

# GURU KUNJU KURUP

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M. K. K. Nayar

None of us has seen Garrick, the legendary Shakespearean actor in action. But his very name creates in us a ripple of inexplicable pleasure. I wonder how many of us had opportunities of seeing the Dying Swan of Anna Pavlova. Yet the mention of Pavlova brings into mind that incomparable ballerina's exquisite delicacy and imaginative interpretation. We have heard of Sarah Bernhardt. Many of us have yearned to see her in action although she belonged to a previous generation. To the aging generation of today, mention Kathakali Theatre and Guru Kunju Kurup looms before you. For Kurup was everything great and noble, tender and beautiful in *Kathakali*.

In the history of *Kathakali* there have been hundreds of notable artistes—actors, musicians and percussionists alike. Among them only a few names have stayed fresh in the memory of centuries. Vettathu Sankaran Nayar, Nalan Unni, Eachara Pillai Vicharippukar, Kunchu Kartha, Kesava Kurup, Thottam Sankaran Namboodiri, Thakazhi Kochu Neelakanta Pillai, Kavingal Sankara Panikkar, Mathur Kunju Pillai Panikkar and Pattikkamthodi Ravunni Menon among actors; Neelakantan Nambissan, Nemmara Madhava Menon and Venkatakrishna Bhagavathar among musicians; Moothamana Namboodiri on the *chenda* and Venkichan Pattar with his *maddalam* constitute this galaxy. Each one was great in his own way. Kunchu Kurup was not only a gem amongst them, his lustre was indeed far more glittering than most of these great ones.

We have no doubt an advantage relating to Kurup. We have seen

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him, we have seen him many times though not enough. We have seen only a few of the others and that too nearer the evening of their careers. It may be that we are a bit partial to the Kurup we have known than to the others of whom we have only heard. That is but natural.

Kurup was born in 1881 in Thakazhi in the erstwhile Travancore State of Kerala. Thakazhi was indeed the cradle of many an artiste and litterateur of Kerala. Thakazhi had its own traditions of Kathakali. Guru Sankaran Namboodiri, Panchali Kaimal and Kochu Neelakanta Pillai were some of the great sons of Thakazhi. Great teachers like Velu Pillai and Bhiman Kesava Panicker had given a stature to the *kalaries* of Thakazhi to attract pupils from far and near. *Thullal*, the unique folk art form of Kerala was very popular at that time. Children were easily attracted to it. Young Kunju also took to it with glee. But he soon felt that his future lay in something more rewarding, something greater. *Kathakali* captivated him.

At that time there were two famous brothers, Kochappi Panicker and Rama Panicker who ran the most well-known *kalari* of the time at Kurichi. At the age of twelve, Kurup started his first lessons under their exacting direction. Two years later he returned to Thakazhi and continued his training under Champakkulam Sanku Pillai, an eminent teacher. At that time Mathur Kunju Pillai Panicker who had really lifted Poet Vallathol off his feet and taken him into the inexplicable realms of the Kathakali Theatre was running his own *Yogam*—(the name given to a *Kathakali* troupe or company). At the age of seventeen, Kurup was admitted as a member of this troupe. Tradition held that a youngster usually took roles of minor and female characters. Kurup's feminine roles were quite popular. He did not, however, take much time to graduate into major roles. He no doubt had the rare opportunity to work under the discerning eye of Kunju Pillai Panicker and draw inspiration from him.

When he was twentyone he had occasion to participate in performances in a number of places in the Malabar region when a troupe led by a famous artiste, Thiruvalla Kunju Pillai toured that area. At that time Manthredathu Namboodiripad spotted Kurup and saw in him the promise of the future. Very soon Kurup came back to Namboodiripad. In those days, a *Kathakali* artiste needed a patron. The Maharajas of Travancore and Cochin usually extended such patronage. Some leading Namboodiri houses also did so. The real turning point in Kurup's life was when he came under the tutelage of Mandredathu Namboodiripad. That was in 1903. He had opportunities to get acquainted with the Kalluvazhi school of *Kathakali*. The Namboodiripad was a scholar in Sanskrit and drama. His association helped Kurup to enlarge his intellectual horizon and imagination. Kurup's amazing knowledge of the *Puranas* must have derived from this association.

