

Dance Forms of Kerala: Symbols of Traditional Culture

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Abstract

Kerala or the land of 'Kera' or coconut is synonymous with pristine beaches with a never ending array of coconut palms, backwaters, magical monsoon, rich and vibrant flora and fauna, fragrant spices, countryside reverberating with the sounds and music of various rich art form, fairs and festivals. Present day Kerala comprises erstwhile princely states of Travancore, Cochin and Malabar which was part of Madras province. It has a total population of approximately 33.3 million comprising Hindus, Christians and Muslims and few Jews and some other minorities.

Kerala with its rich and vibrant history and deep rooted cultural divisions based on caste structure has distinct art forms for different communities and castes. Music and dance are the main components of art. Music has undergone a lot of change with the evolution of Malayalam as a language. Dance forms of Kerala are varied and colourful. There are two distinct types of dance forms: Ritualistic or classical and folk dances. 1) Ritualistic Dances: koodiyattom, Kathakali, Mohiniyattom, Krishnattom, Thullal, Thiruvathira Kali etc. These are all conducted in specially designed stages on religious festivals. Does it cater to the masses or is it elitist? and 2) Folk Dances: Poorattam, Kaliyattom, Theyyam, Aivar Kali, Pootham Kali, Pulikali, etc.

The paper explores the origin of different dance forms, performers, stage setting, accompanying music and targeted audience and highlights problems faced by these dance forms. The role of the government and also the role of influential and rich business establishments in encouraging and protecting the traditional dance forms needs to be explored if they are to survive in the present world.

Introduction

Kerala, the land of *kera* or coconut, as the name suggests is the land of pristine beaches with a never ending array of coconut palms, backwaters, magical monsoon, rich and vibrant flora and fauna, fragrant spices, countryside reverberating with the sounds and music of various rich art forms, fairs and festivals. Culture of any place is closely linked to legends and myths that have

been handed down through generations. One such legend which is accepted by Keralites irrespective of caste and community is that regarding the origin of Kerala. As per the legend, Kerala rose up from the sea when Lord *Parasurama* (mythological figure) threw his axe into it and the sea receded to bring up a narrow strip of land from underneath. Lord *Parasurama*, believed to be the sixth avatar of Lord *Mahavishnu* (Hindu God), is believed to have thrown his axe from Gokarnam southward across the ocean in rage and in repentance for his actions of killing *Kshatriyas*. The land of Kerala emerged from the waters of the Arabian Sea with the blessing of *Varuna*- the God of Oceans and *Bhumidevi*- the Goddess of Earth. It is speculated that the nickname 'God's own Country' for Kerala is influenced by this legend.

Historic references to Kerala are found in many ancient scriptures and writings of travellers from across the world. It was known by different names like Malai, Manibar, Bilad ul Phul Phul, Malaibar and Keralaputra (Kareem 1971: 1). The early history of Kerala remains largely unexplored. Yet information is available in various Tamil writings and writings of foreign travellers and inscriptions and copper plate grants which are preserved. According to these Kerala have had trade relations with Egypt, Babylon, Phoenicia and the Greco-Roman world. It is, therefore, very clear that Kerala and her people have had commercial and cultural relations with foreign countries.

Geographically, Kerala lies on the South Western tip of India and is flanked by Arabian Sea on the West and Western Ghats (Sahyadri Mountains) on the East. The Western Ghats are a continuous stretch of mountains except for a small break in the form of a pass at Palghat. This geographic location has been most beneficial for the state as it was well protected from any kind of foreign invasion. As it was bound by the sea on the western side, it was natural for it to have many ports and it is proven that Muziris (Muziris Heritage 2013: <http://www.keralatourism.org/muziris/history>) was a thriving centre of trade with many Arab and African countries. Muziris was reputed to be the ancient world's greatest trading centre in the East. As the focal point of commerce for over 2500 years, this bustling seaport traded in everything from spices to precious stones with the Greeks, Romans and the rest of the world. It was also the doorway to India for varied cultures and races: Buddhists, Arabs, Chinese, Jews, Romans, Portuguese, Dutch and even the British (Muziris Heritage 2013). However, due to some natural disaster this port disappeared and instead many other ports on the

same coastline came up as centres of trade and are still important. Cochin, Calicut, Ponnani are a few to name some.

