

# CHAVITTU-NATAKAM

## DRAMATIC OPERA OF KERALA

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With the dawn of Independence an unprecedented revival of ancient arts is being witnessed throughout India. This perhaps is more apparent in the sphere of folk dances and dramatic arts than in any other. Kerala has her own fine contributions to make towards the vast variety of Indian folk arts and dances. Dramatic traditions of Kerala date as far back as to the beginning of the era. Kerala with her pleasant, even climate, plentiful monsoon showers and evergreen flora, has been the home of folk arts—dances, music and folk theatre. Apart from her highly developed classical *Kathakali* which has won world-wide renown, there are other beautiful art forms — folk dramatic arts especially, still waiting in the background for recognition. *Chavittu-Natakam* is one of them.

*Chavittu-Natakam* is a beautiful musical dance-drama akin to *Kathakali* but also very similar to the opera of the West. It is considered as the Christian counterpart of *Kathakali* by some and by others as an Indian edition of European opera.

*Chavittu-Natakam* shows a happy blending of music, dance, action and *kalarippayattu* (gymnastics) of ancient Kerala. It is a *gana-nritha-natakam* in which, *gana* (music), *nritha* (dance) and *nataka* (drama) elements are harmoniously blended together. The actors sing while they act the drama and take steps (dance) according to the time measure of the *chenda* (drum) and *elathalam* (cymbal) and other musical instruments playing in accompaniment. Acrobatics is another special feature of *Chavittu-Natakam*. Drawing its roots from the earlier folk arts of Kerala, *Kooth* and *Koodiyattam*, *Chavittu-Natakam* closely follows the rules laid down by *Natyasastra*, the basic text of all Indian dramatic arts.

*Chavittu-Natakam* is popular among the Christian community of Kerala, living in and around the old ports and coastal centres where Portuguese influence once prevailed<sup>1</sup>. It forms an integral part of the religious and cultural life of the people of the area. They cherish it as a rich heritage of their old martial prowess and have it performed regularly twice a year in the village church, *maidans*, or sandy open coastal wilds during Christmas and Easter. Those are the days of plentiful coconuts and harvesting of paddy. The performance of *Natakam* adds to the joy of life and is of much social significance to the villager. All the kith and kin are summoned from near and far. To be selected as an actor in the *Chavittu-Natakam* is considered as a great honour to each family. The head of the family is ever ready to open his purse, for the making of costumes, in giving gifts to the *asan* (master) and donations for the performance. The expenses of *cholliyattam* (rehearsal) which extend to a few years and that of the *arangettam* (staging) which amounts to a lump sum are all borne by the joint effort of the populace. To be brief *Chavittu-Natakam* is folk theatre in the fullest sense.

As pointed out earlier, *Chavittu-Natakam* has much in common with the classical *Kathakali* of Kerala and is considered as a Christian counterpart of *Kathakali*. Essentially indigenous to Kerala in its technique, *Chavittu-Natakam* shows a touch of Western operatic style from start to finish.

### East and West

History tells us that the cultural development of a people depends much upon the chance they get to contact other cultures and peoples. Kerala is quite fortunate in this respect. This narrow strip of coastal land lying on the South-West corner of the great sub-continent of India, has been the meeting place of East and West for long. The Greek, the Roman, the Jew, the Syrian, the Arab, the Chinese, the Portuguese, the Dutch, the French, the English and a host of others came to this land from time immemorial, either as traders, travellers, adventurers, historians or religious missionaries. There has been a continuous intermixture of cultures, a continuous give and take. This was at no time more apparent than in the 16th and 17th centuries A.D. when groups of Jesuits, Augustinians, Dominicans and other educated Christian missionaries came to the coastal areas of Kerala under the patronage of Portugal. These eminent men, hailing from the great universities of Paris, Padua, Milan, Florence, Cordova were highly imbued with the spirit of the European Renaissance. Ancient Greek arts, philosophy, literature and sciences

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1. Portuguese were in Kerala from 1493 — 1963 A.D.

were being revived in Europe with religious zeal. The Printing Press<sup>1</sup>, the immortal paintings and sculptors of the great masters Michael Angelo, Leonardo, Raphael<sup>2</sup> and others, the Greco-Roman architecture<sup>3</sup>, the heavenly music of Mozart and Beethoven<sup>4</sup> and a vast variety of the skills of European Renaissance were introduced into Kerala. Incentive was given to indigenous art-forms as well.

Greek drama was being revived and introduced into operatic form in Italy at the time. The epic of Charlemagne was a favourite theme with opera lovers. The missionaries took up the trend. They found the dramatic arts, especially folk arts, an effective and natural way of appealing to people. Indigenous folk dramatic arts of Kerala, *Kooth*, *Koodiyattam*, *Kaliyattam* and *Yathrakali* were revived for the purpose. Themes from the Bible, European history and episodes from the life of Charlemagne were introduced. There was a unique blending of Indian and European arts, Western and Oriental styles. A new flowering in dramatic arts followed and we get the new musical dance-drama *Chavittu-Natakam* in the operatic style much as we have the *Gandhara* art of the North as a result of the unique marriage of Indian and Greek art and architecture. East and West meets in a harmonious whole in *Chavittu-Natakam*.

