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Kathakali Dance

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Kathakali Dance

Kerala is the home of several traditional dance and dance - drama forms, the most notable being Kathakali.

Kathakali, as a dance form popular today, is considered to be of comparatively recent origin. However, it is an art which has evolved from many social and religious theatrical forms which existed in the southern region in ancient times. **Chakiarkoothu**, **Koodiyattam**, **Krishnattam** and **Ramanattam** are few of the ritual performing arts of Kerala which have had a direct influence on Kathakali in its form and technique. Legend has it that the refusal of the Zamorin of Calicut to send his **Krishnattam** troupe to Travancore, so enraged the Raja of Kottarakkara, that he was inspired to compose the **Ramanattam**.



Basic standing position of a female character



Basic standing position of a male character

Kathakali is a blend of dance, music and acting and dramatizes stories, which are mostly adapted from the Indian epics. It is a stylised art form, the four aspects of abhinaya - **angika**, **aharya**, **vachika**, **satvika** and the **nritya**, **nritya** and **natya** aspects are combined perfectly. The dancer expresses himself through codified hastamudras and facial expressions, closely following the verses (**padams**) that are sung. Kathakali derives its textual sanction from **Balarama Bharatam** and **Hastalakshana Deepika**.

The **attakkathasor** stories are selected from the epics and myths and are written in a highly Sanskritised verse form in Malayalam. Many Malayalam writers have also contributed to the vast repertoire of Kathakali literature.



Shri Krishna with Radha



Makeup for Vellathadi

Kathakali is a visual art where **aharya**, costume and make-up are suited to the characters, as per the tenets laid down in the **Natya Shastra**. The characters are grouped under certain clearly defined types like the **pacha**, **kathi**, **thadi**, **kari** or **minukku**. The face of the artist is painted over to appear as though a mask is worn. The lips, the eyelashes and the eyebrows are made to look prominent. A mixture of rice paste and lime is applied to make the **chutti** on the face which highlights the facial make-up.

Kathakali dance is chiefly interpretative. The characters in a Kathakali performance are broadly divided into **satvika**, **rajasika** and **tamasika** types. Satvika characters are noble, heroic, generous and refined. In **pacha**, green colour dominates and **kirita** (headgear) is worn by all. Krishna and Rama wear special crowns decorated with peacock feathers. The noble characters like Indra, Arjun and the Devas are some of the **pacha characters**.



Shri Krishna with Duryodhan



Kalasam

The **kathi** type depict anti-heroes. Though they are of the rajasika category, they are sometimes great warriors and scholars such as Ravana, Kamsa and Sisupala to name a few. The moustache and the small knob called **chuttippu** fixed on "the tip of the nose and another in the centre of the forehead, is peculiar to the **kathi** character. The characters of the **thadi** (beard) category are the **chuvanna thadi**, (red beard), **vellathadi** (white beard) and the **karutha thadi** (black beard). **Vellathadi** or the white bearded character is generally that of Hanuman, the dancer also wears the costume of a monkey. **Kari** are characters whose make-up have a black base, they wear black costume depicting a hunter or forest dweller. Apart from these, there are minor characters like **minukku** which are the women and sages. Kathakali costumes and make-up are elaborate and designed so as to give a super human effect. The make-up of Kathakali can be classified into the **teppu**, **chuttikuthu** and **uduthukettu**. The teppud done by the actor himself. Each character has a distinct **teppu**. The second stage is done by experts who specialise in make-up. The wearing of huge bellowing skirts is called **uduthukettu**.

A simple stage is used. A large oil-fed lamp is placed in front of the stage and two people hold a curtain called **Tirasseela** on the stage, the main dancers stand behind it before the performance.

In no other dance style is the entire body used so completely as in Kathakali. The technical details cover every part of the body from facial muscles to fingers, eyes, hands and wrists. The facial muscles play an important part. The movement of the eyebrows, the eye-balls and the lower eye-lids as described in the Natya Shastra are not used to such an extent in any other dance style. The weight of the body is on the outer edges of the feet which are slightly bent and curved.

Kalasams are pure dance sequences where the actor is at great liberty to express himself and display his skills. The leaps, quick turns, jumps and the rhythmic co-ordination make kalasams, a joy to watch.

A Kathakali performance begins with the **kelikottu**, calling the audience to attention followed by the **odayam**. It is a devotional number performed where one or two characters invoke the blessings of the gods. **Kelikottu** is the formal announcement of the performance done in the evening when drums and cymbals are played for a while in the courtyard. A pure nritta piece known as the **purappadu** comes as a sequel to this. Then the musicians and drummers hold the stage entertaining the audience with an exhibition of their skills in **melappada**. **Tiranokku** is the debut on the stage of all characters other than the **pacha** or **minukku**. Thereafter, the play or the particular scene of the chosen play begins.



Musicians

Kathakali music follows the traditional **sopana sangeet** of Kerala. It is said to be the ritual singing of the **Ashtapadis** on the flight of steps leading to the **sanctum sanctorum**. Now, Kathakali music also uses Carnatic **ragas**-the **raga** and **tala** conforming to the **bhava**, **rasa** and **dance patterns (nritta and natya)**. The orchestra which is also used in other traditional performing arts of Kerala, normally comprises the **Chenda**, **Maddalam**, **Chengila**, **Ilathalam**, **Idakka** and **Shankhu**.

Ilakiattam is that part of the performance when the characters get an opportunity to demonstrate their excellence in **abhinaya**. For the most part of the performance the dancers engage themselves in **chodiattam** which means acting in strict conformity to the words in the **padams** sung by the accompanying musicians.

Thanks to the service done by the poet Vallathol, this classical dance form received a new impetus and today many innovations are also being made to suit the needs of a changing society.

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