From that time Kurup rose in stature and popularity every day. Very soon he was dominating the Kathakali Theatre particularly in the Malabar region. At that time the doyen of the Kathakali Theatre was Mathur Kunju Pillai Panicker who was the inspiration behind some of the famous roles of Kurup like Bahuka in *Nalacharita*, Dharmaputra in *Kirmeera vadha*, Arjuna in both *Kalakeya Vadha* and *Subhadraharana*, the Brahmana in *Rukmini Swayamvara* and *King Rukmangada*. After the death of Kunju Pillai Panicker in 1929, Kurup was the undisputed monarch of the Kathakali Theatre. He continued to hold sway till the early sixties after which he was too old to be active on the stage.

In *Kathakali*, heroic roles are either *pacha* (heroic) or *kathi* (bearded). In both Kurup was inimitable. Physically he was ideally built for such roles. His face, particularly in *pacha* looked extraordinarily charming and effective. He was a very cultured man. Discretion was a strong point with him. Naturally, his performance reflected these qualities and elevated them to a state of rare aesthetic nobility and brilliance. Even in love scenes where *Kathakali* literature often transcends the bounds of decency as for instance, where Ravana ravishes Rambha or Kichaka chases Draupadi, Kurup's performances have been unique for their dignity and aesthetic content. He was an example to others in observing the prescribed *sthayi bhava* without fail. He was indeed a true artiste who made the very stylisation of *Kathakali* smooth and elegant surpassing on occasion, the standards of stalwarts like Kunju Pillai Panicker.

When Kurup was on the stage all eyes were on his face. No one looked at his steps. Even in the elaborate *astakalasa*, it was Kurup's face that captivated you. Indeed his face was a veritable stage. He could play any role with distinction. I have seen him in almost all costumes except Red *Tati*.

I have seen Kurup in action on countless occasions in different roles. Those that stand out in my memory are Kuchela (Sudama), Purooravas in *Urvasi* Sundara Brahmana, the messenger of love in *Rukmini Swayamvara* and Ravana when he hears of his son's resounding victory over Indra. It was in the mid-thirties. Prof. Krishnan Tampi was visiting the Kalamandalam. Poet Vallathol had arranged for a performance of Tampi's exquisite play *Urvasi*. Preparations for the play had begun under the Mahakavi's direction a few days earlier. Kalamandalam Krishnan Nayar who owes his skill and charm to Kurup was then in his teens playing feminine roles with rare excellence. He was slated for *Urvasi*'s role. It was after lunch that we saw Kurup arriving at the Kalamandalam. The Mahakavi called him and told him that he was to take the role of Purooravas that evening and handed him a copy of the book. It was only then that we knew that Kurup himself had never read the play before! We were all intrigued as to how he could do justice to the role for which he had no preparation at all.

Dinner over, the crowd had assembled. News had gone round that Kurup had come and that he was going to play Purooravas in a new play. The place was packed. Namboodiri connoisseurs had monopolised the front rows. The preliminaries over, the play began.

On the stage we saw Kurup, the incomparable creative genius, as Purooravas, mad in his infatuation, chasing flowers and tendrils, shadows and birds, seeking Urvasi everywhere and in everything as though in a state of intoxication or hallucination. The scene, one of his best ever, has always raised nostalgic memories.

On another occasion, it was Ravana. News of his son Indrajit's victory over Indra has just come in. In his exultation he proceeds to his wife Mandodari's quarters to convey the great news. The proud father, the mischievous husband, the arrogant King, the gay abandon of a child who gets the most sought after toy, the jubilation of his army, the despondency of the gods and ever so many things that crowded into Ravana's thoughts as displayed by Kurup inspired the Mahakavi to compose overnight one of his very famous poems.

Kurup's Bahuka in *Nala Charita* is acclaimed as one of his best roles. According to him, he was following the pattern set for that role by Kunju Pillai Panicker. But there were occasions when he made it delectably different by introducing his own innovations.

