

THULLAL

AN INDIGENOUS ART-FORM

By Mr. K. P. Padmanabhan Tampy

THE MOST popular and interesting variety of indigenous histrionic entertainment in Travancore is *Thullal* which belongs to the realm of story-telling. It was originated by Kunchan Nambiyar, (A. D. 1705-1770) one of the foremost poets of Kerala who composed more than sixty *Thullal* poems to be enacted for the delectation of the people. One of the many indigenous dance recitals provided for the sight-seers during the festival season in the temples in Travancore, *Thullal* holds the audience spell-bound from start to finish.

Nambiyar's New Histrionic Art

The circumstances which prompted Kunchan Nambiyar to invent the *Thullal* and perform it are intriguing. The time-honoured duty of persons belonging to the caste of Nambiyar, was usually to play on the *mizhavu*, a kind of drum in temples during the performance of *Chakkyar Koothu*, a form of indigenous dance recital in which an actor of the Chakkyar caste recites Puranic stories in Sanskrit, and explains them in Malayalam, enlivened with frequent sallies of wit and humour most of them at the expense of the audience. On one occasion Kunchan Nambiyar was asked to play on the *mizhavu* for a *Chakkyar Koothu* scheduled to be performed in the *Koothambalam* (theatre hall) of the famous Sri Krishnaswami Temple at Ambalapuzha. Kunchan Nambiyar who was well-versed in Sanskrit, was at the time one of the many wits who had flocked to the court of the Raja of Ambalapuzha (the "porca" of the Portuguese and the Dutch writers) to

seek their fortune and earn royal recognition. In the absence of the usual drummer, Kunchan Nambiyar had to officiate. Nambiyar who was not a master drummer failed to accompany the Chakkyar on the drum to his satisfaction. The Nambiyar missed the *tala* or rhythm several times. The Chakkyar, an accomplished actor of great fame, was awfully annoyed with Kunchan Nambiyar. The Chakkyar in his uncontrollable wrath ridiculed the Nambiyar in the presence of the audience for his shabby performance on the drum. The critically-minded audience broke into peals of laughter, and made fun of Kunchan Nambiyar who had come to Ambalapuzha aspiring after honour. Kunchan Nambiyar who was put to shame lost his temper, and he took a vow that he would humble the proud Chakkyar in a singular manner and thus wreak vengeance on him who had the audacity to insult and humiliate him in public.

Crest-fallen, and deeply worried Kunchan Nambiyar, sneaked into his residence and ensconced himself in a room. That night Nambiyar had no sleep. With tears in his eyes and a heart overcome with grief he prayed to Lord Sri Krishna to enable him to score a victory over the arrogant Chakkyar. Nambiyar's capacious brain was busy. His fertile imagination and sharp intellect came to his rescue, and he evolved a new form of story-telling that night.

The next afternoon Kunchan Nambiyar went to the temple and took his stand opposite to the performing Chakkyar. The Chakkyar was amazed and perturbed to find

a figure attired in picturesque costume, challenging him with an entirely new and aggressively interesting type of dance form. Nambiyar performed the *Thullal* to the accompaniment of a drum and a pair of cymbals. The appearance of Nambiyar in such strange costume, and the novelty of his performance attracted the audience who were listening to the Chakkyar to such an extent that they left the Chakkyar to himself and gathered round Nambiyar. The Chakkyar driven to the humiliation of facing an empty theatre hall and the jeers of his rival performer, retreated in shame. Thus the intrepid Kunchan Nambiyar scored a victory over the Chakkyar who had strongly reprovved him the previous afternoon. This is the most popular version about the origin of the *Thullal*. The author of the 'Kerala Natana Kala', however, contends that Kunchan Nambiyar a dependent of the Ambalapuzha Raja's family, composed *Thullals* for being sung by the artists and combatants during the festival season in the temple at Takiyil, and that Nambiyar was asked to compose the *Thullal* songs by Mathoor Panikkar, the Prime Minister of the Raja of Ambalapuzha. The author of the supplementary note—Malayalam Language and Literature—to the authoritative publication the History of Kerala considers this version to be more plausible than the first which says that the *Thullal* was the outcome of the righteous indignation of Nambiyar.

