

The Dominant *Rasa*: An Interview with Ammannur Madhava Chakyar*

K.P. NARAYANAPISHAROTI

K.P. Narayanapisharoti: Shri Madhava Chakyar, who was your chief preceptor in Kutiyattam? How did you learn from your teacher and develop as an artist? We would be interested in having a detailed account of your education and your training in the art.

Ammannur Madhava Chakyar: The person who took care of my education was Shri Chachu Chakyar. He had a younger brother, Madhava Chakyar. It was he who first taught me the alphabet and gave me primary lessons. Then I started learning under Chachu Chakyar. The *kāvya*s, *prabandhas*, *Anguliyankam*, etc., were taught by him.

K.P.N.: Were even the first lessons in Sanskrit given by Chachu Chakyar?

A.M.C.: No, it was Madhava Chakyar.

K.P.N.: The preliminary lessons in Sanskrit by Madhava Chakyar, followed by lessons for the stage by Chachu Chakyar—was it like that?

A.M.C.: It was not like that. The lessons pertaining to *vāchika* and those connected with *abhinaya* were given by both Chachu Chakyar and Madhava Chakyar. They gave me training in both these aspects of performance. I learnt under both of them.

K.P.N.: For a Chakyar, speech is very important and acting is even more so.

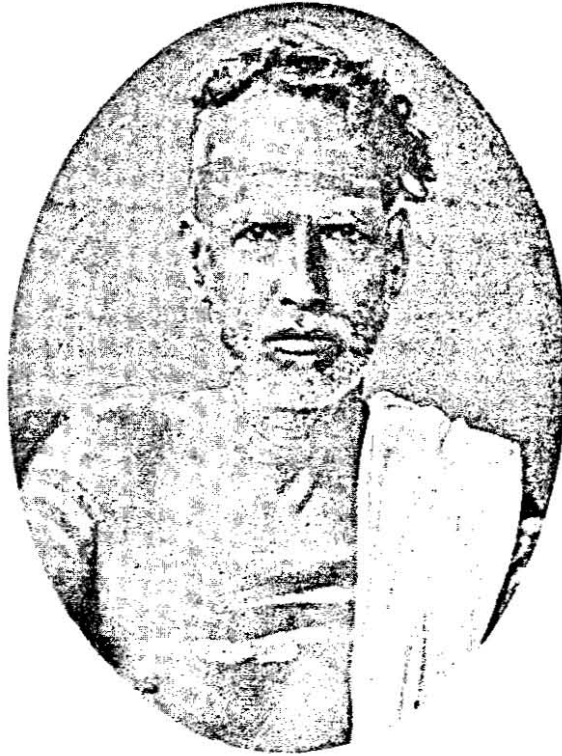
A.M.C.: Yes, they are important.

K.P.N.: In both these aspects, it was Chachu Chakyar who gave you the major part of your training, didn't he?

A.M.C.: Yes; but to improve upon what I had learnt, I had to approach some others also and grasp certain things.

* This interview with Ammannur Madhava Chakyar, eminent Kutiyattam actor and guru, was conducted for Sangeet Natak Akademi by K.P. Narayanapisharoti on 23 March 1995, on the occasion of the Kutiyattam Mahotsavam (24-29 March 1995) in Delhi organized by the Akademi. The transcript has been translated from the Malayalam by L.S. Rajagopalan and has been edited for publication with editorial help from K. Ayyappa Paniker. — Ed.

Courtesy: G. Yenu

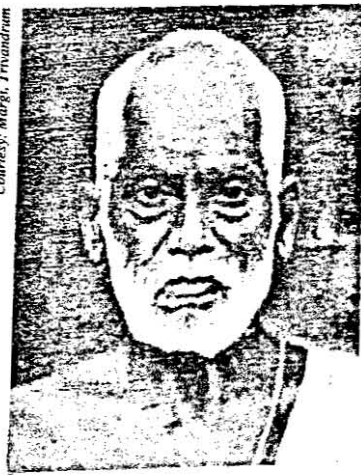


Chachu Chakyar, Ammannur Madhava Chakyar's uncle and teacher.



Ammannur Madhava Chakyar (left) in conversation with K.P. Narayanapisharoti.

Courtesy: Margi, Trivandrum



Kitangur Rama Chakyar, Chachu Chakyar's model in *abhinaya*.

K.P.N.: That was by your personal effort.

A.M.C.: Yes, it was by my personal effort but it was with Chachu Chakyar's permission. In the early days, he used to teach us speech. As far as *vāchika* was concerned, he was second to none, but he was not equally well known for his *abhinaya* [i.e., *vesham*]. Though he was learned in that as well. When the time came when we had to be taught various roles, because of his lack of sufficient practice, he would go and watch the performance of Kitangur Rama Chakyar and would teach us the roles on coming back here [to Irinjalakuda]. When he taught us, we would have to repeat the part till he felt that the *abhinaya* had come out well; that was his rule. He had to satisfy himself. There was no time limit either. It could be three or four months or whatever be the time required to perfect the performance. That is how he taught us *abhinaya*. As far as *vāchika* was concerned, he had no difficulty at all. Here, instead of teaching us *kāvyas*, he would spend time on *prabandhas* [a mixture of prose and poetry in Sanskrit which is the script for Chakyar Koothu].

