

THE FEMALE IMPERSONATOR IN TRADITIONAL INDIAN THEATRE

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A stylised theatre is infinitely adaptable. It converts any limitation into an asset. If changed social circumstances impose a taboo on women on the stage, the stylised theatre adequately meets the challenge by making men play female roles which, far from producing any ludicrous effect, becomes an effective device for stylisation aesthetically so satisfying that if, by chance, a daring woman comes forward to play any female role, she faces the task of imitating men imitating women. This is exactly what happened in the age-old theatre traditions of not only India but also of China, Japan and Greece.

In India the Sanskrit-theatre is the oldest. Although it has now greyed out, many of its conventions and presentational styles still survive in the tradition of *Koodiattam*, a form of highly evolved temple-theatre prevalent in Kerala. Selected acts from the famous Sanskrit plays, specially by Bhasa, form the repertoire of *Koodiattam* theatre. The dialogue in Sanskrit is delivered in a stylised recitative manner accompanied by filigree-like mimetic elaboration in codified gestures. But *Vidushaka*, a stock-character, presents the gist of the dialogue in Malayalam, the language of the region. This particular convention leads to the conjecture that *Koodiattam* is the first step towards the formation of the regional language-theatres. While all the language-theatres, except a few such as *Tamasha* of Maharashtra, resort to the convention of female-impersonation, *Koodiattam* does not. In *Koodiattam* the women of the Chakyar community, which preserves the tradition, play the female roles. On the other hand *Kathakali* and *Krishnattam*, equally stylised forms of dance-theatre prevalent in this very region adopt the tradition of female-impersonation. Like the language-theatres *Kathakali* and *Krishnattam* evolved after the 14th century. *Koodiattam* must have evolved earlier and therefore, following the Sanskrit-theatre tradition, it retained the convention of actresses (*Nati*) playing the female roles.

Very likely the language-theatres adopted the convention of female-impersonation towards the 15th and 16th century. The reason for it can be easily conjectured. During this period the Mughals consolidated their empire

in India which necessitated many social changes. Society then, perhaps, could not afford to be as liberal and permissive as it had been earlier. Also new ethical and social values started taking root. They all combined to shut the door of the stage to respectable women. In such an unfavourable social climate many forms of performing arts died out and many were infected with decadence. Those that survived, may be with some measure of decadence, had either deep religious associations or were protected by inaccessible geographic seclusion. The social convulsion continued when the British replaced the Mughals and in this process the Sanskrit-theatre, the mother, died but some of her offsprings in the form of language-theatre survived. The mother was highly stylised, therefore, the offsprings inherited this character more or less. They are all artificial and make no pretence at being otherwise. Rather they are proud of being artificial and theatrical. Realism on the stage appears to them an unpardonable hypocrisy.

In a theatre which consciously chooses to be artificial, everything is exaggerated, conventionalised and stylised. What happens in the performance is not the moving photograph of some events in the linear stretch of time and space but formalised non-linear flow of dynamic symbols, which form a pattern for the eye and ear. Female-impersonation is so designed as to become a unit of this pattern. What the female-impersonator creates is a subtle convention for femininity. It provides the degree of formality with which the standard for the whole performance is to be set. It is not simply a question of being effeminate; the good female-impersonator must symbolise feminine qualities in a way that no actress can. He must idealise and emphasise the essence of feminine traits where the actress can only fall back upon easier and more natural qualities with inevitable loss of the power of expression. To comprehend this one has to see the famous Vedantam Satyam performing *Kuchipudi* in the role of Satyabhama. Leave aside his exquisite dance-movements, if he merely walks on the stage as Satyabhama, the sensuousness, delicacy and grace of the gait delight the eyes and remains as an experience for life. There are now many female *Kuchipudi* dancers. None equals Vedantam; at least the many I have seen. At best they appear to be imitating him. Does he imitate any particular woman? Perhaps none except Satyabhama, who is not an historical person, but a myth; a symbol.

