

# KATHAKALI-- THE DANCE DRAMA

By RUKMINI DEVI

**K**ATHAKALI, according to many South Indian scholars is Bharata Natya in its Natya or Drama aspect. South India during the time of the Chola Kings shone in so many types of dance dramas. There were many names given to these different types, but the special types of the Chola period were the Kurawanji and the Chakkyar. Both were attached to Temples which were always the centres of Art. The Chakkyasattam dance drama does not exist any more except in the Malabar Temples and can be seen nowhere else. The style of the dance steps has obviously changed and is more like Kathakali, another form of dance drama which is not so much attached to Temples. According to many books Kathakali has its origin in the Bharata Shastra and essentially has not changed, though utterly different in appearance and the Nritta portion looks as if it had been very much affected and influenced by some local dance movements already existing in Malabar.

According to the average conception, Bharata Natya is performed only by women. But in reality the dance dramas of the Bharata Natya type were performed by men. These can be seen even to-day in some of the South Indian villages. Kathakali characters, even including those of women, are performed only by men. But, in fact, a generation or two ago women of the best families were studying Kathakali and took the part of the women characters. This shows that in the very olden times the style



WOMAN CHARACTER IN KATHAKALI :  
A CARVING IN WOOD.

must have been different, for the dance even of the feminine characters to-day is naturally very masculine.

The Kathakali which is seen all over India to-day is generally the modernized variety and not much accepted by those older Malayalees who have seen the best in their own land. The real Kathakali comes under the title Natya. It contains all the elements of the dance according to Natya Shastra—Natya, Nrittya, and Nritta. Just as in



SITAPARANAM :—A Kathakali scene depicting the abduction of Sita by Ravana.

Bharata Natya, the Nritta portion is the most dominant and beautiful, so in Kathakali, the Bhava portion is the strongest, as it has to be since it is a dance drama.

Except to the Malayalees who are used to it, the first impression from the point of view of those who have studied Bharata Natya is the similarity and yet the utter difference. In Bharata Natya there has been so much vulgarity—but one feels that this is due to the attitude of the dancer, particularly of the Nattuvanar who composed these dances and the environment which demanded this of him. But the form of it is such that even vulgarity is hidden by the natural beauty of the movements. In Kathakali, not the usual kind one sees everywhere, there is great beauty

of thought, vivid imagination, and complete absence of vulgarity; but the natural postures and movements are such that due to the extreme exaggeration and elementalism, the real beauty of the dance is hidden and obstructed. In the modern expression of Kathakali, the postures and movements are a little more natural but other elements have come in which, on the whole, tend to kill Kathakali rather than to reform it in the spirit of the ancient Rishis and Sages.

### Village Entertainments

Kathakali, as every other ancient Indian art, is also a spiritual expression, but instead of being performed in Temples, it is performed in the open air in different villages and produces a spiritual and uplifting entertainment for the people. Great and beautiful stories have been written as dramas in exquisite poetry which, as poetry alone, is equal to any literature in the world. These dramas are from the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, and the Bhagavata entirely. They are com-

posed in alternate shlokas and padas; the shlokas are sung in raga alapana and without set tala. They are like the chorus in a play and are not danced, but they introduce the padas which are set to definite ragas and talas and are danced or acted.

The language of Malabar was originally Tamil and the very old Tamil script seen in the Temples is very like the Malayalam script in general appearance. But later with the influence of Samskrit, Malayalee literature is mainly Samskrit with a beautiful blending of old Tamil.

### A Miracle

There were very great people, including kings, who were well versed in Kathakali and therefore wrote inspiring dramas for it. The greatest of them who was the last

independent ruler in India was the King of a part of Malabar now called Wynad. This great personage was a very fine scholar and ruler and one of the greatest warriors known in Malabar. The story is told that as a little boy he was remarkable for his stupidity and his mother who was a very learned woman—there are many such in Malabar—was quite disappointed in him. Then she heard of a miracle waterfall nearby which was blessed by Saraswati, the Goddess of Learning. The tradition was that even if the most stupid person bathed under that waterfall regularly, he would become a genius. The mother left the child under the waterfall to live or die. The child lived and wrote *Krimmira Vadha* and *Kalyana Saugandhika*. In this last drama, he put into the mouth of Yudhishtira the words: "The forest is my fate." And certainly the forest was the fate of the author himself, for he was later exiled.