*Chavittu-Natakams* are musical dance-dramas showing a fine synthesis of music, dance, dramatic action and gymnastics. In spite of its deep similarity to Western opera it is essentially Indian in its technique as is evident from a detailed study.

### Music

*Chavittu-Natakam* is first and foremost a musical dance-drama. No character speaks a single line of prose. The actors must be good singers too. Playback is not admissible. The actors sing while they act and take steps. Background music is also important. The musicians also play in accompaniment to the actor-singers.

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1. First press from Europe to India was brought to Goa in 1576 and the next one to Vaippicotta, Kerala in 1577. The first book was printed in 1579, at Vaippicotta in Tamil, the "lingua franca" of Kerala at the time. The letters were prepared by an expert, John Gonzalvez by name, a Jesuit missionary from Spain. A copy of this printed book "Doctrina Christiana" is kept in Sorbonne University Library, Paris. (See Christians and Malayalam Literature, P. 82 - Dr. P. J. Thomas).
  2. Images and paintings were first introduced into the churches of Kerala by the missionaries between 16-17 centuries. Before that there was only the Cross. (Old History of Kerala, P. 33 - Gundert.)
  3. The Roman bented arch supported by massive columns, the thin pointed arch and slim clustered columns of Gothic style, the cupola and like Western styles of architecture were introduced in churches of Kerala during this time.
  4. The Latin organ music of Kerala churches is the innovation of missionaries during the Portuguese period. Before that the music was in Syriac.

The music in *Chavittu-Natakam* is strictly composed in extreme union with the time measure and the action of movements. The songs are composed in the vast and varied *Esai* of the rich Tamil musical literature. Kerala has inherited a rich legacy of Tamil music from the "*Sangha Poems*," the classics of Tamil. It is from this vast Tamil music literature that *Koodiyattam* and *Kathakali* developed their music. It is in this sweet familiar *Tamil Esai* (song) that *Chavittu-Natakam* plays are composed by a master-mind, so as to depict the various *rasas*, mainly sentiment of valour, as most of the plays parade deeds of bravery and thrilling fights. Hence there is the popular saying: "a fourline song of *Chavittu-Natakam*, will make the old man and his stick dart." There are heroic scenes as in the play *Charlemagne* when the twelve Peers of the Emperor, line up on the stage in the glamour of feudal Knights, with drawn swords and challenge the foe.

We can also have sweet soft melodies in a love scene, a parting scene or a religious scene which raises our mood to aesthetic heights.

As a rule *Chavittu-Natakam* songs are in the *tandav* style. This suits its manly steps and the *chenda* (drum).

### Footwork

The striking beauty of *Chavittu-Natakam* is its measured footwork from which it derives its name "*Chavittu-Natakam*". The word "*chavittu*" means steps. The actors stamp their feet in time with the *chenda* and other musical instruments while they act and sing.

Of the main types of Indian dance, *tandava* and *lasya*, *Chavittu-Natakam* follows mainly the *tandava* style of dance. It is eventually masculine in character, suggestive of strength and vitality. The step, like the songs, are mainly meant for men — war-like men. There are however a few soft graceful steps of *lasya* type too for women. Women characters are few in *Chavittu-Natakam* and these roles are played by men.

*Chavittu-Natakam* steps are set to a variety of *talas* or time measures. Footwork is different for noble characters such as king, commandant, angel, priest and physician. Low personages such as the thief or executioner who remind one of the *Kari Vasham* (black characters) of *Kathakali* have a quite different set of steps.

Steps are 12 basic ones.<sup>1</sup> They are intermingled in an intricate variety as *Kavitham*, *Kalasam*, *Edakkalasam* and *Atantha*. *Kavitham* is similar to *Tillana* of *Bharatanatyam* and *Kavitham* of *Tamil Nattuvu Nritham*. It is performed at the first entrance of an important character — the hero

1. Basic steps vary from 12 to 16 in different places.

or minister. *Kavitham* is also performed at the start of a full Durbar scene, the Soldiers or retinue standing in rows. Mastery in *Kavitham* is achieved by the actors by long and strenuous practice. Correct display of *Kavitham* is considered the hallmark of a well-trained actor. *Kalasams* are vigorous steps made at the end of a song and *Edakkalasams* in the middle of a song. They are executed in a beautiful way to the accompaniment of the drum. This aspect makes *Chavittu-Natakam* closely resemble *Kathakali*. *Atantha* is a combination of flowing steps especially meant for women. The movement of *Atantha* resembles *Mohiniyattam*.