K.P.N.: Was the teaching of *prabandhas* started first, that is, before starting the teaching of *abhinaya*?

A.M.C.: Yes, he had started teaching us *prabandhas*, but he would not have us perform them yet. He would take us wherever he went, so that we could hear him. He would take us along with him when he went for Chakyar Koothu performances and also for Kutiyattam performances.

K.P.N.: Only when we hear the speech of an actor are we able to produce it in actual performance, isn't that so?

A.M.C.: Exactly, and that applies both to speech and *abhinaya*. So whenever there was a Kutiyattam or Koothu he would take with him a couple of boys from among us. He took us along because he thought that his students should hear and see and learn. After the performance he would get back home; it was our home and also the *gurukula*. He would teach us whenever it was convenient to him, such was his style of teaching. When he came back, he would teach us the portion of the Kutiyattam that he had seen. That was his method.

K.P.N.: From whom did Chachu Chakyar acquire his ability in speech?

A.M.C.: He learnt his speech from Kitangur Parameswara Chakyar. He was an older member of the family of Rama Chakyar.

K.P.N.: So Chachu Chakyar used to watch the *abhinaya* of Rama Chakyar and get back home and teach you. Now Rama Chakyar's teacher was Parameswara Chakyar. I understand it was under him that Chachu Chakyar learnt the *Prabandha* Koothu—that is, the mode of *vāchika*.

A.M.C.: Yes, one part of performance he learnt by observation [*abhinaya*], the other he learnt by hearing [*vāchika*].

K.P.N.: So Chachu Chakyar acquired his abilities [in *abhinaya* and *vachika*] from those two teachers [Rama Chakyar and Parameswara Chakyar], didn't he?

A.M.C.: Yes; further, he brought about slight changes in the styles that were current at that time. In the manner of speech, formerly there used to be a sort of melodic way, like the *swaras* of verses; there was a bit of a dragging manner, even in the delivery of Malayalam.

K.P.N.: In what? In the Prabandha Koothu [Chakyar Koothu]?

A.M.C.: Yes, in Prabandha Koothu. It was Chachu Chakyar who did away with that style and started the present-day style.

K.P.N.: So he improved upon what he got. As an able student improves upon the skill he has acquired from his teacher.

A.M.C.: For that, some amount of theoretical training is also required. To acquire that, he went to the house [*illam*] of Karingampilli Namputiripad and became his student. It was Parameswara Chakyar, who had taught him *prabandhas*, who took him there.

K.P.N.: Which is to say — while rendering *prabandhas*, if one's speech is to improve, one has to understand the *prabandhas* well. If one is to understand the *prabandhas* well, knowledge of grammar is essential. Karingampilli *mana* [Namputiri household] was a good place to learn grammar. So, in order to impart greater knowledge in *prabandhas*, the teacher himself took Chachu Chakyar to a grammarian.

A.M.C.: Yes, but it was after learning much of the *prabandha literature* that he was taken there.

K.P.N.: After learning the verses by rote, when it was time to perform in public, he was taken there, wasn't it so?

A.M.C.: True. And then the teacher [the Namputiripad] found it difficult to part with his disciple [Chachu]! Even I had occasion to see his fondness for Chachu Chakyar. When Chachu Chakyar went there [the teacher's house] during the festive season, the Namputiripad would bring out his personal stock of powdered banana wafers, and fruits too, and serve them to his student, saying, "This is specially for Chachu".

K.P.N.: So grammar and scholarship were imbibed at Karingampilli *mana*, weren't they? If there is no erudition, the speech won't be proper. If the rendering of the *prabandhas* is to be good, deep scholarship is also necessary. But the per-

formance should not be a mere exhibition of erudition; it should be in a manner easy for others to follow. Isn't that so?

A.M.C.: That's right.

K.P.N.: Rama Chakyar was good in dramatic roles, wasn't he?

A.M.C.: He was great. There was no one like him in his time.

K.P.N.: There was no one like Kitangur Rama Chakyar in dramatic roles?

A.M.C.: There was none. His standard wasn't lower than that of the famous original Madhava Chakyar of Kitangur.

K.P.N.: So there was a Madhava Chakyar at Kitangur also?

A.M.C.: Yes. Haven't you heard of the Chakyar who frightened an English officer?

K.P.N.: Oh, about his frightening an Englishman's dog by miming throwing a stone?

A.M.C.: Yes, that Madhava Chakyar [of Kitangur] was the maternal uncle of Rama Chakyar. Rama Chakyar was superb in his love-scenes [*shringāra*] but, in acting with the eyes [*kanninte bhaganga*], Madhava Chakyar was superior.

K.P.N.: The eyes and the lips, wasn't it so?

A.M.C.: Yes. No matter how difficult the situation, he would portray any emotion with his eyes flawlessly.

K.P.N.: That means he was best with his eyes.

A.M.C.: But in *shringāra* Rama Chakyar was better than Madhava Chakyar. That was well known even in those days.

K.P.N.: So only if uncle and nephew joined together, the performance would be complete, wouldn't it?

