

# TRADITIONAL DISCIPLINES IN TRAINING

*A survey of work at Kerala Kalamandalam*

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The history of classical arts the world over bears evidence of a particularly sad period at one time or another in the life of a particular artform. Usually, when that particular artform had reached its pinnacle of glory, it took a sudden turn towards a decline. It was ignored by the public, sometimes it was even discredited. The greatest among the classical arts provides no exception to this rule. Their revival and rejuvenation then devolved on a few dedicated persons. Precisely, this was what happened to Kathakali, one of the greatest in classical theatre. A hundred years ago, royal pleasure and patronage in Kerala descended only on connoisseurs of Kathakali. Maharaja Uttram Thirunal, who succeeded Swathi Thirunal, the great scholar and composer, was so devoted to Kathakali that he had a dark cellar specially constructed in his palace, so that he could get the actors to perform even during daytime. In those days, it was considered the height of fashion to be a Kathakali artist. Royal favours showered on you if you were a composer of an *attakkatha* (play for Kathakali). The Kathakali actor had a social standing too, as the chamberlain of the Maharaja was himself a leading actor. Uttram Thirunal's period was the golden age of Kathakali, to use an old-fashioned phrase.

The decline of Kathakali after the death of Uttram Thirunal was swift. Swathi Thirunal had introduced English education in the State. A new crop of young men arose in society, displaying their smattering of Shakespeare and Emerson. Macaulay's system of education successfully cut them away from their original cultural moorings, without giving them any solid alternate values. But their knowledge of English gained them official positions of power and prestige. They constituted the new elite, complacent in their arrogance and artificial western ways, and shrugging away with contempt from everything that was traditional.

orthodox or conventional. Classical artforms became some of the first few casualties at their hands. To them, the ever-vibrant theatre that was Kathakali was nothing but a dumb show, a rather ravenous pantomime. The *Upanishads* and the epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, were trash and nonsense compared to the works of Thackeray and Scott.

At the turn of the present century, Kathakali was indeed thoroughly and totally neglected by society. It was only on account of the work of a few dedicated *acharyas* that Kathakali managed to stay alive. These *acharyas* continued to teach and train. They went about with their troupes performing from one end of Kerala to the other for a pittance. Life was indeed one continuous state of misery for the artists who had no land to fall back upon who did not know where their next meal was coming from. The masters of arts and the bachelors of arts had no time for Kathakali or any other traditional artform of Kerala. Cultural disintegration had reached such a state that it was not unusual for a troupe to be paid just a rupee and given an evening meal for a whole night's programme!

It was only in the twenties that a break was visible. Professor V. Krishnan Tampi in the South and Poet Vallathol Narayana Menon in Central Kerala spearheaded the movement for the revival of the Kathakali Theatre. Krishnan Tampi had spent a number of years in England and Europe and had returned home with a great deal of respect and admiration for his country's own cultural values. The theatre festivals of the West and the devotion of the people to classical artforms had opened his eyes to the realities at home in his own land. A poet and a great scholar in Sanskrit, he recognised the intrinsic merits of the Kathakali Theatre. He started organising a movement for the revival and popularisation of Kathakali from Trivandrum, his headquarters.

Mahakavi Vallathol Narayana Menon was not satisfied with the mere efforts to revive and popularise Kathakali. He decided to give it an institutional foundation. Mustering the support of some of his dedicated friends, of whom particular mention should be made of Mukunda Raja, Vallathol set about organising a permanent institution which would not only give training in Kathakali, but also engage itself in the continuous development of classical artforms. The Kerala Kalamandalam was the result of his toil. It was an epic struggle that the Mahakavi had to go through to set it up.

Beginning in a small way in 1930, in a private residence at Kunnamkulam (20 KM from Trichur) the Kalamandalam had only three or four students to start with. Two years later, it was shifted to Ambalapuram near Trichur. Although institutionalised, Vallathol jealously guarded the *gurukula* traditions of teaching. He would have only the best in the profession on his faculty. Guru Kunchu Kurup, Koppan Nayar and Ganacharya Samikutty Bhagavathar were the first teachers.