Foot-work is quite important in *Chavittu-Natakam*. The actors enter the stage, move about and go out keeping strict time to the drum-beats.

### Acting

*Chavittu-Natakam* is primarily a drama. Hence much importance is given to *natya* or dramatic representations. The actor expresses himself through song, gestures, and expresses the emotions and varying mental stages of the character which he represents and thus enables the audience to understand and appreciate the character.

The acting is spontaneous as the actors sing. *Mudras* are used so far as helpful to dramatic expression.

As pointed out earlier, *Chavittu-Natakam* is a folk art reminiscent of the ancient *Kalari* culture of Kerala<sup>1</sup>. Fighting and hunting are important items in the *Natakam*. Most of the plays depict deeds of valour especially the former. *The Play of Charlemagne* which exhibits the colourful fights of Emperor Charlemagne and his Twelve Peers, to redeem Jerusalem from the Turks, is typical.

Fighting in *Chavittu-Natakam* is performed in a realistic manner with actual swords, spears and other weapons. In earlier times, the actors were given thorough physical training in *kalasis* (gymnasiums) including oil massage to make their body supple and strong. They are next taught to wield the various weapons as sword, spear, dagger and *vati* (long stick). There were expert swordsmen among *asans* (instructors) competent enough to train the actors. Their line is fast disappearing. At present only nominal training is given to actors.

There are anecdotes of the feats performed by the actors. Some time ago when the *Play of Charlemagne* was being staged, Prince Ferebras

1. In Kerala, boys were given thorough Physical training in Gynmastic Schools from the age of 7 until 24, as in ancient Greece. In every *Kara* or Village Unit there were such Gymnastic Schools (*Kalasis*) reported by Portuguese historians of the 16th century.

was entering the stage with his lance pointed up, seeing which the comic actor threw a boiled egg from the farther end of the stage and the 'prince' cleverly caught it on the tip of his pointed lance .

### Musical Instruments

We have seen that the dance in *Chavittu-Natakam* is of the *tandava* type, hence the chief musical instruments used are the heavy forceful *cenda* (drum) and *elathalam* (cymbals). However the use of musical instruments is quite elastic in *Chavittu-Natakam*. Besides the old *chenda* and *elathalam*, an elaborate variety of musical instruments including modern ones, fiddle, flute *bulbul*, clarinet and harmonium are used.

The *asan* remains on the stage giving directions to actors with his cymbals. Formerly the other instruments were also placed by him. At present they are placed on the side of the stage.

Besides the group of musical instruments, there is a group of singers in *Chavittu-Natakam*. They stand in a group with the text open before them and a bell-metal lamp hung in front, they start the play by singing a chorus. They have also to sing a second time the songs sung by each of the actors. While they sing the actor gets time to begin a new stanza.

However, this background choral music in *Chavittu-Natakam* sometimes becomes boring as the musicians often sing at the top of their voices without any regard for harmony.

### Costume and Make-up

*Aharya Abhinaya* — expression of mood with the aid of costumes, ornaments and make up — is quite important in *Chavittu-Natakam*. The costumes are noted for their artistic excellence. Since the plays are mostly of great emperors and medieval kings and knights of Europe, the costumes are elaborately and richly done befitting those personalities. There is a profuse display of colourful silk, velvet and brocades studded with dazzling pearls, glass chips and like materials. The soldiers usually wear the Greco-Roman uniform. The helmet and breast-plate of the soldiers and the king's crown are first modelled in clay. There is still found here and there the village artisan making these costumes and embellishments with a masterly hand. Special prizes are given by the actors and elders of the village for good costumes. Hence there is keen competition amongst the artists in the making of costumes.

Costumes and make-up in *Chavittu-Natakam* are realistic. Masks and symbolic representation are not used. The emperors dress as emperors, soldiers as soldiers and sages as such in accordance with their age and place. The emperors and kings in their rich regal robes and dazzling

crown and sceptre, escorted by soldiers in their Greco-Roman uniform, helmet and armour make indeed an unforgettable sight.

### Text

*Chavittu-Natakam* texts are not printed. The earliest works such as the *Play of Charlemagne*, *Braseens* and *Jenova* were probably written between 16th, 17th century. The texts known as *Chuvati*<sup>1</sup> were first written on palm leaves in Tamil, *Vattezhuth* or *Granthakshara*, the language of Kerala at the time. These works were later copied on paper in the Malayalam script. These plays excel in literary value. Later works show a mixture of Tamil and Malayalam. I have found some 46 plays so far. Sad to say, very many of them are imitations or copies of old texts conveniently christened anew. Another sad truth I found was since the texts are still in manuscripts, the *asans* (masters) will not part with them. So naturally the tendency to make "pirated works" is all the more apparent. Hence for the same text we may find several different versions. Even for the play of Charlemagne, I could get four different ones. Omissions and additions are amply made in them. Difficult songs are avoided and easy ones of their own, inserted.

