

Photographs: Mohan Khokar



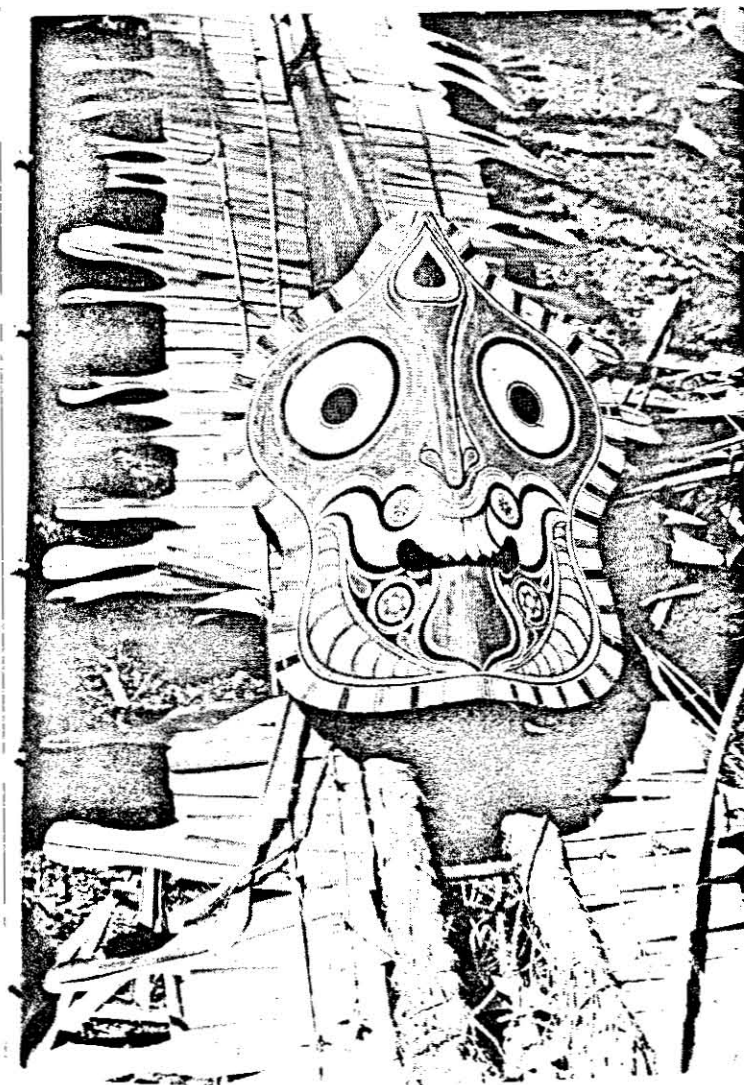
Taiyam

MOHAN KHOKAR

The Mother Goddess holds precedence in the religious affiliations of the people of Kerala. And though the Goddess is recognized in many forms and known by several names, it is as Bhagavati that she gets star billing in Kerala. Temples and shrines dedicated to Bhagavati abound all over the region, but those in Malabar, especially north Malabar, carry an import all their own. From February to April each year these abodes of worship quit their normal, humdrum routine and, overnight, rouse themselves to provide the backdrop for a dance spectacle of overpowering ritualistic grandeur. Both the event and the characters who adorn it are known as Taiyam, a corruption of the word *daivam* or divinity.

There are, literally, thousands of sanctuaries of Bhagavati, known as *kavus*, in Kerala. Some of these have large, imposing structures, housing dazzling images of the Goddess. The majority, however, are pathetically small, unpretentious edifices, comprising, as they often do, no more than thatched huts with a little open space in front. Most of the smaller shrines do not even house an idol of Bhagavati; any of the weapons or insignia associated with her, or even a piece of red cloth on a stool, suffice as symbols of her presence. The *kavu* is always near a river or pool or any other tract of water, and, if none of these are available, a tank is

Left: Preparing the rig-out for a performer.



Mask and head-dress of a performer discarded after use: fresh ones are made for each year's festival.



