

VELAKALI

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VELAKALI is a spectacular and fascinating entertainment during the *Ulsavam* (Temple Festival) season in the Trivandrum Temple dedicated to Sri Padmanabha, the tutelary Deity of the Ruling House. It is

A Major Embellishment

The ten-day *Ulsavam* takes place in March or April. *Velakali* is one of the major embellishments of the season. The gleaming swords, the ornamental shields



In the dance of war, who so sits to the feast of life must drink the cup of death. In the golden martial traditions of the State the cup held both the music and romance of life.

a war dance peculiar to Travancore. *Velakali* was originally instituted as a peacetime martial exercise with a high fighting and entertainment value.

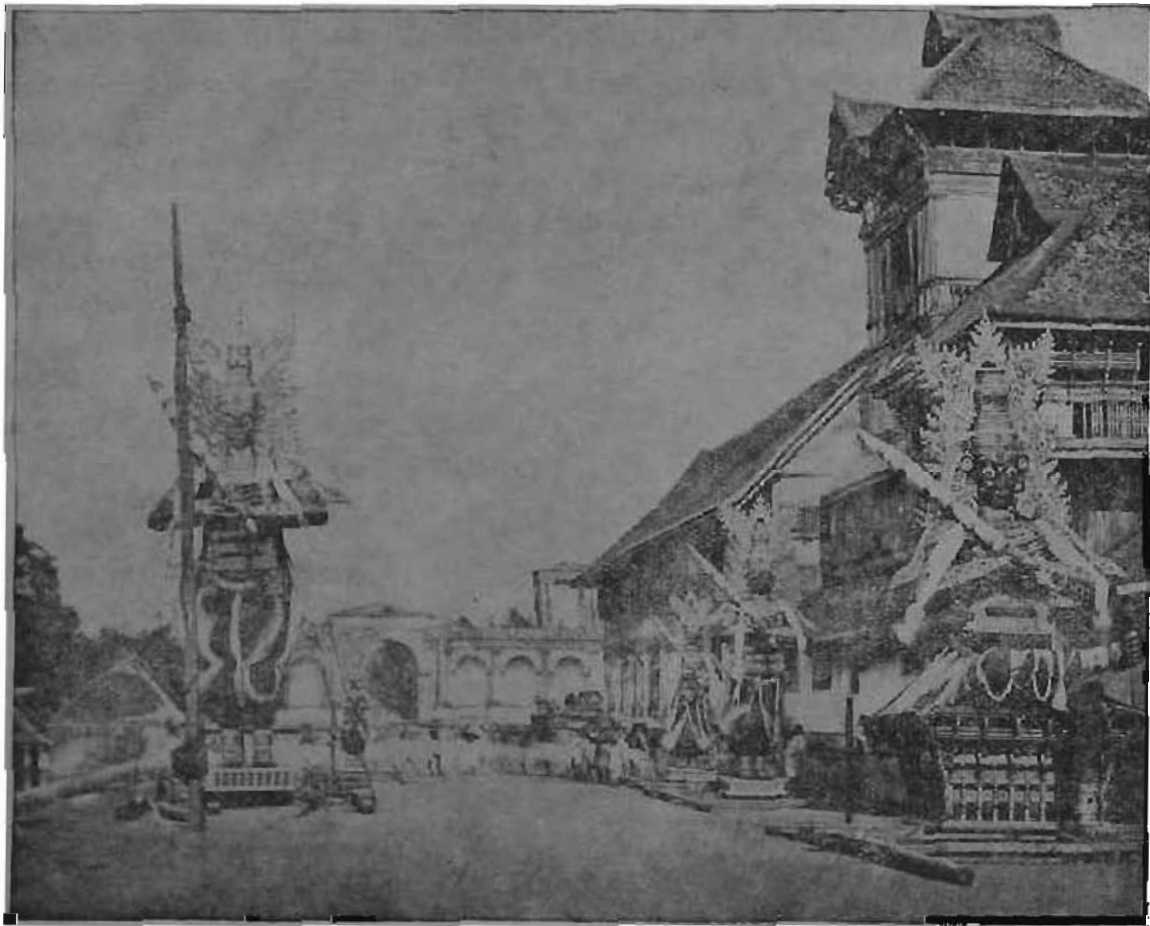
the quaint and impressive costumes of the actors and the vigorous martial music to which they dance lend a rare old world appeal to the performance.