Financial problems plagued the institution from the very start. Mahakavi started a lottery and got a small sum out of it to tide over the immediate needs. Some land was found on the charming banks of the Bharathapuzha river at Cheruthuruthy and an unpretentious yet elegantly conceived building was put up to accommodate the institution. Thus in 1936, the Kalamandalam was established at its present location in Cheruthuruthy. It continued to be in straitened circumstances till it came to a dead end in 1942. The then Maharaja of Cochin, a great lover of Kathakali, came to its rescue and took it over by a proclamation. Since then, the Kalamandalam has been functioning as a state-aided Akademi of classical arts.

From its inception, Kathakali has been taught by the *acharyas* in *gurukula* style. The Kalamandalam has maintained that tradition. The students live there supported by a stipend and undergo training in a systematic manner. In the traditional manner, the student lived with the teacher. He got his training for only six months in a year as the teacher was busy with his own performances or agricultural operations for the rest of the time. So it took from ten to twelve years before a boy was fit enough to enter the stage. In the Kalamandalam, however, training is continuous for ten months in the year. This helps a student to get himself adequately equipped in six years' time. While a traditional teacher used to take a boy for training at the age of eight or nine, the Kalamandalam could take him at the age of fourteen or fifteen. This gave an advantage to the boy in that he could finish his elementary education before joining the institution. From this year, Kalamandalam has insisted upon matriculation as the minimum academic standard.

The training syllabus of the Kalamandalam has been drawn up with great care by a body of experts who have taken into account all the basic aspects of traditional training and improved upon them by providing additional components of theory and general education. Continuous monitoring and annual tests have also been introduced. The training of a Kathakali actor involves several aspects. Firstly, he has to undergo rigorous physical culture. This is usually done in the small hours of the morning. The intention is to bring under perfect control every part of his body solely for the sake of aesthetic expression (*abhinaya*). Physical culture is a regular feature of the course throughout the six years. To render suppleness to the muscles and to generate the necessary resilience in the system, he is given a rigorous oil massage once every year, usually in July/August for about three weeks to a month. This is a highly specialised affair as it is also used to correct any minor physical distortions that may be noticed in the boy.

The morning starts with training in dance movements for the beginners. As the years go by, the morning hours are spent in *cholliattam*, that is, performing a role in a play interpreting the musical dialogue. The daylight hours are usually spent in learning the technique and stylisation of Kathakali. It is in the evening that a student is expected to spend a few hours learning Hindu mythology, *puranas* and the epics. A good Kathakali actor has to be well versed in these. The Kalamandalam provides special facilities for this. Not only that.

Some of the daylight hours are spent to improve the general educational standard of the student too.

The essence of Kathakali is *abhinaya*. The eye holds the key to *abhinaya*. Training of the eye is, therefore, the most important component of a student's curriculum. It is indeed a matter that calls for a high degree of discipline and perseverance. Eye *sadhaka* (training) is done in the early hours of the morning to begin with. Clarified butter is applied to the eye and it undergoes an unbelievable number of various steps. As the boy gets trained over a period of time, eye training is taken up for longer hours in the evenings. In some cases, one goes through practically a whole night of eye exercises once in a way. An artist of real quality can tell a whole story with the mere movements of his vibrant eyes.

Being an academy of the classical arts of Kerala, Kalamandalam imparts training not only in Kathakali but also Kudiattam (classical Sanskrit drama which dates back to the 3rd century B.C.), Mohiniattam and Bharatanatyam. The only semi-classical artform taught there is Thullal, which has a special place in Kerala literature and society.

The first batch of students of the Kalamandalam included among others Krishnan Nayar, Madhavan and Kelu Nayar. Gopinath, an actor already accepted on the Kerala stage, had come for advanced training. So also, Anand Sivaram. It was a distinguished group, but alas only Krishnan Nayar stayed permanently on the Kathakali stage. All the others have succumbed to other attractions like ballet dancing inspired by the success of Uday Shankar. Gopinath went round the world with Ragini Devi keeping audiences spellbound by his marvellous skill. Guru Gopinath became one of the greatest choreographers; but he never came back to Kathakali. Anand Sivaram, likewise became associated with Miss Lightfoot and ultimately settled down in San Francisco as a dance teacher. All this was quite understandable at that time as no Kathakali artist could make a reasonable living in Kerala. The only staunch devotee was Krishnan Nayar. He was indeed greater than them all. His debut into the Kathakali stage of Kerala really created a new awareness in the people of the greatness of this artform. Initiated by Guru Chandu Panicker and trained with great care by Guru Kunchu Kurup and Guru Pattikkanthodi Ravunni Menon at the Kalamandalam, this gifted artiste of the Kathakali stage brought home to the crowds that usually went to a Kathakali performance either out of curiosity or to while away the time, a new sense of aesthetics and pride. Specially groomed in *abhinaya* by the famous Mani Madhava Chekkar, after graduation from the Kalamandalam, Krishnan Nayar demonstrated with ease and charm what a Kathakali actor could do in a variety of roles ranging from the most tender and graceful to the most violent.