An Original Creation

The first *Thullal* composed and enacted by Kunchan Nambiyar had as its theme the story of *Kalyanasougandhikam*, that colourful and intriguing episode in the *Maha Bharata* wherein Bhima, at Draupadi's behest wanders in search of thrilling adventures. This interesting story, Nambiyar recited in simple, sweet Malayalam verse, enlivened with frequent illuminating flashes of wit and humour, and illustrated

with appropriate gestures. This new art form, made a straight and powerful appeal to mass minds and won great popularity. The language, humour, and criticism of men and affairs of Kunchan Nambiyar's first *Thullal*, disclose that he borrowed liberally from the literature of *Chakkyar Koothu*. The quaint costume and the simple gestures employed by Nambiyar were, no doubt, borrowed from the technique of *Kathakali*, the famous dance drama of Malabar. But, the art form *Thullal* as a whole was entirely an original creation. The homely and beautiful language of the *Thullal*, its variety and vigorous and rapid metres, its flow and grace, and keen sarcasm, contributed to the popularity of the new dance-recital which for a time threw into the shade the *Chakkyar Koothu*.

The Performance

Thullal is performed usually during day time. There is only a single performer who is called *Thullalakkaran*. He is assisted by two musicians, one who leads the song and plays on the cymbals, and the other who beats the *maddalam*, a kind of drum, and keeps time. The actor sings as well as dances, making appropriate gestures to explain the meaning of the dance. The performance begins with invocations to God Ganesa and Goddess Saraswathi and to the *Gurus*. The recital of the story follows next. The *Thullalakkaran* or the person who performs the *Thullal* recites a few lines which are repeated by the drummer. The actor simultaneously with this interprets the meaning of the lines repeated by the drummer, through suitable gestures. No curtain is used in a *Thullal* performance. The Actor, when he feels tired snatches a brief spell of rest by turning his back to the audience. A typical *Thullal* performance would take about two hours.

Three Distinct Forms

There are three distinct forms of *Thullal*, known by the names of *Ottam*, *Seethankan* and *Parayan*. Of these, *Ottam Thullal*

is easily the most popular, both because the majority of *Thullals* are written in this form, and due to the variety and vigour of the metres employed in these exquisite literary pieces. An eminent scholar has said that the pure *Ottam* is more vigorous than the *Seethankan*, while the *Parayan* is the best suited for the pathetic style. A careful study of Kunchan Nambiyar's first *Thullal* "Kalyana Sougandhikam" reveals that he began with writing the *Seethankan* and *Ottam* styles of *Thullal* and finally took to writing those of the *Parayan* type. While the first two varieties of *Thullals* are overburdened with literary embellishments, are avowedly outstanding for their beauty of sound, sweet cadence and uncontrolled outbursts of caustic humour, and are mainly intended for attracting audiences, the *Parayan* style of *Thullal* excels in literary craftsmanship and artistic perfection.



OTTAM THULLAL

Costume and Make-up

The costume and make-up of the *Thullal* actors, especially the performer who enacts the *Ottam* style, are picturesque. The *Ottam Thullal* actor's make-up is quite an elaborate affair, which takes nearly two hours. He wears a fan-shaped crown inlaid with tiny bits of coloured glass, and an exuberance of gilt-work. A resplendent

breast plate embellished with multi-coloured spangles, shells and glass pieces hangs from his neck to the waist. Two wooden plaques similarly ornamented are tied to his shoulders. He paints his face light green and colours his eyelashes with collirium. He reddens his eyes with the flowers of the *Chunda*, a plant. The lips are painted red. Two long lines drawn from the corners of his eyes to the ears right across his temples, add to his dignified appearance. A vertical mark of sandalwood paste is put on the actor's forehead. Bangles adorn his wrists. A scarlet skirt is worn around the waist. A large number of four inches broad tapes of scarlet and white cloth with loops at the bottom are tied above the skirt. Strings of tiny bells are fastened around his legs. These tingle rhythmically when the actor dances.

