

25. Kathakali : the Dance Drama of Kerala

Kathakali, the dance-drama peculiar to Kerala, is in essence a pantomime show, in which stories from Puranas are depicted with musical accompaniments through signs and gestures of the actors. It has been a very popular art on the west coast. Though for a short while there was some neglect it has now come to be recognised as an important aspect of art and is receiving attention and recognition all around. There is a distinct atmosphere about Kathakali, which makes it similar to the old Mystery Plays of the West. In one sense Kathakali is a kind of Magic, the make-up, the costume and gestures all combining to produce a distinct other-worldly atmosphere. Usually Rama and Krishna are the central figures round which all the stories are woven.

To a stranger the make-up and costumes of the Kathakali actors may appear fantastic and weird. But one can

easily understand that all the details have been carefully worked out to produce almost a ceremonial effect. The make-up is a very elaborate process and at times it takes three to four hours to make up a particular character. They generally start this at dusk, the actor lies down flat and the make-up artist starts his work on the actor; different kinds of flour paste mixed in different colours are used; the process being rather long the actor at times goes to sleep in the course of this process. It is not easy to give a precise description of this. But the effect is marvellous; the very sight of a made-up Kathakali actor is enough to lift you to a different world.

As I have already said there are different kinds of make-up depending upon the character to be depicted. There is a very large variety of characters, but they can be grouped under four or five broad headings:—

(1) *Paccha* (green) in which green is used for the face, red for the limbs, and black for the eyes and eye-lashes. There is a border of a mixture of rice flour and chunam all along the outline of the cheek. Outstanding characters like Krishna, Rama, Arjuna and so on, appear in this make-up.

(2) *Minukku* in which red and yellow colours dominate on the face. Generally this make-up is used for ladies, sages and Brahmins.

(3) There is another variety called *Tadi* with three sub-divisions. A beard in appropriate colour and a furred-coat, and a big projection on the forehead and the nose are characteristic of this type. White colour is used in the case of Sathvic characters like Hanuman, red in the case of forceful leaders like Bali and black is generally dominant for characters like Kali.

(4) A very elaborate make-up is employed in the variety called *Katti*, where green and red are blended and

also a white knob is attached to the nose. Generally Asuras are represented in this make-up.

(5) Characters like hunters, clowns, etc., appear in the make-up called Kari, in which black dominates. We generally find in this type all kinds of fantastic and comic representations.

The costumes as already indicated are elaborate, almost to the point of looking fantastic. The head-gear is a very striking ornament, the ear-rings are big round discs, silver nails are attached to the fingers, and garlands and bracelets and girdles and jingling anklets are all used. The skirt is made of long pieces of embroidered cloth, interspersed and folded, and is so worn round the waist that freedom is assured for acting and dancing.

The stage for a Kathakali performance is a very simple affair. A thatched hut in any convenient place is used as a stage; lighting is provided by two big bell-metal lamps well supplied with oil and wicks. There is only a single curtain which is held across the stage by two people holding its two ends about six feet from the floor. There are no scenic arrangements. When a character is to appear on the stage the curtain is drawn aside by one of the holders. Generally the audience squat on the floor. The only furniture used for any actor to sit is a wooden mortar or a wooden stool. The background music is provided by a number of musicians standing well behind. Generally only such singers are chosen as have very powerful voice which will stand out clear in the midst of the noisy instruments like *Chendai* and *Maddalam*, the gong and resounding cymbals.

The Kathakali troupe generally consists of 30 people, of whom a dozen are actors. Till very recently, almost every rich and aristocratic family of Kerala was maintaining a troupe of its own. A Kathakali show is practically an all-

night affair; by about 9 P.M. the beating of drums indicates that the play is about to begin, the performance proper generally lasts for about 8 hours. The intervals between the appearances of the actors are filled by singing and drumming. While the play is going on, the theme will be sung by the orchestra and the actor will interpret the action by gestures and by manipulation of the so-called *Mudras* (hand poses — representatives of various types of emotion and action). In the use of these *Mudras*, strict adherence to traditional methods is compulsory, no deviation is allowed. And all the time there is the background of dance which is indispensable for any Kathakali actor.

The dance side of Kathakali is of perennial interest; it supplies rhythmic background and helps to keep the atmosphere of the art. Both the types, *Tandava* and *Lasya*, are used, though generally the former dominates. In the mode of dance employed by Kathakali actors there is a general indication of the original martial spirit which was dominant in the people of Kerala. When a verse or a song has been acted there is a winding called *Kalasa*, in which the dance is worked out to a careful finish through various movements of the feet accompanied by jumping and leaping. The time-measure has a prominent place in Kathakali dance and experts use various kinds of *tala*-measure in the finishing steps of *Kalasa*.

Persons who want to become Kathakali actors take to an elaborate system of apprenticeship. When very young the body has to be trained, made nimble, elastic and alert. Generally one takes to this training between the ages of 12 and 15. The preliminary exercises are mostly physical, and when the body has become suitable the apprentice is given training in the use of *Mudras*, and then foot work is taught. To get a fairly good standard of proficiency it may take 6 to 8 years of continuous practice.

As many as 24 Mudras (hand-poses) are used in Kathakali. I do not propose to mention all of them here. Three or four of the more important ones may however be referred to.

(1) The *Pataka*, in which the fourth finger is bent inwards towards the centre of the palm while the remaining fingers are held erect. This is used in connection with kings, elephants, lions and so on.

(2) *Nataka*, in which the middle finger is turned so as to touch the palm while the index finger and the thumb are brought together so as to make a circle and the other two fingers are extended. This goes with Vishnu, Sri Rama, women, star, umbrella and so on.

(3) *Mudra* is generally used to indicate Veda, Brahma, Svarga, sky, meditation, affection, etc. In this the index and the thumb form a circle, while the other fingers remain extended.

(4) *Mushti* which consists in the thumb being inserted between the middle and the fourth fingers while the other fingers are closed up towards the palm, is generally indicative of Yama, sudra, yaksha, fight, strength and so on.

These and several other Mudras are used in various combinations so as to produce a large number of complicated expressions.

Naturally all the nine sentiments or *Rasas* are used. Certain facial movements are associated with each of these *Rasas*; for example, raising the eyebrows with wide open eyes and holding erect the neck and the face express *Veera Rasa* (Valour); curving the eye-brows and half closing the eye go with *Hasya Rasa* (ridicule or sneer); if the hands are held in a worshipful posture and the pupils of the eyes look upward in a slant, obviously *Karuna Rasa* (compassion) is meant. Similarly all the nine *Rasas* have their corresponding movements of the various parts of the face.

The art of Kathakali has an uniqueness of its own. It has been developed out of an instinctive recognition of the dance art as a mode of contacting the inner worlds and superphysical beings. It had its own heyday, and, as in other things, there had been ups and downs for this art also. In the new life that is now pulsating in this country this art also is having its due share and it is hoped that, while certain improvements based upon modern conveniences may be made, the essential features of the art will be kept intact, so that the art may fulfil its true purpose.