The names of the early authors are unknown. They are given as *Chech Thachan* (Servant of Jesus) and *Maria Thachan* (Servant of Mary) as is the usual practice of the missionaries<sup>2</sup>. Other evidence found in the texts also affirms that the author of the earliest plays most probably was a European missionary well versed in Indian and European dramatic techniques.

An important point: the language of *Chavittu - Natakam* has been a subject of much controversy. But if we are ready to study the linguistic history of Kerala with an open mind, we find that Tamil was in use in Kerala till the close of the 18th century amongst a vast majority of the people especially the village and coastal folk. We saw that the first book printed in Kerala (1579) was in Tamil. Documents of the times, written and printed books, inscriptions on tombs, all evince that Tamil was profusely used in Kerala, this later developed into a Tamil-Malayalam mixture.

However, the Tamil language of *Chavittu-Natakam* is a stumbling block to the present day Malayalam speaking Malayalis. Hence attempts are made to render the text into Malayalam. Also themes from Indian history and Epics are being introduced in the place of old European historical and Biblical themes.

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1. A kind of cuniform writing in use in Kerala. Letters are inscribed on dried palm leaves with pointed nails fixed on knives.
  2. In the dictionaries and grammar texts compiled by the Missionaries, they designate themselves as such.

### Play of Charlemagne

The *Play of Charlemagne* is the first of *Chavittu-Natakam* plays. It is an elaborate play of fifteen days to be performed by eighty leading actors. Rich in poetic concept, heroic adventure, dramatic expositions and the creation of sterling characters, the *Play of Charlemagne* exceeds all other *Chavittu-Natakam* plays. The theme of the play is the heroic adventures of the great emperor Charlemagne of 8th century France and his 12 valiant Peers. The play is based on the Charlemagne Classics of Italy especially "Orlando Furioso of Ariosto" extolled as the "Ihad of Italy".<sup>1</sup> When Charlemagne became King of France, Europe was in a perilous position. The Turks were marching on Europe from the East after capturing Jerusalem, while the Saracens had stepped into the Continent from the West via Gibraltar and actually captured Spain. A leader and patron was urgently needed. Pope Leo III invited Charlemagne of France to Rome, organised the Holy Roman Empire of European Kings and crowned him as its first Emperor, and entrusted him with the Charge of the Church and People. Paintings on the walls of the Lateran Church, Rome, and the coins of the times depict the Pope bestowing the crown on Charlemagne.

Charlemagne rose to the situation. He organised the army on the lines of Imperial Rome into 12 divisions and entrusted each to the care of his 12 "Paladins" (Peers). Roland his nephew was made leader of the 12.

A regular counter-attack began. After untold dangers Charlemagne won the day. Jerusalem was recaptured and the Saracen menace stopped on the borders of Spain. But when the army was celebrating victory, the Valiant Peers were treacherously murdered by the foe on the instigation of a kinsman who betrayed them for gold!

Charlemagne was greatly grieved. He lived a retired life, had the heroic deeds of his Peers compiled, along with the old heroic legends of France. This collection, *Chansen de Geste* written in French became the source of a flood of heroic literature for the different European languages. Local incidents, imaginary stories and Greek legends were all incorporated in them. During the Renaissance the Charlemagne epics were a favourite subject for the playwrights of Italy, where the home of European Opera had its best productions.

We get the theme of Charlemagne in *Chavittu-Natakam* from the Italian poetic composition *Orlando Furioso* written by Ariosto: *Orlando*

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1. A prose version of the text is available in Malayalam translated from Spanish by Fr. Jacob, Cochin.



is the Italian version of the French, Roland. The story of *Orlando Furioso* is centered not upon Charlemagne, but on Roland his nephew and leader of the Peers. The historical Emperor Charlemagne is all powerful and undaunted before his army and Peers. In this play Roland sometimes outshines the emperor in heroism and adamant will. He is like the Arjuna of *Mahabharata*; the pet of his colleagues and followers.

The *Play of Charlemagne* is divided into five parts. The first Part named *Chinna Roldon* (Little Roland) deals with the birth of Roland and the heroic adventures of his childhood.