The *Parayan Thullal* actor's make up is simple, but no less striking. His head-gear is a fan-like crown made of young coconut fronds. He attires himself in a short scarlet skirt, with a large quantity of looped tape.

The actor who performs the *Seethankan* style of *Thullal* wears a conical head-dress, elaborately and exquisitely ornamented with coloured beads. Rows of garlands of multi coloured beads adorn his bare chest. Decorated wooden plaques are tied to his wrists. He wears a scarlet cloth around his wrist reaching up to a foot below the ankles. A narrow strip of white cloth which serves the purpose of a belt is tied over the scarlet cloth. The white cloth has an elongated knot on either side.

The Censor of his age

The literary form of *Thullal* is Dravidian and the language is more popular than literary. The *Thullals* are based on episodes in the Ramayana and Mahabharatha. The variety of rapid metres, eminently suited for narratives, the direct style and straight appeal to the mass mind, the rich cadence, sparkling humour, subtle nuances—these distinctive features of Kunchan Nambiyar's *Thullals* have contributed to his lasting greatness as the foremost literary man of his age, and as one of the two

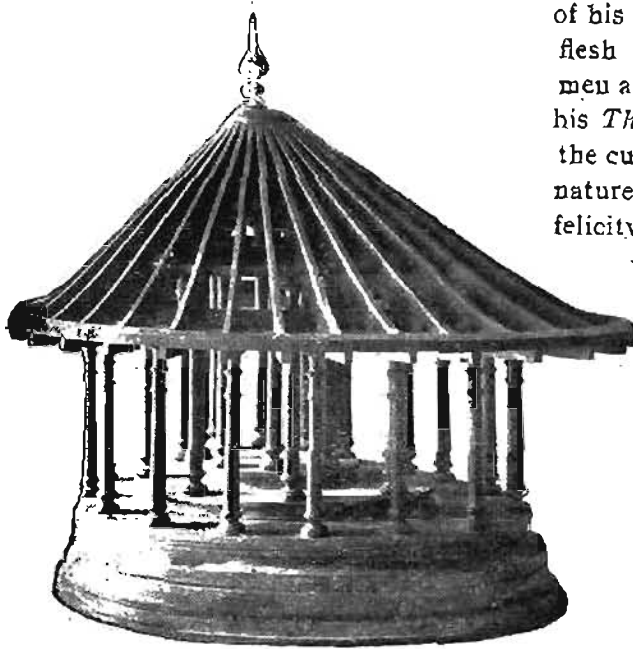
greatest writers, who by the extent and quality of their literary activity, liberated the Malayalam language from the bonds of Sanskrit literature and gave it her own soul.

Kunchan Nambiyar is by popular consent the foremost humourous writer in Malayalam. His *Thullals* which are full of rhyme, beauty of sound and depth of thought, embody caustic criticisms of social conditions and violent outbursts of rich humour. This fearless poet has spared no community from his sallies of wit. He made it clear that he was not prepared to please any one. His *Thullals* abound in rich didacticism, and satire. With consummate dexterity this literary genius has discussed contemporary society in his poems by the clever use of scenes and situations. He has pictured the gluttony and exploitation of the Brahmins, the idleness, arrogance and intemperance of the Nairs, the suicidal schisms among the chieftains, the cowardice and incompetence of the military, the foolishness and temerity of physicians, the intrigues of courtiers, the silly pomp of the wealthy, the stupidity of the astrologers, the advent of the Western Nations and their interference into the internal affairs of the country, and many more. His caustic humour and penetrative insight coupled with his picturesque eloquence render his works immortal. As a critic Kunchan Nambiyar is fearless, original and incisive. He is the creator of a literature unfettered by tradition, and distinctly new in form and technique.

An eminent scholar says of Kunchan Nambiyar :—"He was the censor of his age, he had a profound scorn for humbug and sham and against all such things he has directed his acid epigrams. His allusive satire on popular morals and manners must have had its biting effect on the people beyond the power of rod or sermon. He loved Malayalis and, therefore, wished to direct them in the way they should go. Kunchan Nambiyar was nothing, if not humorous. This humour, warm and all-embracing, bathed his ideas in a genial and abiding light".