Present day Kerala comprises erstwhile princely states of Travancore, Cochin and Malabar which were part of Madras province. It has a total population of approximately 33.3 million comprising Hindus, Christians and Muslims and few Jews and some other minorities. Generally it is said that the northern part of Kerala has a predominantly Muslim population, the Central part has majority of Hindus and the Southern part has majority of Christians. Though Kerala has the distinction of being the state with the highest density of population of 819 per square km its growth rate in terms of population is lower than that of any other part of the country i.e. 3.44 per cent. It has the distinction of being the most literate state and a sizeable portion of the Keralites is working abroad and form part of 'Non Resident Indians'. With higher levels of education people migrate in search of greener pastures.

Keralites are known for their adaptability to their surroundings. Whatever be the region/ country they are living in, Keralites are seen to be deeply nostalgic about their home state and culture back home. It is not uncommon for Keralites to return to their home state for major temple festivals. For those unfortunate ones unable to reach home state, they actively take part in the celebrations being organised by Cultural Associations of Keralites which can be found across the world. What is it that these people are craving for? Visit to any of these cultural celebrations being organised would make things clear. Keralites miss the sound of music, dance performances peculiar to the festive season.

Social Structure of Kerala

Kerala followed a caste system which was quite different from other parts of India. While the Indian caste system was modeled on the four-fold division of society i.e. *Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Shudras*, in Kerala the Namboodiri Brahmins formed the priestly class. Rarely was one recognised as an inferior caste except for *Shudra* or untouchables. Thus, the Kerala caste system was ritualised but it was not the *Varna* model found in the North of India. Though it was not modeled on the *Varna* model of caste system it was very cruel and rigid compared to others. From 800 CE onwards the elite Hindu caste - the *Namboodiris* - held control. People of lower castes were banned from public markets and had to go naked above the waist - regardless of gender - to satisfy the ego of the upper caste

Namboodiri men. Kerala's Christians also operated a kind of caste system, Syrian Orthodox people being on a level with the Nairs and Catholic fisherfolk considered a low caste. At the very bottom of the hierarchy were the *adivasi* or indigenous people who have been in Kerala for 4000 years.

Education

Kerala's achievements in social development and quality of life are much ahead of the other states of India. The state has achieved a Human Development Index comparable to the developed countries of the World. However, the story was quite different till the twentieth century or so. With the rigid caste system in place it was but natural that education was denied to everyone except the *Namboodiris*. Scenario started changing slowly with the advent of Christian missionaries and the activities of social reformers of twentieth century. Now Kerala takes pride in being one of the most literate states in India.

Culture

Though Kerala followed a unique caste system it largely remained free of communal strife. *Brahminism* had brought along with it the caste system. Caste divisions were so strong that 'pollution by sight' was accepted and the lower castes were forbidden from appearing in front of the upper caste lest they pollute them by their sight. Lower castes were identified by their physical appearance as also their dress. Being of the poorer strata of society, the lower caste communities could afford only a simple white *mundu* which was an unstitched piece of cloth used to wrap around the lower portion of their body. Upper part was not covered. This became so much of a caste identity that even when the lower castes could afford clothing, they were prohibited from using any cloth to cover the upper part of the body. Even female members of the lower castes were prohibited from doing so. With the spread of education social reform movements also started and they greatly impacted the society. The practice continued as late as early twentieth century when the efforts of many social reformers helped in discontinuation of this social evil. At present it is a state where caste divisions are not noticeable.