A.M.C.: Madhava Chakyar might have given instructions to Rama Chakyar, he might even have taught him. But it was mainly Parameswara Chakyar who taught Rama Chakyar.

K.P.N.: So there were three people involved: Madhava Chakyar, Parameswara Chakyar, and Rama Chakyar. Three generations. It is from these three generations that Chachu Chakyar got all his knowledge. And from the Namputiripad also. So four persons in all.

A.M.C.: That is why he was able to perform for a very long time. Then he made some improvements; didn't I mention the change in the delivery of speech?

K.P.N.: Was it the way of speech or the *swaras* [*ragas*] employed? Some changes were effected for giving more life to the words, weren't they?

A.M.C.: Yes.

K.P.N.: Was it in the matter of words?

A.M.C.: Yes, it was in the matter of words.

K.P.N.: In those days, wasn't Chachu Chakyar taking roles in Kutiyattam?

A.M.C.: Only rarely. There was no great need for it since there was Kuttanchery Rama Chakyar. There were enough people to do the roles, but for speech there weren't enough. It was only after the death of Kuttanchery Rama Chakyar—when there weren't enough people to do Kutiyattam roles—that the need arose to teach us roles.

K.P.N.: I see; in those days the best person for acting in Kutiyattam was Kuttanchery Rama Chakyar. When Rama Chakyar passed away there was one person less. Then Chachu Chakyar tried to groom his students to take his place. Was that so?

A.M.C.: Yes.

K.P.N.: Who were the other Chakyar boys learning with you?

A.M.C.: The boys of the Kottayam Pothiyil Chakyar family.

K.P.N.: Were there some from other places too?

A.M.C.: No, not in those days. There were none when we were learning.

K.P.N.: In those days, if a Chakyar wanted to improve his art, he used to go to a *gurukulam*, didn't he?

A.M.C.: Yes, there were *gurukulams* in several places. Whether it was Pothiyil or Irinjalakuda or some other place, wherever Kutiyattam was performed, if students went there with a desire to learn the art, they could do so. There was no difficulty in matters of food and other necessities. The reason is that everything was on the expense account of the temple. Whatever income came in was spent on such things as board, lodging and teaching of Kutiyattam. Maybe there were exceptions. I have had no personal experience [of difficulties in learning at a *gurukulam*]. In the old days there was a bit of the feeling that others shouldn't know how the teaching was imparted.

K.P.N.: Why was that?

A.M.C.: If the elders of other families learned what I was teaching to the boys of my family, wouldn't the techniques of all the families become the same? People didn't favour that. But by our time this feeling had completely disappeared.

K.P.N.: One tradition will flow in one direction. It will not flow in another direction — is that so?



A.M.C.: Yes, the elders never liked the idea that their style should spread everywhere. That was the attitude. Pynkulam Rama Chakyar stayed at our place and studied there. Kitangur Narayanan Kutty, and others too, have studied under my uncle Chachu.

K.P.N.: Which of the *veshams* [roles] of Kitangur Rama Chakyar were more famous? What have you heard about his acting?

A.M.C.: He had passed away before I could understand things well. I think he died in 1116 [Malayalam Era: A.D. 1940]. His role as Ravana was good — Ravana of *Asokavanikāṅka*; he was also good as Bali and Ravana in other plays. His body was well suited for performance. You know, I went through training under the Thampuran [prince] of Kotungalloor; both of them had the same build — they looked very similar. I have a photograph of the Thampuran — more or less the same facial features. Also the build. The body was compact. There was a performance of *Jatayuvādhā* at Tripunithura when he was pretty old. Kitangur Rama Chakyar had taken the role of Ravana in the play. Jatayu's role was taken by Pynkulam Narayana Chakyar, and Pynkulam Rama Chakyar acted as Rama. The casting was apt.

K.P.N.: Kitangur Rama Chakyar's Ravana, Pynkulam Rama Chakyar's Rama — yes, the roles were well chosen. Did you see the performance?

A.M.C.: I played the Suta's [charioteer's] role.

K.P.N.: So you have first-hand knowledge of Rama Chakyar's role as Ravana.

A.M.C.: Then I have seen his Paccha roles. Whether it was Paccha or Kathi [types of role], he was always good. But when Madhava Chakyar was on the stage, it would seem as though there was something lacking in the eyes of Rama Chakyar — no one had eyes like Madhava Chakyar.

K.P.N.: Even during the time of Madhava Chakyar, Chachu Chakyar had become well known, hadn't he?

A.M.C.: Oh yes, it was in our boyhood that he was presented with a Veera Srinkhala [gold bracelet]. That was at Tripunithura, for the performance of a *prabandha* [Chakyar Koothu]. You know, in the *Ramayana* there is a portion where Bharata goes to see Srirama. This portion was rendered elaborating a verse in *anushtup* metre [four lines of eight syllables each], commenting on the abdication of the Raja of Cochin. It was the brother of the abdicating king who was then the ruler at Tripunithura. In his rendering, Chachu Chakyar focused on this point: while Srirama went into exile in a forest, the former king of Cochin was staying at Kanattukara [Trichur], apparently to fool his subjects and not because he was averse to ruling the kingdom. If the king really wanted to abdicate, he would not

Left: Pynkulam Rama Chakyar in performance.
Inset: portrait of Pynkulam Rama Chakyar.
Courtesy: K. Vasudevan Nambudiripad

have been within the borders of Cochin. Chachu built on this theme and spoke for three-quarters of an hour, basing the performance only on a four-line *anush-tup* verse. That is what I have heard.