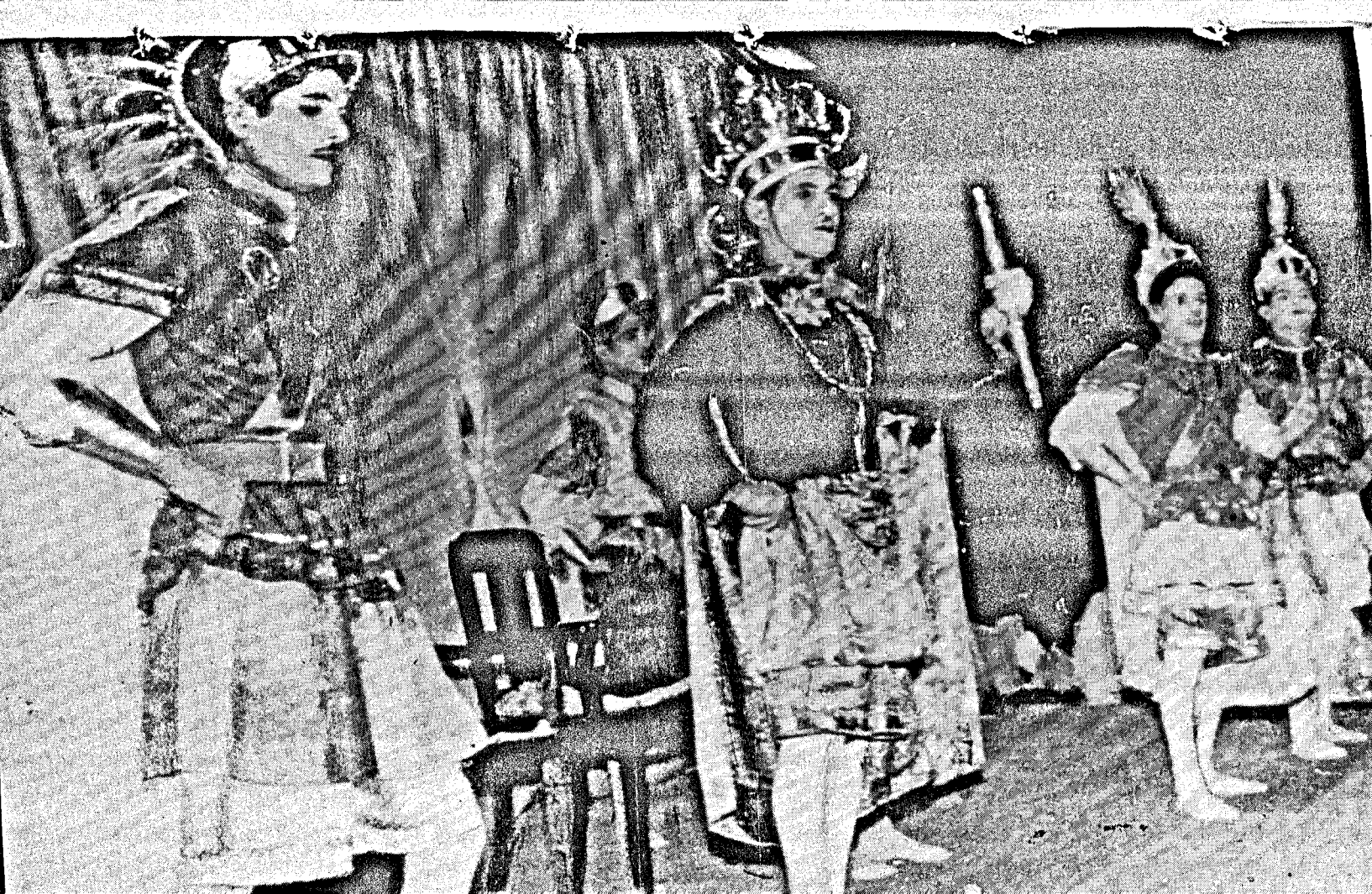
### Master and Training

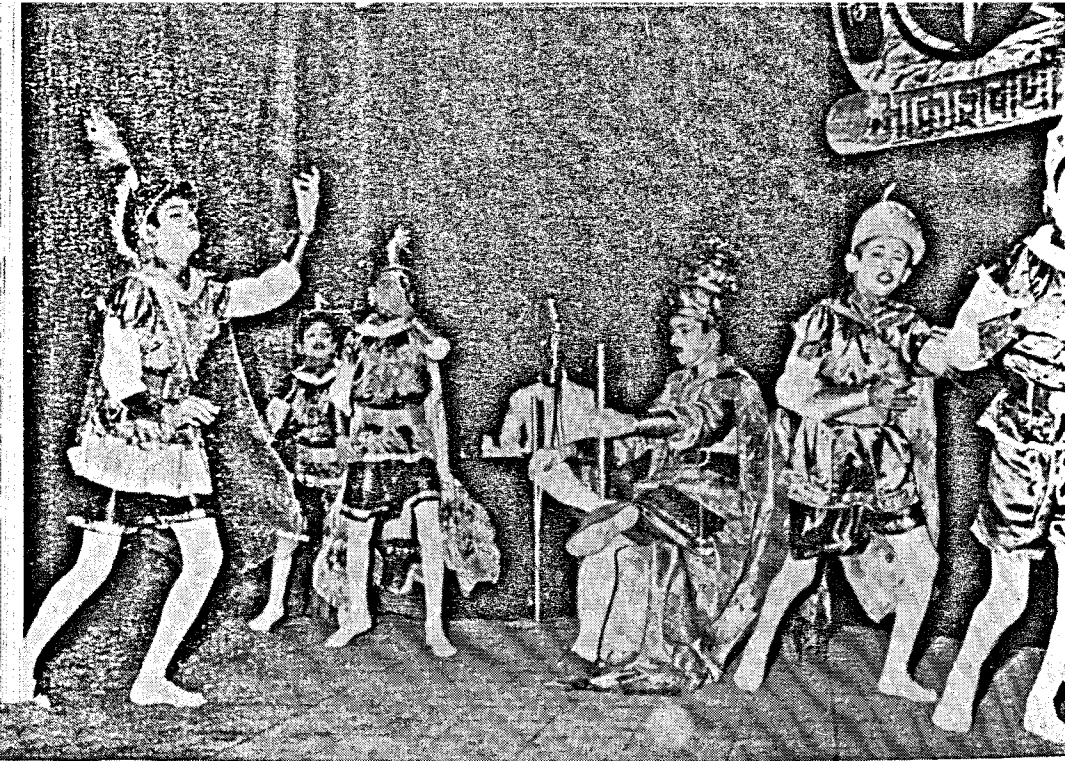
The master in *Chavittu-Natakam* is called *Annavi*, a pure Tamil word meaning instructor, *Annavi* is changed to *asan* later. The *asan* is held in great esteem and honour in the village.