Female-impersonation is not limited to the young and beautiful alone. Demonesses like Tataka and Putana, old scheming women like Manthara and hunch-backs like Kabuja are also impersonated by male actors. Such characterisations require a depth of technique and a power which, in relation to the formal standard of the stylised theatre, would be difficult for an actress to attain, because traditionally they are designed for males.

Of all the various forms of traditional theatre the following are the major ones which adopt female-impersonation:



Krishnattam : Krishna with consorts played by female-impersonators. Costumes and make-up bear a resemblance to Kathakali.

Kathakali : Rama and Sita in Panchavati. This could be any hero and heroine, as Kathakali characters are typed as to costume and make-up.





3. *Rasleela* : Radha and Krishna. The young performers dance and mime. During performance they are treated as deities and are carried into the acting arena, as in Ramleela.

4. *Ramleela of Ramnagar* : Sita played by a young boy. Unlike Rasleela, here the female impersonator need not be a dancer or singer as he only needs to repeat a few dialogues. Sita represents a jewel-like purity: brilliant, pure and hard to break.





5. *Ankianat*: Rama, Sita and Lakshmana in "Ram Vijay Nataka", by Shankaradeva, propounder of Bhavana theatre. This is one of the exceptions to the usual Krishna-theme associated with the Vaishnava cult of Ankianat. The Bhakti movement identifies with Rama as with Krishna.

6. *Yakshagana*: Dushasana drags Draupadi to Duryodhana's court. Draupadi is played by a handsome and talented female-impersonator.





7. *Yakshagana* : The make-up and costume of Manthana, a scheming old woman, is realistic.

8. *Bayalata*: Daksha-brahma and queen. The king is sumptuously dressed in sharp contrast to the relatively realistic get-up of the female-impersonator.





9. *Therukoothu* : Draupadi and Pandavas. The beautiful female-impersonator here sings to encourage her despondent husbands to fight.
10. *Veethinatakam*: Here again the female-impersonator as Draupadi sings and dances, urging the Pandavas to rise against the Kauravas.