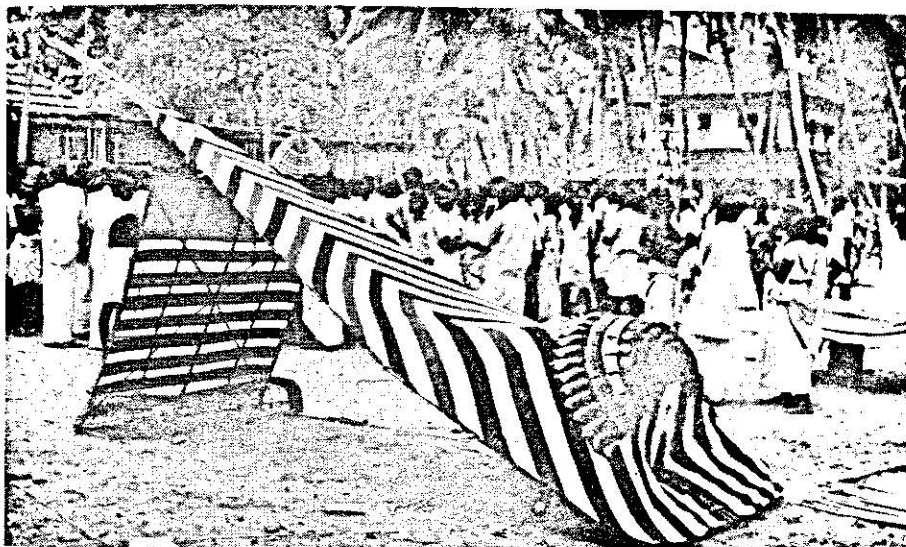
Stone altar in front of shrine adorned with coconut and palm fronds.

constructed nearby. A small stone altar for conducting some of the rituals is also invariably provided in front of the *kavu*. Far from what one might expect, the observance of a festival of the stupendous scale of Taiyam is not given so much to the handful of major temples of Bhagavati as to the numerous low-ranking and apparently insignificant shrines, many of which are not even easy of access, being connected by neither road or rail.

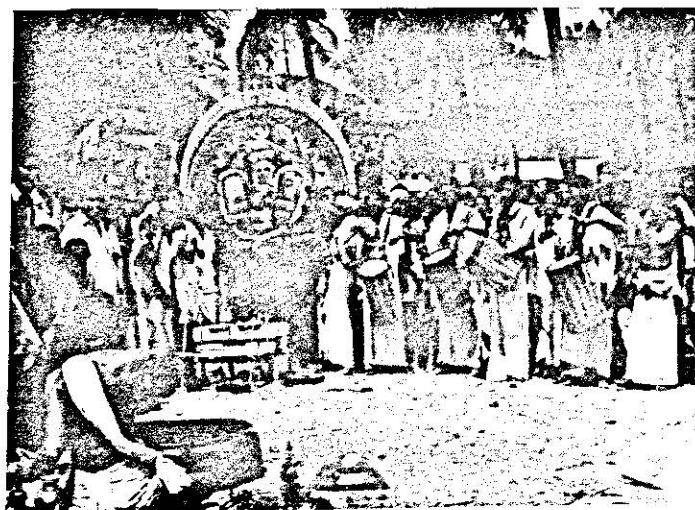
The main features of the Taiyam celebration are the appearance, in appropriate disguise, of a series of performers impersonating gods and demons, the masquerade and dance of these characters before those assembled to witness the same, and the acceptance of offerings from the congregation, followed by the bestowing of blessings upon all. There are some 300 characters in the Malabar hierarchy of gods, goddesses and demons, but only six to ten of these appear at the celebrations at each *kavu*. Of course, there are different participants at the different *kavus*, and all of them, collectively, may cover a substantial part of the cast, but the set of characters which can appear and perform at any one *kavu* is conventionally fixed. The names of the different characters are also peculiar to Malabar, and perhaps the like of such a galaxy of deities, good or evil, is not to be found anywhere else in India. The different characters represent either the different aspects of the Goddess Bhagavati or others associated with her in various ways. Some of the representatives have a distinct antediluvian colour which probably dates them back to pre-Aryan times. The more important members of this sectional pantheon have names such as Gulikan, Gulikanmar, Bhairavan, Koodangurikal, Kuttichatan, Puttan, Paradevata, Raktachamundi, Parakutti, Karinkutti, Pattaveeran and Kandakaranan.