Traditional Art forms

According to Pandeya (1961: ix) "If an art is true, it reflects the innermost ecstasies of a people in a sympathetic and symbolic but eloquent form". Present

day Kerala is devoid of caste divisions. Yet the Art forms of Kerala are a reflection of the deep rooted cultural divide based on caste system that was prevalent until last century. There are distinct art forms for different communities and castes. Music and dance are the main components of art. Music has undergone a lot of change with the evolution of Malayalam as a language. All forms of dances have their historic background of evolution. Topographic conditions, climate, language and the physical built of the people are the main guiding conditions for the development of any dance form (Pandeya 1961: 2). Dance forms of Kerala are varied and colourful. What is unique about dances in Kerala is that unlike those of other states of India, there is no concept of social dancing or mixed dancing i.e. dancing of couples or group dances where males and females dance together in celebration of social events like birth, marriage, festivals, etc. Also, the concept of impromptu dance during social events is hardly seen. All forms of traditional dances are planned. Younger generations are however now being influenced by film music and dance and the scenario may change after some time. Traditional dances of Kerala can be broadly categorised into two: Ritualistic and Folk.

Ritualistic Dances

1. Kathakali

Kathakali as the name denotes is a highly stylised classical dance drama. It is famous for its elaborate, colourful and attractive make-up of characters, elaborate costumes, detailed gestures and well-defined body movements. The artists do not speak or sing but their movements are in sync with the anchor playback music and accompanying percussion. As per sources of information available, it originated in the seventeenth century and has developed over the years.

Genesis of Kathakali - Popular belief is that Kathakali has emerged from *Krishnattam*, the dance drama on the life and activities of Lord Krishna created by Sri Manavedan Raja during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century. Due to some rivalry between the rulers of two native states, another form of dance drama was evolved on the life and activities of Lord Rama. While the former was in Sanskrit, the new form was in Malayalam. The latter dance drama evolved into the present day Kathakali by the seventeenth century. Being a dance form specially created, it was based on the contemporary dance forms mainly *Koodiyattam*, *Ashtapadiyattam*, *Teyyam*, *Thiyattu*, etc. Kathakali as a dance form

owes its popularity to use of Malayalam, people's language instead of Sanskrit which catered to the elite of the society. Traditionally there are 101 classical Kathakali stories, though the commonly staged among them these days total less than one-third of that number. Almost all of them were initially composed to last a whole night. Nowadays, there is increasing popularity for concise or select versions of stories. Hence the performance lasts not more than three to four hours from evening.

Themes of Kathakali - The most popular stories enacted are on the Mahabharata war after profiling the build-up to it. These include *Kalyanasougandhikam*, (the story of Bhima going to get flowers for his wife Panchali), *Keechakavadham* (another story of Bhima and Panchali), *Nalacharitham* (a story from the Mahabharata), *Duryodhana Vadham* (focusing on the time during the stint of Pandavas in disguise), *Kiratham* (Arjuna and Lord Shiva's fight, from the Mahabharata), and *Karnashapatham* (another story from the Mahabharata). Also staged frequently are stories like *Kuchelavrittam*, *Balivijayam*, *Dakshayagam*, *Rukminiswayamvaram*, *Poothanamoksham*, *Subhadraharanam*, *Balivadham*, *Narakasuravadham*, *Uttaraswayamvaram*, *Harishchanracharitham* and *Kamsavadham*, all from Mahabharata.

Performance - Traditionally, Kathakali is performed on stages specially set up in Temples or houses of patrons. The performance is around a *kalivilakku* or a traditional lamp. Traditional music or *geetam* and instruments like cymbal, *chenda*, *maddalam*, *edakka* (percussion instruments) accompany the performances. What is unique about this dance form is that there are no dialogues for the performers but only *mudras* (hand gestures), eye movements and body movements (**Fig. 1**). The Kathakali *mudras* are more stylised and symbolic (Nair and Paniker (eds.) 1993: 111). A Kathakali actor uses immense concentration, skill and physical stamina, gained from regimented training based on *Kalaripayattu*, the ancient martial art of Kerala, to prepare for his demanding role. The training can often last for 8–10 years, and is intensive. In Kathakali, the story is enacted purely by the movements of the hands (called *mudras* or hand gestures) and by facial expressions (*rasas*) and bodily movements. The *mudras* could be termed as per the alphabet of the hand and *mudras* in Kathakali are a fully developed language of gestures. There are more than 500 common *mudras*. However, they are never used alone but are always accompanied with gestures of limbs, face and eyes. The expressions are derived from *Natyashastra* (the treatise

that deals with the science of expressions) and dancers also undergo special practice sessions to learn control of their eye movements. The training is very arduous and takes over 10 years to achieve a level of perfection.