K.P.N.: Do you remember the verse?

A.M.C.: Yes I do:

*Rāmastvāsannadeshavād
Bharatāgamanam punah
Āshankyotsukasārangām
Chitrakutasthalim jahau*

“Were you dismissed or did you voluntarily abdicate?” When Chachu asked this on the stage looking at the former Raja, he was annoyed but he couldn’t do anything about it. Subsequently, the gold bracelet was presented to Chachu Chakyar by the younger brother of the former king, the ruling Raja. That is what I have heard from Pynkulam Rama Chakyar.

Rama Chakyar, then, was a student of Chachu Chakyar. Chachu Chakyar recounted the story to Rama Chakyar on one occasion when he had forgetfully left behind the bracelet on the way to Irinjalakuda. In those days there were no buses, and the two, while walking one night from Kallettunkara [the nearest railway station] to Irinjalakuda, had rested under a big tree and chewed *pān*. The gold bracelet was in the *pān* kit. Chachu had taken it out and put it on the ground and left it there. It was only after reaching Irinjalakuda that he knew that he had forgotten the bracelet. Rama Chakyar remembered the place where they had rested and chewed *pān*. So he went and got it.

K.P.N.: Even though Chachu Chakyar was not an outstanding actor in Kutiyattam, he had the ability to groom some eminent actors, didn’t he?

A.M.C.: Yes; and besides, when he attired himself for some of his Kutiyattam roles, he was reasonably good. His eyes were full of life. The eyes were small, though.

K.P.N.: Have you seen him in such roles?

A.M.C.: Yes, three or four times at Tripunithura when the royal patrons insisted that he take some roles. He then played important roles like Soorpanakha, Bali, Ravana, etc. They used to ask him, “Why have you given up these roles?” And he would reply, “I don’t get enough satisfaction. Why take unnecessary trouble?”

K.P.N.: Didn’t he mean, ‘Not in this *sātvikābhinaya* but in *vāchikābhinaya*’? Anyway, he knew how to teach these roles very well. He groomed many disciples who became outstanding actors. I knew Rama Chakyar; and I know you. I don’t

know much about those after you.

A.M.C.: There is my elder brother [cousin] Parameswara Chakyar; he was also a disciple of Chachu Chakyar together with me and Rama Chakyar.

K.P.N.: I have seen Parameswara Chakyar in many roles. He would recite and render *mudrās* precisely. To those who wished to learn, his *mudrās* [hand gestures] were a very good model. Although his facial expressions left something to be desired, I still liked them. So you three are the disciples of Chachu Chakyar?

A.M.C.: There was another; it was his son. He died at a very young age, but he had already started doing Prabandha Koothu. He and I were the same age. He used to study in Tripunithura. After completing his studies he started doing Prabandha Koothu and kept at it for three or four years. Then he was afflicted by a cough which eventually led to his death. He was unwell for five or six months before he died.

K.P.N.: Was that the reason Chachu Chakyar's son Parameswara Chakyar and Vasudevan were kept away from Irinjalakuda?

A.M.C.: You can't say that was the reason.

K.P.N.: There is a saying — a successor to a stalwart is difficult to find.

A.M.C.: In fact, it was like that. In 1116-1117 [M.E.: A.D. 1940-41], Uncle Chachu Chakyar was all-in-all. He and Pynkulam Rama Chakyar were the leaders in Koothu and Kutiyattam. Both Koothu and Kutiyattam performances were held regularly. Though we started training in 1106 [A.D. 1930], and I began taking roles in a small way, I started Prabandha Koothu only in 1118 [1942]. By 1120-1121 [1944-45] Uncle Chachu had retired, but I and Rama Chakyar were there to carry on the work! It was an opportunity for me to learn. Rama Chakyar was there to teach. Chachu Chakyar was not involving himself in things; it was a good opportunity.

K.P.N.: As his disciples were becoming mature artists, he vacated his place for them to take over.

A.M.C.: Yes. *Pādam shishyah swamedhayā*, that is what they say. [The student should learn one-fourth of the subject by his own efforts.] *Āchāryat pādam ādatte*. [The preceptor teaches one-fourth.] *Pādam sabrahmachāribhyah* [One-fourth is learnt from fellow students], *pādam kālakramena cha* [One-fourth in course of time]. It was like that in my case; that is how I have managed to survive.

K.P.N.: I have heard a *shloka* of Kalidasa:

*Pātravisheshe nyastam
Gunāntāram vrajati shilpamādhātuh*

*Jalamiva samudrashuktau
Muktaphalatām payodasya.*

If a good disciple is taught an art, the standard of the art will go up. As far as I am concerned, I have only small scraps of knowledge received from people like you.

A.M.C.: My uncle seemed to have the impression that the standard of *abhinaya* in Kutiyattam was below par. That must be the reason why he readily agreed to my going to Kotungalloor. I had not acquired any knowledge of the *shāstras* by then. I had only learnt Prabandha Koothu from my uncle.