A little before the festival, the shrine is given a face-lift. Flags, buntings and strands from coconut fronds are used for decoration. Neat strips from the trunk of the plantain tree are placed criss-cross on the altar. The articles of worship associated with Bhagavati are removed from the shrine and, after cleaning, used by some of the dancers as part of their trappings. In the area surrounding the shrine, the dancers, aided by their confreres, get busy assembling their costumes and headgear, some of which require hours of preparation before they can be worn. Expert artists and designers who belong to the tradition are engaged for painting the face and body where this is required and for getting ready the masks, which, incidentally, are used only once and then discarded. Of course, shops selling coloured sherbets, eats, trinkets and the like sprout in the vicinity, and the spirit of a *mela* or *utsavam* fills the air.

There is evidence that the Taiyam tradition is centuries old. The dancers are drawn exclusively from the lower castes, notably the Pulaya, Panan, Vannan and Tiyan, who, by profession, are farmers, weavers, basket-



Costume of a character kept ready in the open.



Raktachamundi, an important manifestation of Devi, as seen in Taiyam.

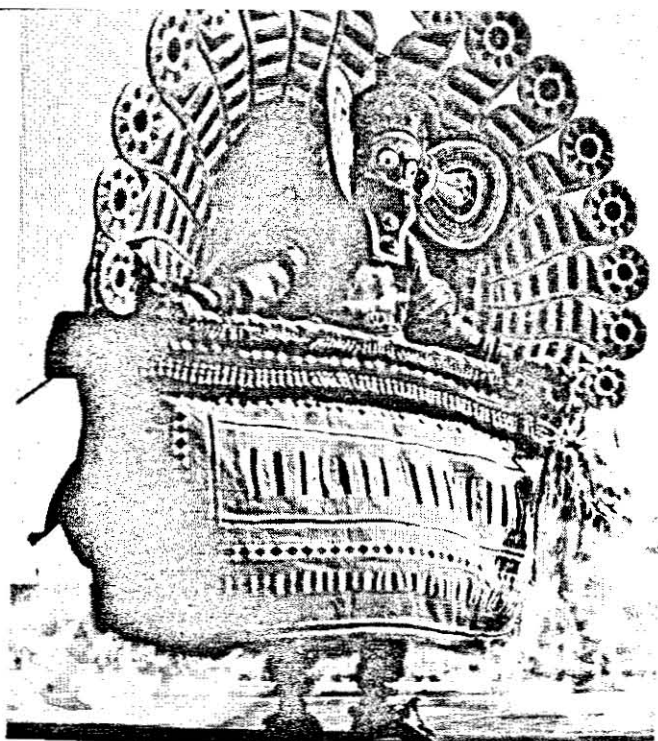
Taiyam is performed in shrines known as kavus in north Malabar.

makers, washermen, toddy-tappers. The dance roles are all hereditary, but not directly so, meaning that, when a dancer retires, his status passes on to his first nephew, not to his son; that is because of the matrilineal character of Kerala society. The costume, ornaments and related accoutrements of any character are the property of the performer and his heirs. The dancers are not paid anything, though they do sometimes receive offerings from the people. It is now common to see women attending the festival, but till about 40 years ago the Taiyam was an out-and-out male affair.

