

# Kathakali , Classical Dance of Kerala

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Kerala is known the world over by its own performing art form, the Kathakali. "Katha" means story and "Kali" stands for dance. Kathakali is considered to be a combination of literature, music, painting, acting and dance, as it is a beautiful mix of dance, drama and music. This is a form of dance formerly confined only to the festival stages in temples.

Kathakali also symbolizes a blending of the Aryan and Dravidian cultures, for shaping its technique. This dance form assimilated various elements, which it borrowed freely from the dances, dramas and ritual performances associated with these cultures.



## Origin of Kathakali

Kathakali as it is known today is not more than three to four hundred years old, even though its actual roots can be traced to at least 1500 years earlier. The art of Kathakali incorporates the characteristic features of many of the dances and dramas and it is safe to conclude that Kathakali evolved out of the earlier dance forms like the Chakiyarkoothu and Koodiyattom in Kerala, various ritual dances associated with the cult of Bhagavathy, such as the Mudiattu, thiyattom and Theyyattom, the socio-religious and material dances such as the Sastrakali and Ezhamattukali and the lately evolved dance - dramas such as the Krishnanattom and Ramanattom.

The ruler of Calicut in the 17th century wrote a poem on the life of Lord Krishna called the Krishnageeti and asked this to be performed at the temple. This was Kathakali preceded by a style called the Krishnattam, which was a masked dance drama; for very many similarities in the presentations, costumes, acting and background music could be cited in both. Another ruler of Kottarakara saw this play and was so impressed that he requested the Zamorin of Calicut to send the troupe to his kingdom, which the latter refused, angering the ruler of Kottarakara. He then decided to create his own play on the life of God Rama called the Ramanattam, which soon became popular and spread everywhere.

The ruler Tampuran of Kottayam then gave it the boost that it needed and it soon turned into Kathakali. Besides improving the costumes and make up so that the facial expressions were emphasized, he also selected interesting dramatic plots for presentation. He chose episodes from the Mahabharata, which were more attractive to the audiences. He also renamed the style calling it Katha- story + kali - act or play. However even with all these changes Kathakali remained in the shadows till the advent of the great poet Vallathol, who out of his own savings, started the Kerala Kalamandalam. Through his work and the gurus like Kunju Kurup, at this institute, Kathakali has acquired worldwide recognition.

## Style And Techniques of Kathakali

Kathakali ranks high among the Indian dance forms, since it is a dramatic performance in which, the actors do not speak or sing, but interpret their emotions through highly sensitive medium by its vivid and persuasive mudras, natural and impressive gestures, graceful and rhythmic movements, pleasing choreography and above all delightful wealth of imagery. It is not realistic art but belongs to the imaginative type spoken of in Bharata's Natya Shastra. Kathakali is predominantly a male art and the dancing is mostly of the masculine type.



### **Type And Theme of Kathakali**

Kathakali is one of the oldest theatre forms in the world. It originated in the area of southwestern India now known as the state of Kerala. Kathakali is a group presentation, in which dancers take various roles in performances. For themes Kathakali draws upon the inexhaustible treasure trove of the ancient puranas chronicling the lives loves and conflicts of the gods and supermen of Indian mythology. They typically deal with the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana* and the ancient scriptures known as the *Puranas*. This is performed in a text, which is generally Malayalam in Sanskrit. The most popular stories enacted are Nala Charitam (the story of a king betrayed by gods), Duryodhana Vadham (a story from the Mahabharata), Kalyanasowgandhikam (the story of Bhima going to get flowers for Panchali, from the Mahabharata), Keechaka Vadham (another story of Bhima and Panchali, from the *Mahabharata*), Kiratham (Arjuna and Lord Shivas fight, from the *Mahabharata*), Karna Shapadham (another story from *Mahabharata*). Recently, as part of an attempt at popularizing the art, stories from other cultures, such as the story of Mary Magdalene from the Bible, and Shakespeare's King Lear have also been adapted into Kathakali scripts.

### **Performance of the Kathakali Dancers**

A traditional Kathakali performance begins in the evening and continues throughout the night, culminating at the auspicious hour of dawn, when good finally conquers Evil. Today, however, it has been modified for the proscenium stage, and urban audiences can participate in this ritualistic theatre experience in the comfort of a plush auditorium, within the span of a couple of hours. In olden days Kathakali performance mostly took place on a temple premises or at the house of a local landlord. For a typical performance, a simple temporary pandal at a height of 10 1/2 feet will be erected. A minimum of 12 feet-square (144 sq. feet) is needed for the acting area.

### **Costumes and Make Up in Kathakali**

Noted for its ancient costumes, weird make up and grand headgears, Kathakali is perhaps the only dance form in India in which the masculine aspect of the dance is preserved in its elemental vigor. Kathakali costuming is intricate, elaborate and colourful and it takes 2 to 3 hours for the make up. The costume and make-up transform the actor mentally and physically to portray the character. The makeup is very elaborate and the costumes are very large and heavy.

### **Music in Kathakali**

Music is an important and essential element in Kathakali and it has some similarity to the larger body of South Indian classical music (Carnatic sangeet); however the instrumentation is decidedly different. Several poets have contributed a Kathakali script, which is called Kathakali Padam. Each "Padam" is a poem recited in one of the Karnatic music ragas. Aattakkadhakal (stories for dance), the poetic compositions of legendary stories to special metric scale, set to music in classical Carnatic style are danced out. Its local colour is strongly achieved by the use of instruments such as chenda, idakka, and shuddha madalam. The orchestra in it is composed of two vocal musicians, one keeping time with a resounding gong called chegala and the other with a pair of clanking cymbals called elethalam, a chenda player and maddalam player... The Kathakali songs couched in rich poetic diction are among the germs of Malayalam literature.

### **Role of Dancers in Kathakali**

Only men usually perform Kathakali. Men dressed in women's costume portray female characters. However, in recent years, women have started to become Kathakali dancers. A Kathakali actor uses immense concentration,

skill and physical stamina, gained from the training based on Kalari Payttu, the ancient martial art of Kerala, to prepare for the demanding role of a Kathakali actor. Training can often last for around 8-10 years before the actor can be considered acceptable. A Kathakali dancer has perfect control over the facial muscles and can express the various emotions (lasyams) with skill. The technique of Kathakali includes a highly developed language of gesture, through which the artist can convey whole sentences and stories. The body movements and footwork are very rigorous. To attain the high degree of flexibility and muscle control required for this art, a Kathakali dancer undergoes a strenuous course of training, and special periods of body massage.