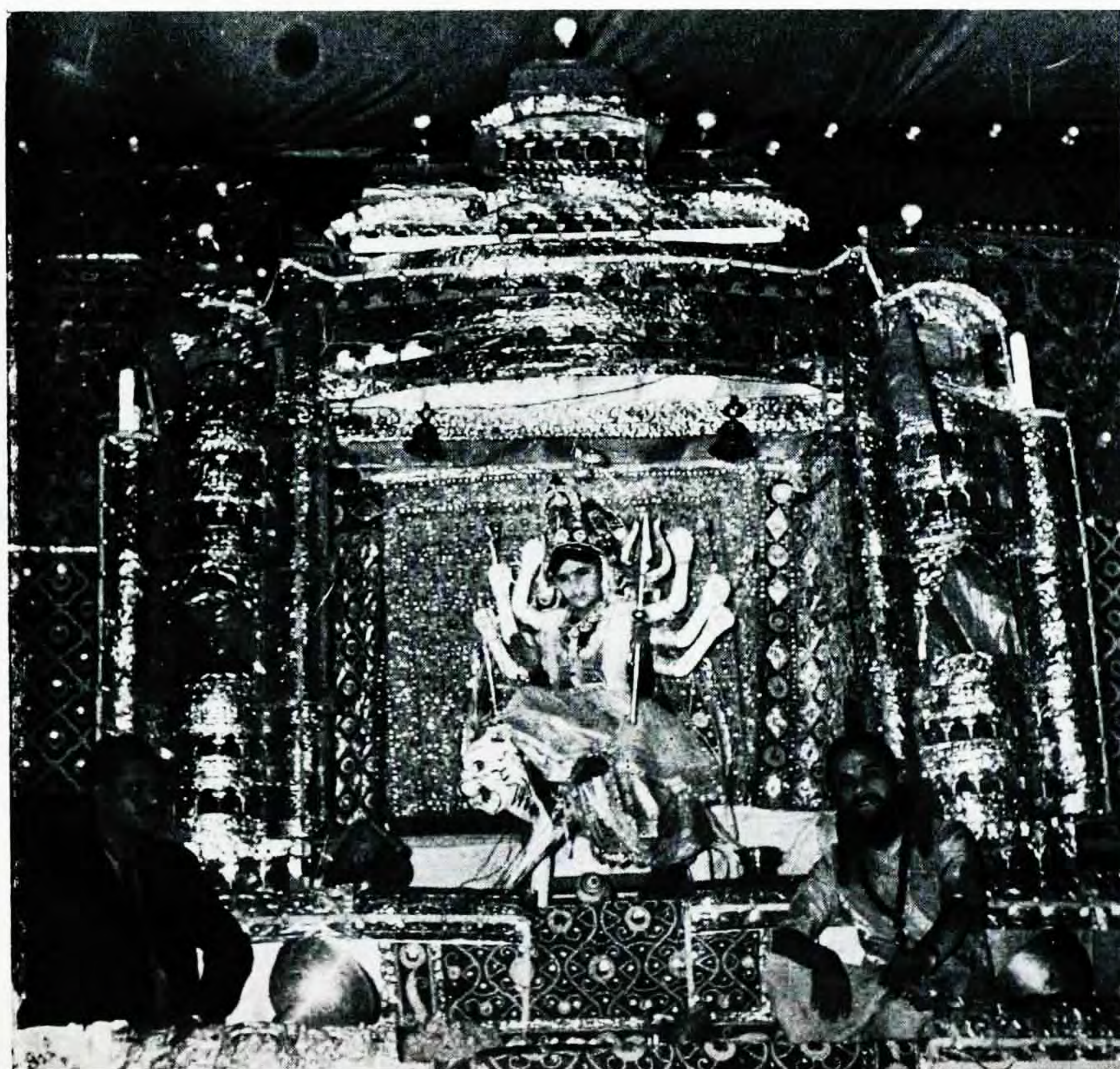


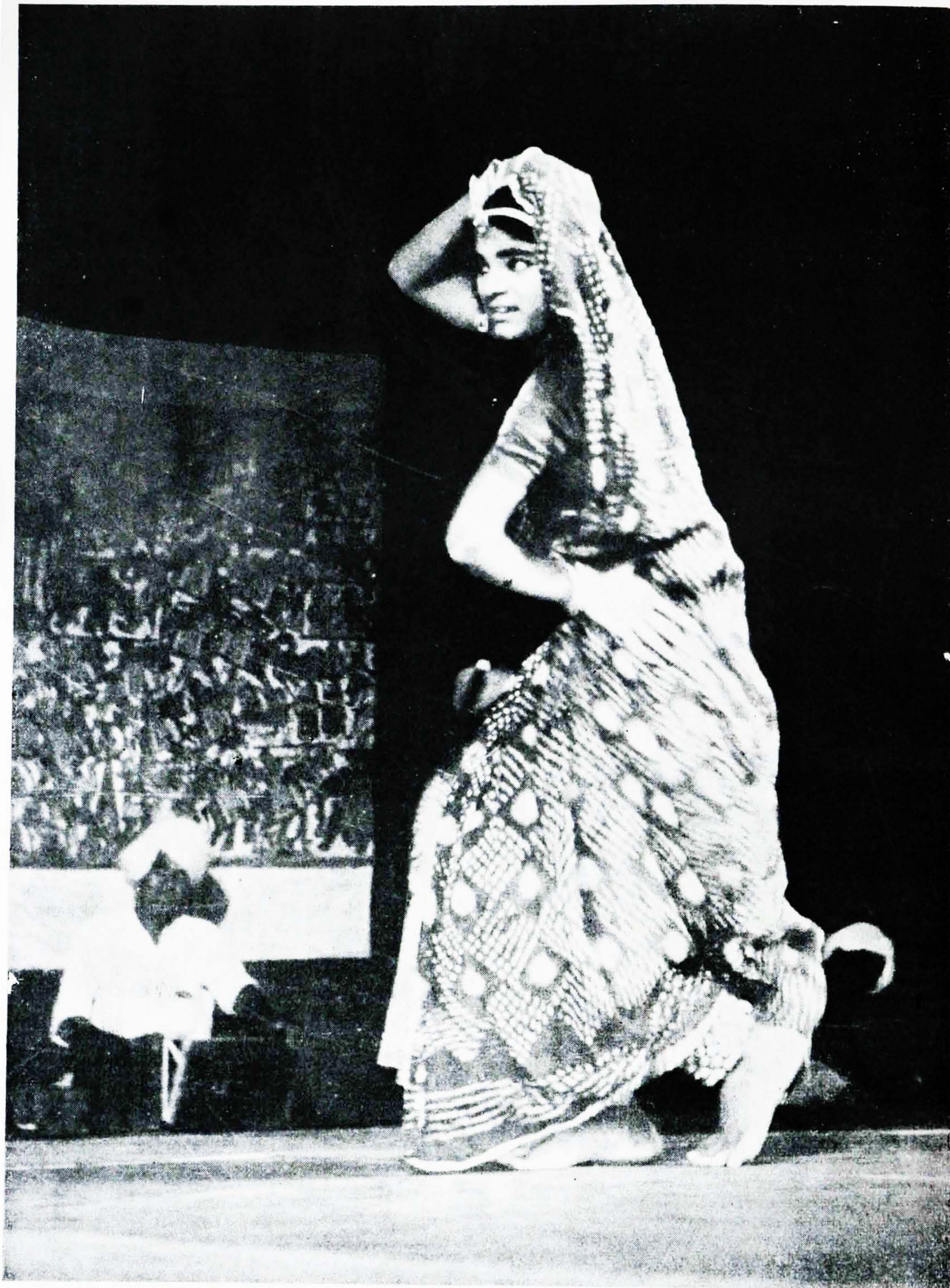
11. *Kuchipudi* : Krishna and Satyabhama. The incomparable Vedantam Satyanarayana as Satyabhama.



12. *Swang* : Usually performed in the arena-theatre style with the actors moving around the stage and the musicians in the centre. Large open-air audiences demand great vocal strength and stamina, which the impersonators possess.

13. *Bhagat* : A variation of Nautanki, prevalent around Agra. Bhagat has a proscenium stage with two aisles as acting-areas on either side. Gorgeous decor and real jewels worn by the young impersonator playing Durga, necessitate heavy police guards during performance.

