with the first decades of the nineteenth century and includes an account of the life and art of famous Bhands, both those who came from Kashmir and were known as Kashmiri Bhand, and those who claimed indigenous origin. Their very names evoked mirth and they were so popular that at the entry of a Bhand in the performance arena, generally under a *shamiyana*, the spectators recognized him and burst into laughter.

Bhands performed light, farcical skits based on awkward social situations and characters, and served to subvert social values and customs. Wajid Ali Shah in his book *Bani* has given a list of 200 *naqals*, episodes and stories performed by the Bhands. These include various social characters and types such as Halwai, Bhishti, a rustic prostitute, an adulterous wife, and a miserly servant. An interesting chapter is on the language of the Kashmiri Bhands, which included words from several languages, local dialects, idioms, puns, parables, repartees and jokes bordering on obscenity. Language was one of the main devices of their performance along with buffoonery and horseplay. A performance combining the arts of story-telling, mime, dance and music provided rich fare to the audience.

The last chapter of the book describes the performance of the play *Chandravali* and gives its full text. This is one of the few plays performed by the Bhands. It is of interest that the structure of the play follows Amanat's famous *Indra Sabha*, written and performed in 1854, and became an

instant success.

The descriptions and sketches of the costumes used by the Bhands for various types of characters, both male and female, and photographs of some Bhands help in giving the reader a glimpse of the colourful world of *bhandaiti*. One however wishes that there were photographs of some performances.

SURESH AWASTHI

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### Rang Yatra

Ed. J.N. Kaushal

National School of Drama

Delhi, 1993

300 pages, Rs 250

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This publication can be scrutinized either under a harsh light or in a mellow one. I prefer the latter illumination for, while it is the work of professionals, writing, editing and publishing happen not to be the work that they profess. The analogy in their own field of activity would be as if a group of amateurs drawn from various walks of life had got together and put on a play for the delectation of the National School of Drama and the latter were to evaluate it. While the latter may well be delighted by the flattery, any evaluation would have to limit itself to individual bouquets such as the one given to the juvenile Laurence Olivier by Ellen Terry when the former essayed Katerina in *The Taming of the Shrew* in a school production. Brickbats should as far as possible be avoided: they would merely be exorbitant.

This is not to suggest that J.N. Kaushal is not a professional editor or that some of the contributors to this volume are not excellent dramaturges in their own right.



Kaushal's experience in the field he adorns here is only a little less vast than that in the area of translation, but arguably nicer insofar as he was the backbone of the best drama magazine ever to have come out of India, *Enact*, whose head was the late Rajinder Paul. You don't get heads like that too often and therefore I take issue with his collaborator Kaushal in leaving much of the labour over this tome commemorating 25 years of the NSD Repertory quite half-baked. You have instances of the disclaimer "complete information not available" with regard to the repertory's own productions as late as 15 years ago (the compilation was published in 1990), whether they are minor ones like Mohan Rakesh's *Shayad* and *Hunh* by Rajan Sabharwal in 1975 or major disasters like E. Alkazi's transmutation of Badal Sircar's *Tringsha Satabdi* as *Hiroshima* in 1971 or extraordinary experiments like Raghuvir Sahai's *Atmahatya ke Viruddh* where even the year is wrongly mentioned as 1972 (I remember it was during the Emergency) let alone the fact that "a programme of poetry" that it has been barely described as was actually directed by the poet himself. There are ways of getting round such irritants; Kaushal should have depended a little more on his store of memory or got professional help in the matter; besides, most of the actors in the arena where information is supposedly unavailable are still alive. The lacuna is so unforgivable that I cannot help bunging a brick at it.

But the glory of the enterprise is without argument the grand sweep in which the entire history of the repertory is taken by that doyen of drama critics, N.C. Jain. It can in fact be taken as a scale model for a history of Indian theatre for anyone foolhardy enough to attempt it. Mr Jaïn takes



exception to the fact that the repertory does not have a resident literary adviser along the lines, presumably, of the National Theatre of Britain. It would, of course, be another foolhardy enterprise and Mr Jain himself has scrupulously avoided it: as the resident dramaturg of the school for long years he might have been expected to fill the bill. But it must be remembered in the case of Kenneth Tynan, the first if not the last of such advisers of the National, that the post was created for him rather than he for the post and that it is still filled in most repertories by the born impresario, which Ram Gopal Bajaj was most recently for the NSD's. Anything else would merely be part of the colonial heritage which considers the theatre to be tied to the apronstring of literature. The NSD Rep has been lucky to have at its head completely unliterary people from E. Alkazi through Manohar Singh to Bajaj and I dread to think what Kaushal himself would make of it in his

test capacity; but he is a man of parts.

Alas, however, he lacks ruthlessness as evinced in this book in a laboriously scholarly account of the whole history of the repertory movement the world over, in a nutshell of notes by Anuradha Kapur and Ian David. It is the sort of thing that can pass muster only in an academic seminar. There are other contributions such as Sussar Allana's on set design and an opinion piece on the same subject by Bansi Lal that partake of the vices of an acade-

mic or the virtues of a critic, crossing the line between what is good dramatic literature and bad, between Jain on the one hand and the rest on the other. But then, as I said at the beginning, such unevenness is only to be expected from an essentially amateur attempt. The NSD and its repertory are, after all, not a school for critics—a small mercy we should not forget to be thankful for.

PAUL JACOB