Christened 'Kalamandalam' Krishnan Nayar by the then reigning Maharaja of Cochin, the name and fame of the Kalamandalam spread through the length and breadth of Kerala through its most illustrious son, Krishnan Nayar who even today is referred to by the people merely as 'Kalamandalam'. Krishnan Nayar's popularity has opened the eyes of

many youngmen to the beauties of Kathakali who have since enrolled themselves as pupils of the art. They realised that one could live in dignity as a Kathakali artist and those that had any merit in them had stayed in it for ever. Kathakali and the Kathakali artists have thus come to stay—thanks to the Kalamandalam and its first and incomparable product, Krishnan Nayar.

Mahakavi Vallathol ensured that the Kalamandalam had the best of teachers. Apart from Guru Kunchu Kurup and Guru Ravunny Menon, he had secured the services of Venkatakrishna Bhagavathar for music, Moothamana Nambooripad for *chenda* and Venkichan Pattar for *maddalam*. Music and the *chenda* and the *maddalam* are indispensable ingredients in Kathakali. With all these gurus imparting training it was not difficult to establish sound traditions and exacting standards. As a result, a crop of talented artists grew up. To mention only a few, they included Ramankutty Nayar, Padmanabhan Nayar and Gopi among the actors, Nambissan for music and the famous Poduvals and Kesavan on the drums.

The system and process adopted by the Kalamandalam influenced some other institutions to follow suit, notably, the Natya Sanghom at Kottakkal. Founded by a great aesthete and connoisseur, Vaidyaratna P. S. Variar, the Kottakkal School has been teaching and training a number of boys in Kathakali for over thirty years. Kalamandalam set the standards, others adopted them.

The Mahakavi was not content with Kathakali alone. He ferreted out from some elusive corner of Kerala, veteran Krishnan Panicker and Kalyani Amma, both in the evening of their lives, to revive that most enchanting dance form, Mohiniattam. Mohiniattam had, like Dasiattam in Tamil Nadu, fallen into disrepute and it was difficult to get any one to sponsor a performance or an artist to perform it. Vallathol recognised its exquisiteness and made a determined bid to bring it back to life. That he has amply succeeded in this effort is evident from the repertoire of any noted danseuse—which invariably includes an item of Mohiniattam. Along with Mohiniattam, Bharatanatyam also is taught through a four-year course for girls. In the fifties, there was a rush of several artistes, particularly danseuses, to Kalamandalam to get themselves trained in a bit of Kathakali and Mohiniattam. Thankamani (wife of Guru Gopinath) and Kalyanikutty Amma (wife of Kalamandalam Krishnan Nayar) were the first stars in Mohiniattam. Both of them have since retired from the scene. Today, Sugandha Mohini, a very graceful artiste of poise and beauty, dominates the Mohiniattam stage with her authenticity, her grace of humility spreading the art of Kalamandalam wherever she appears.

As an academy of classical arts, the Kalamandalam has the responsibility of setting up new standards and maintaining them. The institution has striven to discharge this duty well. Through seminars, symposia and refresher courses the Kalamandalam gets the artists, choreographers, composers and connoisseurs together so that the artforms are kept alive and refreshing. People come from far off countries to

stay at Cheruthuruthy and imbibe some inspiration from the great theatre of Kathakali. Some of them do undergo regular training and get the feeling of fulfilment.