Aliterary Genus

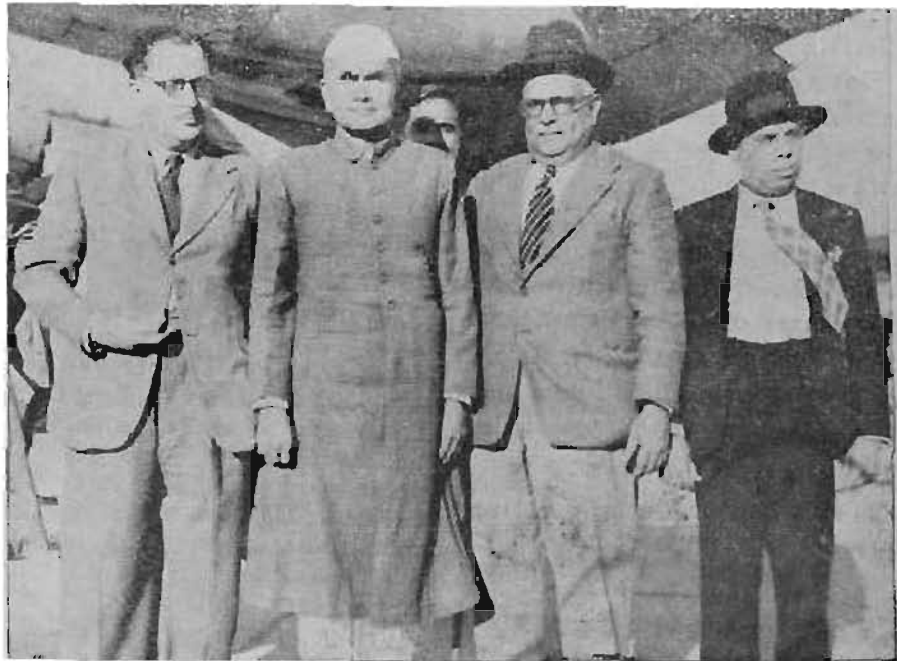
In Kunchan Nambiyar's *Thullals* which rely for their popular appeal in their overwhelming humanity, there is real art and spirited propaganda, which conceals and surpasses both art and propaganda. He plans and develops his works with consummate skill. In his hands the *Thullal* became a passionate and powerful plea for 'better life for all'. With meticulous care and a multitude of picturesque details he composed his *Thullals*. He made the maximum use of the arts of the painter, sculptor and musician to the extent the medium of mere words will permit. His *Thullals* are saturated with an atmosphere compounded with love and hate, beauty and brutality. His style is flexible and is a perfect medium for the vivid and powerful expression of various emotions, tender or strong, slow or swift, as the spirit of the moment may require. Kunchan Nambiyar has very cleverly put into the mouth



Model in wood of a Koothambalam or theatre in which indigenous dance-recitals are performed in the temples in Travancore.

of his characters who appear before us in flesh and blood, great home-truths about men and matters of his own times. Through his *Thubbals* he has given an impetus to the cult of devotion and the appreciation of nature. "His love of his mother-tongue, felicity and ease of expression, richness of imagination, sparkling humour and subtle nuances, great understanding of the human mind and intense love of nature all mark him out as a literary genius for all time".

Artiste, Preacher, Propagandist, Poet, Actor, Critic, Satirist, Inventor and Political Philosopher, Kunchan Nambiyar is verily a 'Super Man' in the literary realm of Kerala.



INDIAN FOOD DELEGATION TO WASHINGTON

An Indian Food Delegation to the Preparatory Commission for the World's Food Board in Washington headed by Dr. K. N. Katju, Minister for Development and Justice in the United Provinces Government, accompanied by Mr. A. D. Gorwala, (Bombay) Sir S. V. Ramamurti, (Madras) and Rajyasevapravina G. Parameswaran Pillai (Travancore) were photographed at the Karachi Airport before their departure for Washington.

(Photo by—Mr. M. SUNDARESAN)