*Asan* holds a unique position in the training and staging of the *Natakam*. He should be an expert in footwork, music, literature and acting. He should be a master in gymnastics and use of weapons too. Such expert masters are hard to get these days.

Actors for *Chavittu-Natakam* are trained in *Kalaris*. A preliminary test is given to boys in voice, marching, etc. Selected boys are ushered before the *Asan* by the parent and ceremoniously admitted according to the age old *gurukula* system. The boy places 10 *puthen*, one rupee, in three beetle leaves and presents it to the master. He then touches the master's feet and touches his own forehead and heart. The master blesses him; He is made a disciple. After pledging allegiance to the master, the boy pays his respects to the Text. *Asan* opens the first page of the book and holds it out to the boy who in turn places 4 *puthen* in the book and kisses it in reverence. The boy is admitted formally to the *Kalari*. Absolute obedience to the master is necessary in the *Kalari*.

The pupils are first taught the steps, both basic and the varying intricate ones, such as *Kalasam* and *Kavitham*. This takes a minimum of six months. After mastering the steps, preliminary training is given in the use of arms especially sword and lance. In earlier times, as pointed out before, thorough physical training including oil massage was given to boys to make their body lighter and healthier. Such intensive physical training is out of the question now-a-days.





Next, the actors are assigned the various roles by the *asan* according to their ability. Main actors, king, *mantri* and commandant, are selected from important families of the village. Some families in the coastal area retain hereditary aptitude in acting the *Natakam*. Minister's role is a coveted one in *Chavittu-Natakam*.

After these preliminary preparations actual *Cholliyattam* (rehearsal) begins. The *asan* recites each song to each of the actors, explains its meaning and context, and shows the action of movements which the disciple repeats. This rehearsal goes on for a year and sometimes two or three years. The expenses of the rehearsal such as light refreshments are met by the pupils. Important persons of the village also donate.

After long and intensive training, the drama is ready for the presentation.

### Stage and Performance

*Chavittu-Natakam* is performed in the open-air theatre of the village *maidan*. A raised stage of wooden planks is prepared, 40-50 metres long and not very wide. On either side of the stage, two up-stage porticos are placed, well decorated, representing the palaces of the kings of the opposite parties. A bell-metal lamp is lit on the stage before a cross. There is no curtain. The stage is open. On the farthest ends of the stage are two doors — entrance and exit for the actors. In the centre back of the stage is a small window through which the background musicians look on to the stage and follow the actors. Stage lights are prepared by lighting cloth dipped in oil.

The stage is put up by the joint effort of the village. The expenses of the performance are met from public contribution. The whole village is in a festive mood. They have supped earlier and are making preparations to go to the village *maidan*, the open-air theatre of the village. The village women, even the poorest of them, have a few *paisa* to donate for the *Natakam*.

*Chavittu-Natakam* is performed free, though the performance is quite expensive. It is essentially democratic in set-up. The audience sits on the floor.

The *asan* is busy on the day. Early morning he takes his pupils to church, attends service, approaches the elders for sanction and blessing, to wear the costume and appear on the stage as Charlemagne, Roland, etc..

The evening draws on. The *chenda* makes the first announcement at seven. It is time to put on the costumes. *Asan* with the open *Chavitti* in one hand takes a little powder and marks the sign of the cross on the forehead of the actor. With this formal inauguration, make-up begins.

An hour later, the second announcement is made by the drum and at 9 p.m. the third.

