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CHAKYAR-KOOTHU

By RICHARD CHINNATHAMBI

Among the less-known pastimes of rural Malabar is the Chakyar-koothu. In orthodox temples, such as the Hemambika-kuvu in Agastheethara near Palghat town, Chakyar-koothu is sometimes arranged for performance during important festivals. Within the temple precincts, in the Koothambalam, a permanent pavilion where theatrical performances are conducted or in a temporary canopy erected of bamboo thatch (see illustration) the Chakyar installs himself dressed in an over-pleated mundu or waist-cloth doubled over his knees. He wears cheap and showy bracelets and wristlets and a headgear. With caste-marks all over his bare

He is an adept at the job, the embellishments of which were handed down to him through generations. He exhibits considerable skill in his witty sallies on the assembled group individually and collectively. As the Koothu was performed only within temples the Chakyar enjoyed all the privileges of the padre in the pulpit of the Christian churches. No one could talk back, laugh immoderately at the jokes nor even take offence in any way. If one did, the performance would be immediately stopped and there would be such a hullabaloo about sacrilege. The author of this article was not intrepid enough to confront a probable

broadside of vituperation by attracting the Chakyar's notice in an attempt to take a close-up snap. The Chakyars are a caste by themselves, a caste of players and singers. Reference is made in canto 28 of "Silappadikaram" to a dramatic performance by a Chakyar troupe in the durbar of Senguttavan. The Chakyar put on boards in the Koothambalam, scenes from the Sanskrit plays of Bhasa and other dramatists. These were known as 'kootiyattam,' now-a-days seldom performed. Both men and women took part in the 'kootiyattam' whereas males alone were permitted in the Chakyar-koothu.

A Chakyar once told me that his ancestors were Brahmins who had fallen from a state of grace. When Shoothan was killed by Balabathan there was none to carry on the recitals of the Koothu in temples and so Chakyars had to be called in by the temple authorities. Brahmins do not intermarry with Chakyars nor intermarry. But Chakyars do so with Kshatriyas. There are about a dozen Chakyars living now on the borders of Cochin State.

As in the 'kootiyattam' chapters 14 to 26 of the Bharata-natyam are adhered to in the practice of the Koothu. Shoothan's followers merely recited slokas in Koothambalams and set the fashion for Katha-prasangams. The Chakyars are dwindling down in their numbers and their Koothu is a dying art. It is a classical form and preserves in itself the origins of not only the 'Thullal' but also of 'Krishnan-attam' and 'Raman-attam' (Katha-kali). Chakyar-koothu is as seldom performed as the 'Krishnan-attam' in Malabar. They are both features of exclusively orthodox temples and no greater inducement is found among devotees to visit these shrines than these classical expressions of indigenous art revived during festivals.



A performance of Chakyar Koothu

also he presents a quaint figure. The face is not elaborately painted as in the characters of the 'Katha-kali,' the dance drama of Kerala. There is no breast-plate or shoulder plaque. Tiny bells are worn around the ankles which jingle intriguingly with his movements. Standing in this garb within the pavilion the Chakyar recites Sanskrit slokas from the Prabandhas and then explains them to the congregation in colloquial Malayalam with comments of his own. The Koothu is, in fact, a 'Katha-prasangam.' The Chakyar is accompanied by a Nambir or the 'Mishavu,' a kind of drum made by stretching a membrane over the mouth of a huge metal pot with a narrow neck. The drum is smacked with the bare hand by the Nambir and he is accompanied by a Nangiar (young girl) with a pair of cymbals.

The popularity of the Koothu consists mainly in the humorous commentaries interspersed by the Chakyar in the course of his exposition of the slokas.