Makeup for Kathakali - Most of the Kathakali performances are done by male artists. One of the most interesting aspects of Kathakali is its elaborate makeup code. Most often, the makeup can be classified into five basic sets namely *Pachha*, *Kathi*, *Kari*, *Thaadi*, and *Minukku*. The differences between these sets lie in the colours that are applied on the face. *Pachha* (meaning green) has green as the dominant colour and is used to portray noble male characters. Those having an evil streak or anti-heroes in the play are portrayed with streaks of red in a green-painted face. Excessively evil characters such as demons (totally *tamasic*) have a predominantly red make-up and a red beard. They are called Red Beard. Uncivilised hunters and woodsmen are represented with a predominantly black makeup base and a black beard and are called Black Beard. Women and ascetics have lustrous, yellowish faces and this semi-realistic category forms the fifth class. In addition, there are modifications of the five basic sets described above



Figure 1: Young Deepti Omcherry in Kathakali Pose and Kathakali Costume (Female Character)

such as white beard used to depict *Hanuman* (the Monkey-God).

Problems - Kathakali as a dance form is difficult to learn and takes a long and arduous period of training. Young Keralites today like their global counterparts are computer savvy and are interested in quick methods of earning. They do not have the patience to spend a decade in learning nuances of a dance style which does not assure them of a comfortable life style. There

are very few dance Gurus or teachers and not too many dance academies to teach the intricate dance style. Instead of being a dance style performed for

connoisseurs, Kathakali has become an item put up in front of foreign tourists. Though there are centres like Kerala Kalamandam teaching this dance form, in this world of globalisation it is increasingly difficult to find pupils and committed teachers who are ready to put at stake 10-12 years of their life for a profession that does not assure them of a steady income and comfortable lifestyle.

2. Mohiniyattam

The term Mohiniyattam comes from the words ‘Mohini’ meaning a woman who enchants onlookers and *aattam* meaning graceful and sensuous body movements. The word ‘Mohiniyattam’ literally means ‘dance of the enchantress’. Mohiniyattam, as the name suggests is the dance of a female character. It is a ritualistic dance style that has been given the status of a classical dance form from Kerala, India. Believed to have originated in sixteenth century, it is considered a very graceful form of dance meant to be performed as solo recitals by women (Fig. 2).



Figure 2: Mohiniyattam by Dr. Deepti Omcherry Bhalla

Origin - Mohiniyattam was popularised as a popular dance form in the nineteenth century by Swathi Thirunal, the Maharaja of the state of Travancore (Southern

Kerala), and Vadivelu, one of the dancers from Thanjavur. Swathi Thirunal not only promoted the study of Mohiniyattam during his reign but also is credited with the composition of many music arrangements and vocal accompaniments that provide musical background for modern Mohiniyattam dancers. Due to the theme and style of dancing it was popular among the devdasis (temple dancers) of late nineteenth century. This was looked down by the contemporary society and so was banned in the princely state of Cochin. It was only after independence with the initiative of the noted Malayalam poet Vallathol, who established the Kerala Kalamandalam dance school in 1930 that the ban was revoked and Mohiniyattam came to be accepted in society (Massey and Jamila 1989: 67). There are two legends related to Mohiniyattam. One is that of Lord Vishnu disguised as Mohini who appeared to lure the *asuras* (demons) away from the *amrita* (nectar of immortality) obtained during the churning of the *palazhi* (ocean of milk and salt water). In the second story, Vishnu appears as Mohini to save Lord Shiva from the demon Brahmasura. The name Mohiniyattam may have been coined after Lord Vishnu but the main theme of the dance is love and devotion to God, with usually Vishnu or Krishna being the hero. *Devadasis* used to perform this in temples. It also has elements of *Koothu* and *Koodiyattam*. Mohiniyattam is a drama in dance and verse.