The Kathakali theatre is now faced with a new challenge. The world at large has suddenly discovered that Kathakali is one of the greatest of theatres. Every country is keen to see it. Theatre festivals in the west do not consider their programmes complete any more without Kathakali. Choreographers of Kathakali have been put to a rigorous test indeed. Usually a performance of Kathakali starts at 9.30 P.M. and goes through the night. The *Dhanasi* (the concluding prayer) is sung with the dawn. A modern audience cannot stand such a long programme. Thanks to the emergence of a number of Kathakali clubs in Kerala during the last two decades, considerable editing of plays has taken place. It has not become difficult to put up performances in two to two-and-a-half hours that bring forth the best of Kathakali plays. This has become possible without taking any liberties with the classical content of Kathakali. Tradition and convention have been fully respected; the dramatic content only more poignantly stressed. The artistes have responded to such treatment in a magnificent manner. The continuous score of performances at the World Theatre Festival at the Aldwych in London last May marks the culmination of choreographic efforts to achieve magnificent success in this direction.

There is an impression among some persons that a lot of modifications have to be done even in regard to costumes and headgears to suit modern concert programmes. This is not true. While by competent editing, the duration of a play is reduced, no other element of Kathakali can be tampered with. When one does it, Kathakali ceases to be a classical artform. Attempts to use plastic pieces for *chutti* have made it look ridiculous. Ballets based on the Kathakali technique have been developed since the forties; prominent among the choreographers in this field being Uday Shankar and Guru Gopinath. They are indeed great innovations in art, marvellous in concept and beautiful in exposition. But they are not classical or Kathakali.

Will Kathakali be able to preserve its 'purity'? This question is heard at times. The answer is simple and yet it is not. One can ask, will Beethoven's symphonies remain 'pure' in the future? It will remain as Kathakali only so long as it is 'pure'. The *acharyas* of Kathakali frown at any effort to tarnish its purity. The artform has such rare depth and variety that its technique overwhelms people. Choreographers bent on innovations get inspired by its technique and stylisation and use them for carving out their own themes in their own way. But they are all what might be generally termed as ballets or dance themes and not Kathakali.

Since the thirties, composers have tried their hands at new themes. Poet Vallathol himself encouraged an attempt to present characters like Hitler through the traditional Kathakali medium. But those attempts were miserable failures. On the other hand, Guru Kesavan's (leading *chenda* artiste of Udyogamandal *Rustom and Sohrab* has been an

unqualified success. This only went to show that mythological or classical themes alone would lend themselves to the Kathakali theatre. A number of new plays have been written and presented during the last two decades. The successful ones among them are Guru Kesavan's story of *Ekalavya* (the Harijan disciple of Dronacharya), *Bhima Bandhana*, V. Madhavan Nair's *Karna Sapadha*, V. Krishnan Tampi's *Tataka Vadha* and Kalamandalam's presentation of the story of *Ayyappa*, the deity of the famous hill temple at Sabarimala in Kerala. One has to recognise that the Shakespearian Theatre is totally different from modern drama. A classical artform is in a way fenced around, although it may be a colourful fence.

Sometime ago, an attempt was made to translate some of the poems of Kathakali into Hindi. The play was a failure. That was but natural. One does not have to translate a *pada* in Bharatanatyam into English or Hindi to enjoy the dance. The very suggestion that such a translation might be done is an insult to the *sahridaya*. The Americans do not insist that the famous Opera *Fidelio* should be rendered in English! The houses are full and they enjoy it in its original classical form and language. Classical arts are not popularised by such methods. On the other hand, the necessary education is provided through adequate literature, well thought out lecture demonstrations etc.

One of the remarkable developments of the recent years is the rise and growth of the Udyogamandal Kathakali Theatre at Udyogamandal (20 KM from Cochin) on the banks of the river Periyar. Drawing together the galaxy of talent in the Kathakali field, this institution has been setting new standards for artistic excellence and showmanship. Led by Kalamandalam Krishnan Nayar himself, this theatre is in great demand all over the world for the theatre festivals. The formation of this famous theatre has been possible mainly on account of the contribution that the Kalamandalam has made in raising a generation of talented artists who form the base.

Perched on a river bank in the cool shade of the swaying coconut palms and tropical trees, the Kalamandalam draws you to its rustic charm and peace of nature. Suddenly you are transported to a world totally different from yours; the world of the superhuman, colourful, dramatic and expressive. You travel through the night with Rama and Ravana, Nala and Damayanti or Arjuna and Draupadi sharing their joys and their sorrows, their wrath and their compassion. As dawn breaks over the Sahya range, you reluctantly return from that glorious world of make-believe to your daily mundane chores.

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