Before he finally plunges into the role he is to take, the dancer finds it necessary to seek the blessings of Bhagavati. For this, after a purificatory bath, he dons part of the apparel of the character he is to assume and stands before the shrine. To the accompaniment of much gesticulation and mounting fervour, he delivers what are known as *tottam* songs in praise of the Goddess. More often than not, he works himself up to a pitch of excitement, when he bounds to the open space that is kept available for the purpose and begins to dance. The row of drummers who are in attendance take the cue and begin to pound their *chendas* furiously. The dance is an outburst of frenzy, blazoned by whirls, spirals, jumps, whimsical capering and plain mad rushing about, all of which generally lead the dancer to virtual collapse. The Goddess is then believed to have descended on him. He is then made much of, by the sprinkling of holy water on him. Having thus completed his preliminary part in the ritual, the dancer moves away to give place to the next performer.

It is only after his invocatory offerings to the Goddess through the chanting of *tottams*, followed by ecstatic dancing, that the dancer takes on the full disguise of the Taiyam he is to represent. The costuming and make-up entail a tedious process, often requiring a number of helpers. Each character has a fixed style of attire and adornment, for which the main material used comprises coloured cloth, tassels, beads, silver, tinsel, shards and fibres cut fresh from coconut and palmyra palm. Many of the characters have intricate designs, all strictly conventional, painted on the face, while some, such as Gulikan and Kuttichatan, wear masks made of paper. The dresses are colourful and ornate in the extreme, but also often patently weird if not altogether nightmarish. Each character also has his or her own distinguishing head-dress, which is generally of elaborate make and at times extraordinarily massive or defiantly towering. For the most part, every aspect of the mien and array of the dancers contributes to make them look at once majestic and awesome.

The dancing has not much to commend in it by way of technique or variety. The movements and the steps are all simple. It cannot be otherwise, perhaps, considering the irksome and unwieldy outfit of the



Kuttichatan, a mischievous imp, is a popular character in Taiyam.



Prelude to a performance through invocation.



A performer in trance, dancing before the shrine of Bhagavati.

performers. The dancers mostly go about wearing a stern, grim expression coupled with a proud and stately demeanour. They are robust but the dance is tame and straightforward, with little room for individual artistry. The body remains erect or tilts to any side, and there is a good deal of punctuation with immobile stances. The entire open space around the shrine becomes the performing area. The dancers weave their way through this with deliberate pacing, followed all along by the drummers and their terrific din. After accomplishing his role, the dancer does not normally call it a day but tarries for a while. He is believed to have emerged from a state of ecstatic union with the *daivam*, and hence equipped to bless and heal people and to give oracular replies to any questions that may be put to him.

It is at this time, too, that the dancer accepts offerings from the gathering. These are, at present, practically wholly in the form of cash, but formerly—as some of the pictures accompanying this piece that were taken in the early 1950s will show—toddy and fowls were also commonly given. In the case of fowls—only cocks, not hens, can be offered—the dancer decapitates the bird with one quick stroke of a knife, throws the severed head on the altar, and returns the headless body to the offerer for being taken home and cooked as a special dish. Also, women were at the time not allowed to attend the Taiyam, and it was obligatory for each family in the village to have at least one male member with offering to assist at the event. All this is now a thing of the dim past.

Thanks to the abiding faith and tenacity of the handful of performers who are the sole legatees of the tradition, Taiyam well survives in all the villages with which it has been customarily associated. But it is at the same time despairing and disquieting to find how in recent years Taiyam has been thoughtlessly and callously planted on the professional stage, in an altogether garbled version to be sure. The Republic Day Folk Dance festivals in Delhi and the Festivals of India in several countries abroad, for instance, have seen Taiyam in its new incarnation; and Kerala Tourism revels in trumpeting the art as “a dance performed to propitiate mystique deities and spirits”. In all such cases everything of course is fake: the dance, the dancers, the rig-out.

As always in the past, Taiyam today essentially belongs to the simple village folk, the rabble so to speak. It is of no concern to townsmen, most of whom have, on their own admission, never attended a Taiyam. Its peak period is the Malayali month of Kumbham which begins in the middle of February, but the festival lingers on until early summer. And on each occasion, Taiyam takes the faithful back, one might even say nostalgically, to a strange, unreal land which the hand of time has hardly touched. Where they come face to face with their distant gods wrapped in untold mysteries, and emerge morally reinforced through the kick of both passion and fear. □