Give him the most insignificant role in a play, Kurup made it the most important one. His Kripacharya in *Uttara Swayamvaram* where the character has no more than five minutes in just one scene converted it overnight into a role fit for veterans.

In North Kerala it was Kurup who introduced episodes from *Nalacharita* not performed earlier and also *Rukmangadacharita*. They became so popular that whenever there was a performance one was sure to see Kurup as either Nala or Rukmangada.

Kurup had an ability rarely seen in many others. He could effectively express an idea in much shorter time and with much greater charm than others could do. Once I asked him what the secret was. He said that when he was a boy he had devoted some time to learn the technique of *Thullal* which was faster in gestures and briefer in putting an idea across. Compared to other artistes, his gestural vocabulary (*mudras*) was also very much richer.

Mahakavi Vallathol and Mukunda Raja in their efforts to set up the Kalamandalam had devised various ways to collect funds. At that time, no one had ever heard of a *Kathakali* performance with tickets. Kurup's

name was such a draw that they dared to put on a number of shows and succeeded in 1924-25. Ticket sales were surprisingly brisk for them. Kurup was at his zenith. And he stayed there for decades.

When the Mahakavi set up the Kalamandalam, it was Kurup whom he selected as the Chief Instructor there. The first batch of his students included Gopinath, Kelu, Sivaraman, Madhavan and Krishnan Nayar. Of these Krishnan Nayar alone steadfastly stayed with the Kathakali Theatre. Kurup's students include some famous names like Ram Gopal, Mrinalini Sarabhai, Ragini Devi and Menaka.

The core of Kathakali Theatre is *abhinaya*—*abhinaya* in all its aspects, delineations and nuances. Kurup was indeed the master of *abhinaya*. His *ouchitya* or aesthetic discretion was unparalleled. While playing Bahuka by the side of Ritu Parna, the latter, a role usually taken by a junior actor, Kurup always maintained the subordinate position while many others often put on a different air altogether. Kurup's ability lay in maintaining the true character of the role without projecting his individual stature through it. Another notable instance of his remarkable performance is the portrayal of Brahannala in *Uttara Swayamvara* where he never overstepped the limits of courtesy to the cowardly prince.

He never stayed on the stage a second more than was necessary. When he left the stage, the audience always felt that he should have stayed a little longer.

Kurup has been honoured in his life-time with the highest of awards available to an artiste in this country. Yet he continued to be humble, ready to learn something new every time. Temperate in habits, helpful to his juniors and patient with ill-informed critics, he was indeed a father figure of the *Kathakoli* Theatre. When I called on him on his *satabhishekam*, i.e. the eighty-fourth birthday at his house in Kottai near Palghat he was reminiscent of his younger days when many a *Kathakali* artiste had to live in penury. Things had changed very much since the fifties and he was happy that the artistes were far better off. His fear however was two-fold. Firstly these poor fellows did not have the education or cleverness to dodge the incometax inspectors! Second, affluence could lead to dilution of the rigours of training. Modern audiences wanted to see only mini-performances. Well-fed young men may not therefore strain enough to master the complete technique and acquire composite skills.

Basically, Kurup's training was entirely in the Thakazhi style—the South Kerala school. His teacher Sanku Pillai was no giant. But Kurup's talent was such that he could be on his own and evolve his own personal style based on observation, discussion and effort. He could effortlessly dominate the North Kerala stage in spite of the general feeling in that

region that the Kalluvazhi style i.e. the North Kerala school was superior to the southern style. He did so without bravado. He did so by competence, imagination, *rasa* mastery and aesthetic discretion.

Under Kurup's direction an authoritative book on *Kathakali mudras* was written by the late Prof. Gopalakrishnan in 1936.

Kurup lived to the ripe age of 93. Towards the last few years he was physically weak and could not move about. But his mind was alert and his reservoir of anecdotes never dry. One could sit by his side for hours and listen to him recounting his past, a past studded with artistic conquests, creative challenges, abundant popular acclaim and a personal sense of fulfilment.

Kunchu Kurup will live in the annals of the Kathakali Theatre as one of its most precious jewels with a rare glitter. He not only preserved the traditions of this great theatre unsullied, but augmented them, enhanced them, glorified them and sublimated them.

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