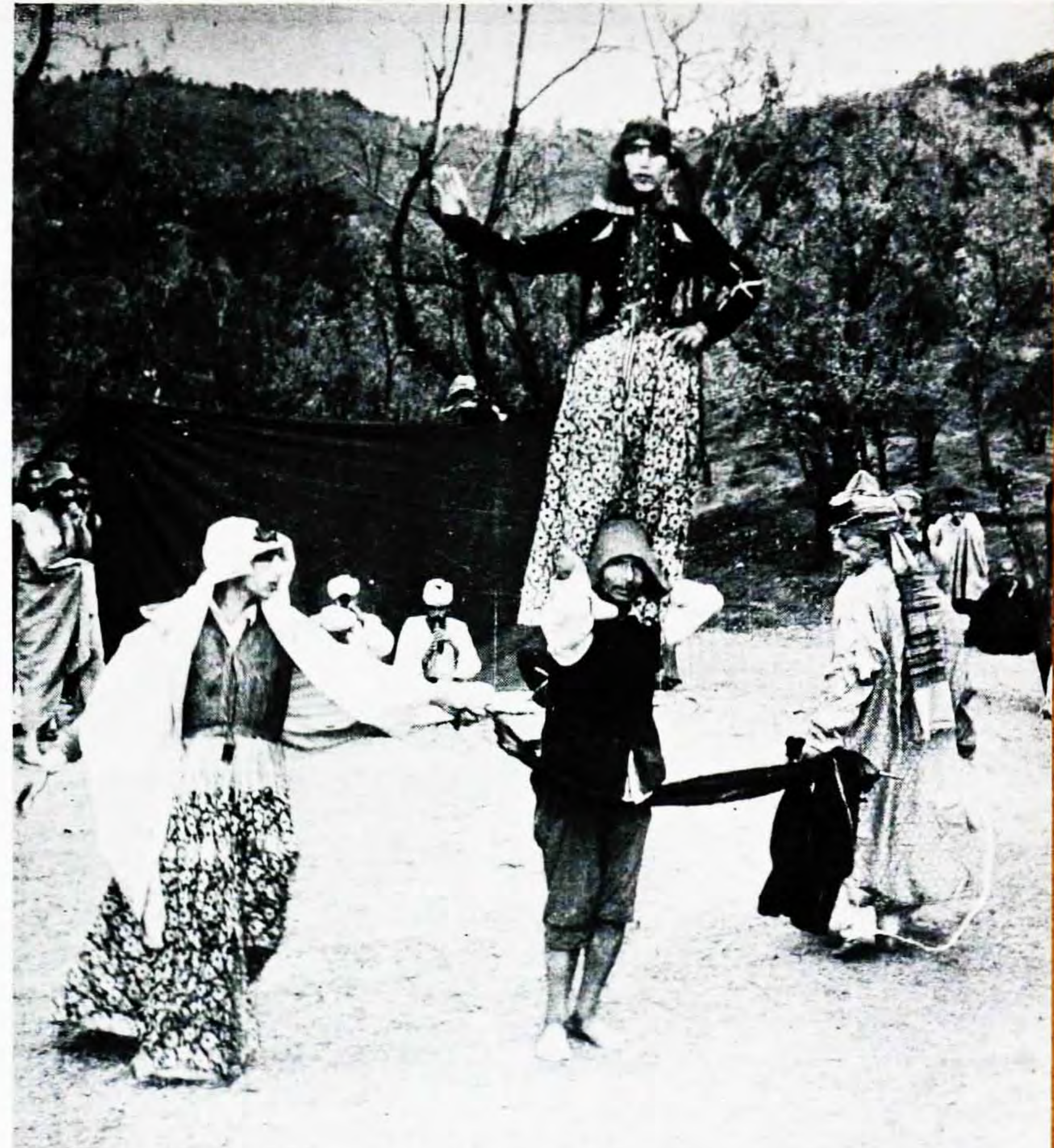




14. *Khyal* : The soul of a Khyal performance is the female-impersonator who sings and dances with great verve. Superbly controlled acting heightens the satiric interludes.



15. *Bhavai* : For predominantly satiric plays, the impersonator needs to be a 'character-actor' rather than a beauty.



16. *Bhand-Jashan* : "Darj-Pather" the play of the queen, is a broad farcical comedy.

17. *Jatra of Bengal* : The fascinating female-impersonator of the Jatra stage is now almost extinct. They are being replaced by actresses.



18. *Chhau (Purulia)* : So vigorous is this dance-theatre that the delicate feminine frame may prove too fragile. The impersonator need not be pretty as a mask covers the face. Here Durga prepares to kill Mahisura.



19. *Chhau (Mayurbhanj)* : Here no mask is used so a pretty face helps. More lyrical and less virile than Purulia Chhau, Radha in a group dance from "Tamudia Krishna".



20. *Chhau (Seraikela)* : Most sophisticated and lyrical of all the styles of Chhau, Seraikela also uses highly stylised masks. The female-impersonator plays Chandrabhaga, a legendary princess, pursued by the lustful Sun-god. (Photos: Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi).