As a well-known writer has put it, "The subject matter and technique of *Velakali* point back to a period in the history of Kerala when the conjoint military discipline and folk relaxation came under growing influences of the culture that had established itself in North India and proceeded southwards, carrying with it the philosophical ideas and religious conceptions and

Costume and Make-up

The *Velakali* actor holds in his left hand an ornamented shield and brandishes a sword-like stick with the other. The circular shield is a work of art. The short sword-stick curves on end.

The actors wear armlets and anklets and adorn themselves with garlands of multi-coloured beads, shells, and spangles. The



The Pandava brothers in action ; the enormous but life-like effigies seem actually engaged.

observances of the Aryan Seers ; carrying also what is more apposite our subject, the imaginative embodiments of deific powers and processes, in the *Puranas* whose stories became the inexhaustible source of the arts of Hindu India, and have remained so to this day."

head-dress is a red turban tied into a cylindrical knot on left and set with gold or silver laces. They wear two clothes, one snow-white reaching down to the ankles and the other a triangular piece of scarlet silk carrying silver stars and rings. A belt-strip of white cloth is tied round the

scarlet silk. Before the performance, they bathe and worship at the shrine. They smear on the forehead, shoulders and chest sandalwood paste and rub their eyes with black dye.

The Battle of Kurukshetra

The *Velakali* actors represent the hundred and one *Kauravas*, the enemies of the *Pandavas*. In fact, the performance is a symbolical presentation of *Kurukshetra*, the epic battle. The battle is staged in the wide approach to the temple, twice daily, in later afternoon and in the night.

The Mighty Pandavas

The *Pandavas* are towering wooden images on either side of the approach. Some are twenty and thirty feet high. The proportions are modulated and impressive. The costumes are quaint and picturesque.

The headdress of the 'Pandavas' is profusely decorated with beads and shells. The skirts are scarlet and voluminous. The *Pandavas* are portrayed as giants with black flowing tufts, long and pointed finger nails, round and bulging eyes. The quintuplet is indeed formidable.

The *Pandavas* except Dharmaputra are in standing posture, Dharmaputra is seated with one leg over the other, serene, dignified and calm, watching the battle. Bhima's image is the biggest and most spectacular. He looks a veritable giant with his huge mace poised carelessly over his broad shoulder. Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva stand behind the 'big brother', wielding smaller but none the less formidable maces.



A veteran in fine fettle. The martial jauntiness and poise reflect an olden tradition.

The costume and make-up of the *Pandavas* bear a remarkable resemblance to those of the *Kathakali* actors. The images of the *Pandavas* are of such gigantic dimensions that they are set up and dismantled with the help of an army of men and a number of elephants! The woodcarver has done his 'bit' for these stupendous statues. The artistry is intricate and sumptuous. There is strange dignity and perfection in the very exuberance and riotousness of the work.

The *Pandavas*

look determined and confident. They tower up like defiant giants instilling terror into the minds of children and curiosity and admiration in the minds of elders.

The *Pandavas* are images and immobile; the *Kauravas* reproduced by the *Velakali* actors play their part.

Battle-Play

Velakali—Battle-Play—commences with a flourish of trumpets and drums. The *kombu* (horn), *kurum kuzhal* (clarion), *thakil* (kettle drum), *thappu* and *maddalam* (hand drum) make the military band. As the trumpets, the drums and the band play up, the warriors muster. In the rear are the standard bearers; in the van the warriors. It is a battalion of youth with a sprinkling of elders. The infantry is accompanied by effigies of birds and beasts employed in olden days for military purposes. Bullocks, swans etc., made of wood, paper and cloth carried by retainers come last. In serried ranks, some eight or nine abreast, the *Velakali* actors surge along the broad approach to the foot of the flight of steps leading to the temple.

Spirited Tattoo

The encounter is regulated by custom and convention and no deviation permitted. The army of the *Kauravas* (the *Velakali* actors) prance like furious war steeds and engage in 'duels and solo exhibitions of martial prowess such as fencing and jumping. They march in battle array from the encampment against the giant *Pandavas*. The *Kauravas* enact the battle for an hour or so and retreat panic-stricken. The spirited tattoo provides thrilling entertainment to the large crowds of sightseers and pilgrims who gather inside the Fort at Trivandrum during the Festival season. The picturesque pennons, in various colours and



These unusually large drums and the shrill tunes of the pipes provide music for *Velakali*.