Everything is ready for the performance. A solemn sound of the cymbals announces the opening. Music starts from within — chorus — a long prayer in which *asan*, actors and musicians take part. The Holy Spirit invoked to give light, the saints are called upon, the *guru* and author thanked. The story is next sung in brief. This Prelude (*Virutham Moolal*) extends to a minimum of one hour, a parallel to the "Prologue" of Greek drama and the "*Na-andi*" of Sanskrit drama.

Before the actual play starts, there are a few preliminary scenes before the play: *Thuthi Yogar Kattiyan*" and *Thodayattam*.

### Thuthi Yogar

The *Thuthi Yogars* (venerators of the audience) are two boys, of about twelve, in soldiers' costume. They enter the stage from opposite ends making extremely energetic strides; move forward, salute the audience, turn round and pay respect to *asan* (kneeling on one leg and touching his feet) and give him *Guru Dekshina*<sup>1</sup> — usually a fine cloth and a few rupees. The artist who made the costume (costume *asan*) is also called to the stage and given presents. Usually the best costume wins a prize from the audience.

The actors step forward to the centre of the stage and perform intricate and difficult steps to the directions of the *asan*, who stands right on the stage with his cymbals. Correct performance of the steps wins applause from the audience, otherwise hooting too! *Asan* is alert to get this first applause. After the performance of steps, the boys sing the condensed version of the play. After this announcement they exit saluting the audience.<sup>2</sup>

### Thodayattam

After the boys retire, the *Thedaya Dancers*, half a dozen maidens making graceful *lasya* steps and singing prayers enter the stage. Their footwork and actions resemble *Mohiniyattam*.

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1. Final presentation to the Master. All the actors have to give this before the village audience at the staging of the play.
  2. The actors have to salute the audience on entrance and exit.

### Kattiyan (Comic Actor)

In between the scenes appears the *Kattiyan*<sup>1</sup> who makes a lot of fun of the mob. He is well-versed in the steps, music and other techniques of the drama and imitates them in burlesque. He is also like the "property man" of the Chinese stage, moving about picking up a fallen sword or cap, or carrying inside a dead Soldier.

An important function of the *Kattiyan* is to give a commentary on the play. He enters into direct talk with the *annavi*. In a Durbar scene, he asks: "*Annavi*! Who is the big personage on the stage?"

*Annavi*.. "He is the great Emperor Charlemagne of France seated on his high throne."

The Jester bows low before the "Emperor" and rejoins: "*Annavi*, what does the great Emperor order?"

*Annavi* "The great Emperor is giving orders to his ministers to prepare for a hunt—".

This "running commentary" helps the audience to follow the story. The village audience is quite pleased with the jokes of *Kattiyan* and at times a funny fellow gets up from the crowd and garlands *Kattiyan* with cakes and bananas.

### A Durbar Scene

Usually the play opens with the colourful Durbar Scene. A chorus by the musicians is sung from within announcing the entrance of the great Emperor and of his manifold virtues. The audience is roused. The Emperor enters escorted by a dozen soldiers in feather caps<sup>2</sup>. The Emperor introduces himself singing the 'Entrance Song' while the soliders make beautiful steps in a spontaneous way keeping to time measure and action of the movements of his Majesty. The Entrance song usually extends from 12 - 16 stanzas.

After this long performance, the Emperor rests for a while after which he orders a soldier to inform his minister to report immediately. The soldier steps forward, salutes and exits.

The minister is the most important actor in *Chavittu-Natakam*. He is also the chief commandant and an expert in gymnastics, steps and acting. His costume attracts special attention and sometimes excels that of the Emperor.

1. "Kattiyan" means jester in Tamil.

2. Two different types of costumes are used for durbar and fight. Durbar costumes are beautifully decorated.



A chorus announces his entrance. The minister sings the first stanza of his Entrance Song from within. Then enters, or rather jumps on to the stage with drawn sword, singing and taking strong, sturdy steps. The soldiers are rejuvenated at the sight of the minister and join his steps. As the minister finishes his entrance song, he thrusts his sword upright into the wooden plank of the stage.

Minister next salutes the Emperor in reverence and enquires of him the cause of his summons. The Emperor orders his 'dear *Mantri*' to give a detailed account of the doings of the Empire. The minister gives a long narration of the well-being of the empire and people. While the soldiers join him making graceful movements as *atanta*. This usually is an excellent performance which wins a second applause.

The Emperor is satisfied. His Majesty wishes to go for a hunt or a fight. The minister assents and the Emperor, minister and soldiers march off in order.

### War Scenes

The fighting scene is quite attractive. There are duel fights and group fights of 40-50 actors on the stage. The kings do not actively take part in the fight. The ministers lead the army. The two opposite parties enter from the two ends of the long stage and march to the centre. They stand face to face in two parallel rows with drawn swords and shields. They challenge each other first by clanging their shields. At the intimation from *asan's* cymbals the leader of one party steps forward, and challenges the opposite side singing the "War cry" (*Yudha Tharu*) and clanging his shield. His followers join him and the fight begins. It goes on for several rounds, and stops abruptly at the signal of the cymbal. Next the turn comes for the second party and they start fighting. The fight continues for half-an-hour and wins much applause.