K.P.N.: Which *shāstras* do you mean, *Nātyashāstra*?

A.M.C.: No, the other *shāstras* — *vyākaraṇa* [grammar], *tarka* [logic], etc. There should be some amount of knowledge of such things, though one needn't be an expert in them — that was my uncle's opinion.

K.P.N.: Yes, one should have the equipment to get at the meaning correctly.

A.M.C.: Besides, the style [way of presentation] of *tarka* is required in this art. To talk about matters connected with *abhinaya*: I went to Kotungalloor for the Koothu during the festival there. When it was over, Kochukkavu Thampuratti [a princess of Kotungalloor] told me that I should learn some more Sanskrit. I told her, "At my place there isn't a suitable teacher." Then she said, "Come over here, we shall set things right." That is how I went over to Kotungalloor.

During the festival there, the Thampuran used to come and hear the Koothu. I thought I could meet him then and ask him. I told Bhagavathar Thampuran that I wished to learn the art: "I have come to find out if you could teach me." He said, "It's not a bad idea. It's necessary, but there is one difficulty. If you learn this art, you will earn more ill-will. That is also necessary." Then I asked him, "Would it be any use if I learned the art?" The Thampuran asked in turn, "Why do you ask that?" I said, "Nothing in particular; since the eyes are most important [in acting], I'm asking you". [Madhava Chakyar's eyes are grey and not black.] The Thampuran said, "If you weep, wouldn't it look like weeping, if you laugh, won't it look like laughing? Then why do you doubt yourself? I have only one difficulty — I am getting a disciple in my old age. But that's not too bad. You can stay here and study," he added. So I got his consent.

After the festival I came back to Irinjalakuda. I had to get permission to go to Kotungalloor. So I asked Uncle Chachu, "What if go to Kotungalloor to study under the Thampuran?" He replied, "That's not a bad idea; rather, it is necessary." It was then that I learned that my uncle already knew about my desire. He added, "The Chakyars here had a correct style in Kutiyattam, which one could learn without difficulty. All that has been lost for some time now. So it will be good if you go there and learn." That is how I got my uncle's permission.

K.P.N.: How long did you stay at Kotungalloor?

A.M.C.: About two-and-a-half to three years. When there were some essential commitments at home, like the Koothu at Trichur¹, I would come over and later go back to Kotungalloor.

K.P.N.: How was the stay there?

A.M.C.: In the beginning, I used to live in the palace itself, like a member of the household. I was staying at the palace of Kochukkavu Thampuratti. Then, when I started learning the *Nātyashāstra*, I started staying with the Thampuran. My living and sleeping quarters were the *patippura* [gate - lodge] of the other palace [the Thampuratti's palace].²

K.P.N.: Did you study subjects connected with *abhinaya* at Kotungalloor as well?

A.M.C.: I had to do the *abhinaya* for many of the parts I had already learnt. The Thampuran would point out to me the defects in the *abhinaya*.

K.P.N.: Did you start with the first chapter of the *Natyashastra* — the *uttamānga abhinaya*?

A.M.C.: Yes, I started with that very chapter. I proceeded from there in regular order. The Thampuran would point out to me what each item of *abhinaya* was meant for. He would point out the good and bad points of performance. He would show me the *drishtis* [ways of looking]. If he was in a cheerful mood, he would demonstrate them, although it was physically a bit tiring for him. He had a bit of a problem with his piles. If he held his breath and exerted pressure, it would affect his piles. At times there would be blood. So he used to be reluctant to demonstrate.

K.P.N.: Did you learn the method of *abhinaya* in which you hold your breath and exert pressure at Kotungalloor?

A.M.C.: Yes, it was there that I learnt the method. Uncle Chachu would tell me, "Here [in Irinjalakuda] the *abhinaya* used to be done without any strain." He used to be worried that that method would be lost. But when I started learning *abhinaya* with the Thampuran, I found that his method was more effective than the other. Though it's true that there was a great deal of physical strain when you held your breath. At the start, when you enacted sorrow, anger, etc., sometimes you would feel a little dissatisfied. One had to pay special attention to learn the system. You should use it only if you have enough practice behind you.

K.P.N.: All your energy should not be expended at once — was that the principle?

A.M.C.: Yes, you gather more strength and spend less of it — that was the

¹This may refer to ritualistic performances at Trichur assigned to the family and regularly performed at specified times.

²There used to be about 400 students from various places studying at the Kotungalloor palace complex; several princes handling various subjects were in charge of their instruction.

method of acting. The Thampuran showed me the method of enacting a death scene . . . this involved a kind of breathing which is close to the way one breathes at the time of death. I spent half an hour to three quarters of an hour every time practising it before him. I would draw a breath, and he would point out, this is not right, that is not right, etc. All the five breaths had to be executed properly. During this exercise, if your *chinnan* [a kind of breathing to be simultaneously executed in the enactment of death] was blocked, you had to start again. The second and third breaths would then come out properly. Only when you had reached the *mahan* [the penultimate breath] could you say, 'I have done it'. Till then one had to go on moving up and down . . . In the midst of this one had also to take care of the vagaries of *chinnan*.