VASUKI DANCE: ANOTHER KATHAKALI SCENE.

These olden rulers were learned scholars in Sangita and the Bharata Shastra, but they developed also the possibilities of Abhinaya and therefore one finds in Kathakali a far larger number of mudras used. One of the great books written by one of the most cultured rulers is *Balarama Bharata*. This valuable book was written by Bala Rama Varma, Maharaja of Travancore who ruled in the 17th century. In this way Angika Abhinaya is to be found in its fullness in Kathakali. Vachika Abhinaya is represented only in the singing of the accompanying musicians whose music is the same in style as the Carnatic music found elsewhere in South India. They have many types of drums, such as the Maddalam, Edakku, etc., and instead

of the small metal bell used in Bharata Natya, enormous ones are used, all together making the sound very powerful and impossible for any place but the open air.

Unlike Bharata Natya dancers, Kathakali actors are not allowed to sing and the only persons allowed to speak are those who act the part of evil spirits and rakshasas.

### **Kathakali Costumes**

Abhaya Abhinaya is very elaborate in Kathakali. The costumes generally are like full crinolines, the main colours being red and white. The women characters have a set way of hairdressing and wear a sort of veil, so that a Muhammadan rather than a Hindu impression is created. This,

added to the exaggerated bending and other postures of the legs, produces a dwarfish appearance.

There may also be another very good reason for the comparative lack of importance given to the appearance of the leg and foot movements, for there is a well-known tradition that Kathakalai is really a mime drama given by Vishnu only for the upper part of the body. The story runs that the first giver of Kathakali mudras was doing his meditation during his bathing in a river. Vishnu appeared before him and gave him Kathakali. But as Vishnu was in the water, all that was seen of him was that portion of his torso above the waist and, therefore, only that portion is presented to the world through Kathakali. But there is no doubt that the arm movements are remarkable and they are geniuses, particularly in the representation of nature, including animals and birds.

The costumes give the impression of being fairly old in type but differ greatly from our temple figures and bronzes. On the other hand, the jewels are very Hindu in atmosphere, though again highly exaggerated. By the head-dress or Kirita alone, it is possible immediately to find out the part the actor is taking and these are extremely beautifully made by craftsmen who specialize in these wooden and papier-mache ornaments. The make-up of the face again is elaborate and suggestive with varying colours. This is also fixed according to the type of the part an actor is taking.

### **Realistic Expressions**

Sattvika Abhinaya is more vivid in Kathakali than in any other art. In the training of the artistes, every little movement of the eye, every use of the eyebrows and facial muscles is taught, so that it is possible to express different expressions by

the correct use of the facial muscles and eyes alone. As in every aspect of Kathakali, Sattvika Abhinaya is very realistic and exaggerated in expression. At first it appears as if this Bhava is over-expressed, but one realizes that Kathakali actors are highly made up and the performances take place all night with the light of wonderful brass oil lamps which subdue all the make-up and bhava. The make-up is so elaborate that the actor sleeps while the make-up man creates and the result is more a mask but painted on the surface of the skin than a make-up. This Sattvika Abhinaya is a speciality of Malabar and there have been many great actors who by their emotions and power of concentration have even changed the appearance of their faces and bodies. For example, a famous Kathakali artiste was demonstrating the serpent in the story of Nala and Damayanti and was portraying the mortal agony of the serpent. There was a great critic seated in the front of the audience. After the play was over, the man who played the serpent went up to the critic and asked him how he had appeared. The critic said he was very good but there was one mistake, in that the artiste did not fulfil all conditions. For example, the snake when it writhes in mortal agony shows dark colour on the back and white on the lower surface of the body and the artist did not convey the difference of the two sides of the body and the appropriate colours. The artiste said it was impossible to show, but the critic actually demonstrated it and portrayed one portion of his face dark and the other pale.

### **Art in Malabar**

One of the unique features of Malabar is the fact that even to-day the average Malayalee knows and understands Kathakali far more than the people of any other

*(Please turn to page 51, col. 1)*