Krishnattam

Evolved around 15th century *Krishnattam* is a ritualistic dance-drama performed in the Krishna temple of Guruvayur, Kerala. A cycle of 8 plays, based on the Krishna-legend, form its repertoire. It has great affinity with *Kathakali* of which some consider it a forerunner. The faces of the principal male characters are treated with heavy and stylised make-up, a few wearing masks. The facial make-up of the female characters is not so stylised nor so heavy. A demoness character like Poothana, however, wears a highly stylised mask with towering headgear. All *dramatis personae* are sumptuously and colourfully costumed.

Kathakali

Although different, the make-up and costuming in *Kathakali* bears many similarities to that of *Krishnattam*. In *Kathakali*, however, no mask is used. Poothana, or such demoness characters, wears a highly stylised facial make-up but the other female characters do not, as in *Krishnattam*.

Rasaleela

Having a tradition of about 400 years *Rasaleela*, the temple-based operatic theatre, is prevalent in the Brajbhumi region of Uttar Pradesh. Inspired by the Bhakti-cult it exclusively deals with the *Madhurya* aspect (erotic mysticism) of the Krishna legend. All the performers in this form of theatre have to be below 14 years with a very good voice since singing is the soul of *Rasaleela*. The female-impersonators playing the role of Radha and other Gopis are sweet looking boys in the age group of 9 to 14. He who crosses the age-bar has to stop performing. He may, however, continue to keep his connection with the theatre as a trainer for younger recruits.

Ramaleela

This theatrical spectacle, a kind of processional drama, having religious associations, evolved during 15th and 16th century. It is prevalent throughout North India in a variety of forms, but the annual festival at Varanasi and Ramanagar at the time of Dussehra is of particular interest. In Ramanagar it is performed consecutively for 31 nights as a cycle of plays based on *Rama Charita Manasa* of the saint-poet Tulsidas. During the performance-days Rama, Seeta and Laxmana are deified. They, therefore, have to be tender-aged boys, preferably below 14 years and belonging to Brahmin families. The other characters in *Ramaleela*, like Ravana, Hanuman, etc., are, of course, played by adults, not necessarily belonging to the Brahmin caste. The performers of *Ramaleela*, specially Rama, Seeta and Laxmana, need not be adept in singing or dancing, as in the case of *Rasaleela*, because in this form of theatre the spectacular pageantry is more stressed than the historoinic talent of the performers.

Ankianat

This may also be called *Bhavana-theatre*, since the performance is known as *Bhavana* and the plays as *Ankianat*. Closely following *Rasaleela* it evolved in Assam towards the latter part of the 16th century. It is also temple-based and inspired by the Bhakti-cult. However, unlike *Rasaleela* it does not relate the Radha legend but that of the royal spouses of Krishna, like Rukmini and Satyabhama. It is traditionally performed in the Vaishnava monasteries, called Satras.

Yakshagana

In Karnataka various forms of *Bayalata* are prevalent. *Bayalata* seems to be a generic term, literally meaning 'theatre in the open-air'. *Yakshagana* is a highly developed operatic form of *Bayalata* prevalent, again, in two differing styles—northern and southern. The male characters wear magnificent headgears and colourful costumes. A demon character wears heavy and stylised facial make-up. The female characters, played traditionally by impersonators, are given facial make-up and costumed relatively in a realistic way, but not the demoness, who wears as heavy a make-up and as exaggerated costumes as the demon.

Therukoothu

This is stylised operatic theatre of Tamil Nadu. A cycle of 8 plays dealing with the story of Draupadi as told in the *Mahabharata* forms the repertoire of *Therukoothu*. Although themewise Draupadi is the central character, performance-wise the male characters dominate, so also in make-up and costuming. While the male characters wear magnificent headgears, sumptuous costumes and stylised facial make-up the female characters, including Draupadi, are treated relatively in a much more realistic manner. The acting, however, is highly stylised and movements of performers are choreographic in character.