K.P.N.: "*Kshudrakastamakachhinno mahānoordhvaścha panchama*" [The five kinds of breath leading to death are *kshudrakan*, *tamakan*, *chinnan*, *māhan*, and *oordhvan*]. Isn't it like that?

A.M.C.: Yes, you go on till the *oordhvan* [the last of the breaths] is reached. Once you reach *mahan*, you can feel at ease. The number of inhalations and exhalations gets fixed then and *chinnan* doesn't create trouble. The breaths up to *mahan* have to be taken slowly. That is all. *Oordhvan* is not like that. There, while taking the breath, you first shake the body feet upwards. In the second movement, from the hip upwards. In the third movement, from the throat upwards. The first two are enough. The third is troublesome. It is actually not required. The Thampuran showed me that. When I started performing *Balivadham* using this method of enacting a death, there were people who asked, 'Is all this necessary for *Balivadham*?' Because they felt that the play showed the salvation of Bali; it was not a mere death you saw out there. I asked the Thampuran about this and he replied: "*Moksha* [salvation] is only for the soul. These are the death throes of the physical body; so it is unavoidable." It was such points that he made. Uncle Chachu, on the other hand, told me that it was Bali's salvation that was represented. Of course, that is clear from the drama. But it was a death that was shown, what everyone had assembled to watch. So there could be no objection to the way it was enacted by me.

K.P.N.: I have heard something similar about Bhasa's *Urubhanga*. The popular opinion is that it is a play with a tragic ending. Present-day scholars also say that it is Bhasa's only tragedy. But its end is the passage of Duryodhana to heaven. Is the journey to heaven a tragic one!

A.M.C.: When I was going for the Kutiyattam at Tripunithura I happened to be with the Thampuran at Kotungalloor. He asked me which play I would be doing, and when I said it was *Torana Yuddham*, he said, "I would like to see that." Then

Right: Ammannur Madhava Chakyar enacting the death of Bali in *Balivadham* : "*Moksha* is only for the soul. These are the death throes of the physical body . . ."



I enacted the main scenes from the play before the Thampuran, and when the *Kailasoddhāranam* scene [the lifting up of Mount Kailasha] and *Parvati Viraham* [the quarrel between Shiva and Parvati] were done, he said, "It would be good if you took care of one point in *Parvati Viraham*. The way you are doing it now, there is a break in the *rasa*: when Parvati is cross with Lord Shiva and starts moving away from him, she gets up on the stool! You portray all the emotions standing on the stool! It's the normal procedure, but it's just not good enough. The emotions that were being portrayed during the conversation between Shiva and Parvati are lost [to the audience] when you stand on the stool. There shouldn't be such a break in the middle. The sentiment should not be disturbed. Therein lies the beauty." He made these remarks and sent me on my way. At Tripunithura there were two Namputiri pundits, the Bhattathiris of Kunnathu *mana*³, who watched the performance. It seems both of them said, "After the death of Kesava Kurup [a famous Kathakali actor], this is the first time we have seen a proper *Parvati Viraham*." The Thampuran himself told me that the scholars had told him that.

K.P.N.: You mean, this was their remark on the *Parvati Viraham* portion?

A.M.C.: Yes, the Thampuran had instructed me only in that portion. Parikshit Thampuran, too, wrote to Irinjalakuda, "If you teach this fellow well, he will reach the top." He also wrote to Kotungalloor after seeing the Kutiyattam.

K.P.N.: He sent his compliments on the training at Kotungalloor, didn't he?

A.M.C.: Yes. The Kotungalloor Thampuran was rather anxious to see me. I delayed the meeting a bit. You know why? They had started sending away the students who were staying there. Times were changing. I didn't want him to tell me, 'Enough, you can go home now.' So I delayed my return. All the students had to visit the temple at Kotungalloor at least once a month. That was the rule. After coming away for the performance it had not been possible for me to do this. So on the first of the month I thought, now let me go back. When I was taking my bath in the temple tank, someone said to me, "I say, the Thampuran has been enquiring about you for several days." I told him, "I am going to him now." After praying at the temple I went to see the Thampuran. He said, "I have been waiting for you. I wanted to see you. Why did you delay your return?" Was it possible for me to tell him the reason? I didn't say a word. He seemed to have understood the matter. He said, "Madhavan, you can stay here and study as long as you wish. I have no objection whatsoever." It was later that I learnt he had received a letter [from Parikshit Thampuran] from Tripunithura.

³The Bhattathiris are aristocratic Namputiris. Kunnathu *mana* was an important Namputiri family.

K.P.N.: You learnt *rasa-abhinaya* at Kotungalloor, didn't you?

A.M.C.: Yes. As regards *mudrās*, there was a bit of a difference there [from the practice at Irinjalakuda]. That was because of the difference in family traditions. But I used to render *mudrās* there according to my family tradition. There are some traditional restrictions, you see. The Thampuran used to demonstrate the *mudrās* in a particular way. When I performed them in my own way, he never said it shouldn't be so. He said, "You needn't change anything . . . You also have the facility to sit and act. So you continue in your style. One thing you have to take care of: there shouldn't be any break in *rasa*. There should be no break in the basic emotion [*sthāyibhāva*]" So on various occasions I have made small changes on the advice of various people.