Not only fights and hunting, but there are also lovely love scenes in *Chavittu-Natakam* on the pattern of the feudal knight ceremoniously winning his Lady Love.

### Mangalam

The *Natakam* which began at 9 p.m. is drawing to a close by dawn. In the closing scene, all the actors who participated in the drama, line up on the stage and sing the *Mangalam*, a prayer in thanksgiving for the happy end of the *Natakam*, and march off.

### Present Conditions

We have seen a sketch of *Chavittu-Natakam* more or less in its old set up. But sad to say, this exquisite art is much degenerated at present and

is fast dying out day by day. The reasons are manifold. A few may be enumerated below.

1. Want of patronage is the most serious handicap. *Chavittu-Natakam* is quite expensive. It was taught free and staged free. At present neither, the *asans* nor the village people can take the expense on themselves unless some help comes from outside.

2. Most of the eminent masters who knew the technique of the art are dead and gone. A few lingering here and there are disunited. They cannot boast of a high level of artistic perfection.

3. Techniques of the art are being forgotten. Intricate and difficult steps are avoided and easy ones adopted. Even basic steps are left out. They show a wide range of difference from place to place. Changes are also introduced in costumes, background music, instrumental music, scene arrangements and other techniques according to the will and pleasure of the parties.

4. Texts are not printed. Genuine old texts are hard to get. As they are in manuscripts, unauthorised versions are too common. This spoils the literary standard of the plays.

5. Tendency to modernise the art on the lines of the cinema has also spoiled it much.

6. Preliminary scenes as those of *Thuthi Yogar*, *Thodayattam* and *Kattiyan* are left out and almost forgotten in many places.

7. Educated people are keeping away from the art. Hence it is left in the hands of the ignorant mass.

8. Ignorance, illiteracy and drinking habits of the actors and *asans* have spoiled the old nobility of the *Natakam*.

9. Competition from modern cinema and drama is another serious challenge. Facilities of enjoyment in modern theatres are far more diverse and cheaper.

10. The Tamil dialect of the *Natakam* is a stumbling block to the present Malayalam-speaking audience of Kerala.

### Suggestions for Improvement

*Chavittu-Natakam* is so far known, as the first folk theatre of Kerala in its full sense. It is also an exquisite musical dance-drama of the modern



operatic style worth preserving from decay. In a democratic state, the government alone can take the responsibility of saving this peoples' art from its present degenerated position. The following points are notable.

1. A seminar may be convened of *asans*, actors and those interested in the art and an open discussion held on the present state of the art, its deviations from the old set up.
2. At present there are over fifty centres where *Chavittu-Natakam* is performed at random. A "*Chavittu-Natakam Festival*". can be conducted under the auspices of the Sangeet Natak Akademi in which the dramatic groups of the various places are given a chance for performance. This will give them opportunity to learn of the various methods in use, in steps, music, musical instruments, costumes scenic arrangement and other techniques of the art and a uniformity arrived at.
3. A study group may be sent to the different centres of the art to get first-hand information of the particular nature of the art. This group of course should be of members interested in the art, of academic disposition and aptitude for research.
4. Original texts of the *Natakam* are to be found and scrutinised with the help of those learned in Tamil music, and printed. *Much caution is to be taken before printing the texts*, as imitations and false copies abound.
5. Tendency to modernise the art is to be completely discouraged.
6. Deserving *Natak* Groups may be given grants to sustain them from failing. Renumeration may also be given to instructors as very many of them are poor. They cannot be expected to teach the art gratis.
7. Malayalam *Natakams* may be introduced and national themes as episodes from Indian history and Freedom struggle can be adopted. This is being attempted in a few places. Mention may be made of the Kerala Kala Samithi, Cochin which recently introduced the plays of *Hari-chandra* and *Akbar* in Malayalam successfully.
8. A central School of *Chavittu-Natakam* is quite feasible some where in the coastal areas preferably near Cochin, an important centre of the art. A separate department for the training of the *Natakam* may also be opened at the Kerala Kalamandalam, Cheruthurmthy, and a full time (paid) *asan* appointed and training given on a more scientific basis with the joint effort of *Kathakali* instructors.
9. Not only the Government and Akademi, but quasi-Government institutions as National Extension Blocks and village Panchayats, and

education and cultural organisations, also can take interest in the art and arrange two or three performances a year. This will do a lot for the survival of the the art.

Thus rejuvenated to its former status, *Chavittu-natakam* is sure to attract an enlightened audience. It can very well be presented on the International stage along with *Kathakali*, as India's particular art form.

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