Veethinatakam

Like *Therukoothu* the literal meaning of *Veethanatakam* is 'Street-theatre' and it is prevalent in Andhra Pradesh. It is less vigorous and less stylised than *Therukoothu* but more lyrical. In *Veethinatakam*, themes are mostly taken from the *Mahabharata*, but need not centre round Draupadi.

Swang

About 200 years ago *Swang* was the most popular form of folk-theatre in many regions of North India. Its off-shoot *Nautanki* became more popular in Uttar Pradesh. *Swang*, retaining its original name, is now mostly prevalent

in Haryana. The themes are drawn mainly from popular legends. Songs and comical interludes play an important role in the dramatic structure.

Nautanki

At one time, in the repertoire of *Swang*, *Nautanki* was a play after the name of a legendary princess. It became so popular that a different form, bearing the same name as the play, took shape. It is more dramatic than *Swang* and the acting is more stylised. Music is also more evolved as it beautifully blends the classical with the folk. The tradition of impersonators is dying out in *Nautanki*.

Khayal

This is the main form of folk-theatre of Rajasthan. Stylistically it has many similarities with *Nautanki*. It is rich in musical content as it draws heavily on the folk-music of the region. In the dramatic structure the comic interludes stand out brightest, in which the female-impersonator is the soul of the performance.

Bhavai

Centuries ago *Bhavai*, the most popular folk-theatre of Gujarat, might have had a religious origin as some scholars assert, but now it is predominantly a social-satire. In *Bhavai* plays *Rangalo*, the stock-character, dominates as he regales the audience with satirical remarks. Importance of the hero and the heroine appears a shade less than the *Rangalo*, of course, purely from the performance point of view.

Bhand Jashan

In Kashmir valley the *Bhand*-theatre has a tradition of about 300 years. *Jashan* literally means a festival. In the months of May/June traditionally a festival is held in which several groups of *Bhand*-theatre coming from different parts of Kashmir valley participate. Like the *Bhand*-theatre of Uttar Pradesh it is mainly satirical and farcical in character but much more stylised and dramatic. The performance usually begins with a musical prelude and at times dance-like movements of the actors heighten the theatricality of the performance. In one of its plays, *Shikargah*, masks are also used.

Jatra

In varying styles *Jatra* theatre is prevalent in Bengal, Orissa and Manipur. The tradition though barely survives in Manipur it lives more vitally in Bengal and less so in Orissa. The Bengal *Jatra*, influenced by the commercial theatre of the early 20th century, is now less operatic but the

actors still deliver the prose dialogue in a declamatory manner. The *Jatra* of Orissa is still more operatic. *Jatra* plays are drawn from *Puranas*, popular history and legends. The *Jatra* of Bengal now successfully adopts even topical events. Actresses are now replacing the female impersonator.

Chhau

It is a highly stylised form of non-verbal theatre prevalent in the eastern region in the States of Bihar, Orissa and West Bengal, in three distinctly different styles, respectively known as Seraikella *Chhau*, Mayurbhanj *Chhau* and Purulia *Chhau*. While masks are used in Seraikella and Purulia forms of *Chhau*, no mask is used in the Mayurbhanj style. Without the verbal element *Chhau* takes drama to a great height through dance-movements. In fact, *Chhau*, perhaps, is the only form of traditional Indian ballet. It is such a virile yet lyrical form that female-impersonators ideally answer its requirement for the portrayal of female characters.

There are many other folk-theatre forms using female impersonators which have not been mentioned here.

Recently there has been an attempt, specially in *Jatra* and *Nautanki*, to replace the female-impersonator by actresses. Some of these talented women have carried the burden admirably. But they have been either instrumental in changing the traditional character of the form or have been successfully imitating the foregone female-impersonators.