K.P.N.: You stayed there for over two years, didn't you? Did you have training in the method of depicting the nine *rasas* [*navarasa*]?

A.M.C.: I went through all that. Though I had had enough practice with the eyes, I had further training after going to Kotungalloor. The Thampuran used to warn me especially about the eyes and about *rasas*.

K.P.N.: The opportunity to learn the art as prescribed in the *Nāṭyashāstra* is rare. You are fortunate. Now, to turn again to your family history of three generations. There was first Kitangur Madhava Chakyar, then his younger brother Parameswara Chakyar, and his nephew Rama Chakyar. The knowledge of these three people from one family was transferred to Irinjalakuda, wasn't it? The person who imbibed it all was Chachu Chakyar. From what he learnt, the *vāchikā-bhinaya* part stayed with him; the *abhinaya* part he divided among his disciples. Isn't that so?

A.M.C.: Yes.

K.P.N.: Have you got any disciples like that?

A.M.C.: I want to have such disciples. Now, when I teach, I have to see if the students are able to absorb the teaching and perform properly. Then I have to tell them what would be appropriate in the dramatic situation. No one has come to me to learn as I learnt from my teachers.

K.P.N.: Aren't some boys learning there [at Irinjalakuda] with you now?

A.M.C.: Some are learning there all right, but they haven't reached the stage where I could tell them about those breaths, for example. They haven't attained that standard — that is the trouble. Only if you put something in a proper vessel will it remain there, isn't it so? I haven't yet got such an opportunity.

K.P.N.: But some boys have come to you?

A.M.C.: They have. Some of the students who are learning now may turn out to be good. They may well ask why I say they may turn out to be good. They are all boys studying in schools : we never went to school. So they can learn [at the guru's home] only when they have the time for it.

K.P.N.: Such *gurukula* learning is useful only when one spends all one's time there. But one also has to adjust to the times.

A.M.C.: This way, the learning is delayed. I have to be [merely] satisfied that things are all right for a particular occasion. There is no point then in talking about *rasa*. So one has to tell a student, 'You laugh now', 'Look with your eyes bulging', etc. What else can you do? If they haven't reached a stage of understanding where one knows, for example, what *shringara* is, such difficulties are bound to arise.

K.P.N.: How many students are there now?

A.M.C.: There are five or six. There are also some girl students. Among them it is only Usha who is in a position to understand what I say— that is, about women's roles.

K.P.N.: Yet there are also other students?

A.M.C.: Yes, there are also other students. If they were also anxious to learn, things would be much easier.

K.P.N.: In some students, this desire shows at a young age. In some others, it shows later. One could say it's a difference in their natures. Of course, it also happens that you just see a student and you feel, 'I must teach this boy'.

A.M.C.: That is true. I have myself often been spanked for not going to class. At that time there was no desire, no mood, to learn. There was hardly a day when I wasn't spanked. I also know from personal experience that learning becomes easy when there is a desire to learn. After the death of Uncle Madhava Chakravarthy, as there was no one else to carry on the work, Uncle Chachu got ready to teach. He was finding things difficult. It was when I saw all that that the desire to learn came to me.

K.P.N.: So there was a time when you were lazy. there was also a time when you got over this laziness. Wasn't it so?

A.M.C.: Yes. After getting over my laziness, I worked hard for five years. It is only those five years which you could say was a period of really hard work. Of course, you always have to work at this art.

K.P.N.: In the case of a person who starts learning the Vedas, it's no good if he stops his studies midway. So also in any family art; once you start learning, you have to be at it till the end of your life. Even when somebody is proficient, on some days some part comes out especially well even without his knowing it.

A.M.C.: Half of it is in God's hands, half of it is in one's own hands; isn't that the saying?

K.P.N.: Yes. There is a chapter called *Siddhivyanjakam* in the *Nāṭyashāstra*. Some part of *siddhi* comes from providence, some by one's own efforts, some from the preceptor. All that is required.

A.M.C.: When an outsider feels that a performance has been good, it happens only by God's blessings. If we must have Gods' blessings, we must work hard . . . Only if these outsiders feel that the performance has been good is it of use. We can't make them feel satisfied. For that God's blessings are essential.

K.P.N.: Do you remember anything else about Chachu Chakyar? Say, about his *abhinaya* or his mode of teaching—anything connected with his art?

A.M.C.: He used to take great care in what he taught . . . and he had an extraordinary ability to make others feel the different moods and sentiments, using his voice effectively, while doing Prabandha. The manner of reciting verses, the power behind the words, the intonation . . . they are all so important. People in the audience would be in tears when he dealt with tragic episodes. When he dealt with heroic episodes, people would be in a state of helpless suspense, wondering what would happen next! What I mean is, he accomplished all this with words alone. He had the ability to convey a *rasa* fully. Of all the Prabandha stories, *Bhagavat Dootu* [Krishna trying to mediate before the start of the Mahabharata war] was his favourite. First the heroic sentiment and, finally, when Krishna returned, the mood of *bhakti*. There would be few in the audience who wouldn't be in tears.

K.P.N.: Which part of *Bhagavat Dootu* is this?

A.M.C.: Where Krishna takes the cosmic form. Also the wailing of Dhritarashtra—when that portion was recited. Then *Nrīga Moksha*, the portion where *Nrīga* is in a quandary after giving away the gifts. Also some portions of *Rāmāyāna*. Whichever may be the part, the sentiment, the ability to render it brimming with appropriate *rasa*, was unique to Uncle Chachu. He would start in a high voice. One would fear that the copper sheets covering the *koothāmbalam* would shatter. You see, there was no mike then. So one had to practise delivering the lines in a loud voice.

K.P.N.: If the next generation is not groomed properly, it would be a great loss.

A.M.C.: But we cannot predict how things would turn out in these changing times.

K.P.N.: Yet we also have to try as hard as we can.

A.M.C.: Yes, we have to; we have to aspire, we have to work hard. We can only hope we can do all that.

K.P.N.: We have another advantage now. Earlier, it was not possible for people other than the Chakyars to take rôles in Kutiyattam and Koothu. Now, we can get over the difficulty of paucity of actors. The times are, in a way, favourable to us. We may be able to get good students, with the right physical features — a good face and eyes — and inborn taste.

A.M.C.: But there is another difficulty in teaching today. The resources have dried up. The times are such that no Chakyar family can afford to keep students at home and feed them free. My family had an income of ten thousand *paras* [measures] of paddy [yearly]. All that was spent in feeding ourselves and the visitors and students. Now this income isn't there at all. Now we have to strive hard and depend on the opportunities we get to earn money. That is all we can do.

K.P.N.: It's a relief that the eyes of the Government are now opening to this reality.

A.M.C.: It's a big thing. Otherwise everything would be over by now. If this scheme [for support to Kutiyattam, initiated by Sangeet Natak Akademi] had not been planned urgently and if the Government was not prepared to help now, the art would have been already dead.

K.P.N.: We can see signs of a future for this art. Rather than attempt new plays, we should look for old ones and preserve them through performance. For example, *Shākuntalam*. It's not known when *Shākuntalam* went out of vogue.

A.M.C.: I don't think anyone has even thought about it.

K.P.N.: With the help of the late Māni Madhava Chakyar, the third act of *Shākuntalam* was performed at Kerala Kalamandalam. I was able to see it. It was good. Still earlier, Pynkulam Rama Chakyar presented the role of Vidushaka in the second act of *Shākuntalam* during the annual conference of Kerala Sahitya Parishat at Trivandrum. In this way, we should try to produce portions of well-known dramas. It would be much easier to revive the Kutiyattams which were in vogue earlier. There may still be people who remember how they were presented. We may be able to get at the *attaprakāraṃs* and *kramadipikas* of these plays in old manuscripts. We must first strive to revive these plays. There is a saying [in Malayalam]: You would earn more *punya* (merit) by renovating an old temple than constructing a new one; you would acquire more merit by digging a new tank than renovating an old temple; it is even more meritorious to renovate a silted tank than to dig a new one.

A.M.C.: It is easier to travel along an old path than to make a new path; I used to say this when people asked me for advice. The old paths have been paved by our ancestors. We need to take new paths only after exhausting the old ones. We

would be saving ourselves half the trouble.

K.P.N.: I have felt so myself. There is that *shloka*: “*Yasyām na priyamandanāpi mahishi devasya Mandodari.*” Isn’t it in *Torana Yuddha*?

A.M.C.: From that *shloka* Kalidasa has lifted the expression *priyamandanāpi* and used it in *Shākuntalam*: *Nādatte priyamandanāpi bhavanām snehena yā pallavam*. Why did Kalidasa borrow the expression from Bhasa? In the verse ‘*yasyām na priyamandanāpi*’, there is a head-to-foot description of Mandodari. In *Shākuntalam* he wanted such a head-to-foot description of Shakuntala to be enacted. Kulashekhara also wanted a head-to-foot description of Subhadra in *Subhadra Dhananjaya*. For the verse ‘*nava [chala] kuvalaya dhamno*’, the head-to-foot description is done even today. Thus the tradition established by Bhasa still continues in Kutiyattam. Is there any Sanskrit play which is as attractive on the stage as the plays of Bhasa?

A.M.C.: No, there’s none.

K.P.N.: Among the Sanskrit plays, the oldest are those of Bhasa. Of these, some are still enacted in Kerala. Next in popularity is *Āshcharya Choodāmani* of the Kerala poet Shaktibhadra. Then one act of *Nāgānanda*, some portions of *Tapati Samvaranam* and *Subhadra Dhananjaya*. These are all presented today. But many famous dramas have gone out of vogue.

A.M.C.: If we understand well the method of presentation of the existing plays, it would be possible to create the *attaprakārams* for the plays that are not being performed. It’s not difficult.

K.P.N.: Anyway, now we can only pray that we would be able to revive some of the acts of these plays by studying all the *attaprakārams* and *kramadipikas* of various plays well and thus to help the Kutiyattam movement survive. Let this Kutiyattam festival be the beginning of such an effort. With that prayer let us conclude this discussion. Thank you. □