Costume and Makeup - The costume includes white *saree* embroidered with bright golden brocade (known as *kasavu*) at the edges. The dance follows the classical text of Hastha Lakshanadeepika, which has elaborate description of *mudras* (expressions by the hand palm and fingers). The jewellery is the typical set of 'Golden Finish Jewellery with a proper wide Golden Lakshmi belt' specially designed for Mohiniyattam. The footsteps are made tinkling with a good pair of *Chilanka* or Dancing bells worn by the dancer on her legs. The performer also adorns herself with fresh white Jasmine flowers which is decked to her hair bun arranged on the left side of the head pinned on to a beautiful *Jurapin* (hair pin) which makes Mohiniyattam artists distinct from artists of other dance forms of India.

3. Koodiyattam

Koodiyattam is a form of Sanskrit theatre traditionally performed in the state of Kerala, India. Performed in the Sanskrit language in Hindu temples, it is believed to be 2000 years old. It is officially recognised by UNESCO as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity.

Origins - Koodiyattam or ‘combined acting’ signifies Sanskrit drama presented in the traditional style in temple theatres of Kerala. It is the only surviving specimen of the ancient Sanskrit theatre. Koodiyattam and chakyar koothu were among the dramatised dance worship services in temples of ancient India, particularly modern-day Tamil Nadu and Kerala. Both koodiyattam and chakyar koothu find several mentions in ancient Sangam literature of south and also in the epigraphs belonging to subsequent Pallava, Chera, Chola periods in Tamil Nadu. Inscriptions related to the dramatised dance worship services like koodiyattam and chakyar koothu are available in temples at Tanjore, Tiruvidaimaruthur, Vedaranyam, Tiruvarur, and Omampuliyur. They were treated as an integral part of worship services alongside the singing of hymns. Several ancient kings and members of other professions are listed to have authored several works for these services. There is evidence of these services being done all over ancient subcontinent during time of Cholas and Pallavas. The themes of Koodiyattam have remained the same since then and were performed in specially designed temples called *koothambalams*.

Costumes and Makeup - Unlike Kathakali, the makeup of artistes in Koodiyattam is not elaborate. Their makeup is more subtle with faces of heroic characters being painted in green with white curved paper frames. Costumes are predominantly in Red, White and Black.

Music - *Mizhavu* (percussion instrument) is the main accompaniment to the musical rendition by Nangiyar artists. This percussion instrument has been traditionally played by Nambiar artists. As per a newspaper report, Koodiyattam artists claim that the music is more like Vedic chants and the evolution of Koodiyattam is not yet fully explored (Joseph 2012: <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/tp-kerala/exploring-nuances-of-koodiyattam-music/article2948482.ece>).

Challenges - Koodiyattam is a dying art form. Koodiyattam has been traditionally an exclusive art form performed in special venues in Hindu temples and access to these performances was highly restricted to only high caste Hindus. Also, performances are lengthy taking up to forty days to complete. The collapse of the feudal order in the nineteenth century in Kerala led to a curtailment in the patronage extended to Koodiyattam artists and they faced serious financial difficulties. Following a revival in the early twentieth century, Koodiyattam is once again facing a lack of funding, leading to a severe crisis in the profession.

UNESCO has called for the creation of a network of Koodiyattam institutions to nurture the transmission of the art form to future generations and for the development of new audiences in addition to fostering greater academic research related to it.

Folk Dances

Folk dances are traditional dances of the masses that have been passed on through generations of various communities. These dances were identified by the castes performing them. According to G.Venu (1990), renowned dancer and scholar, “the arts of the rural folk express the dreams, hopes, joys, grief, belief and aspirations of that folk in easily intelligible and amazingly attractive forms” (1). There are a number of folk dances throughout Kerala. Many of the folk dances are synonymous with the caste names of the performers. Most of them are associated with rituals and are performed in natural surroundings in a temple or in the household of rich patrons without any stage setting. Makeup is simple using natural sources easily accessible to them. Listed below are some of the famous folk dances of Kerala. There are many more which are not mentioned here.

1. Teyyam or Kaliyattam

It is well known that among the primitive civilisations, heroes who dedicated their life for a noble cause were commemorated through folklore and ballads. The villagers’ in order to commemorate their heroes organised festivals incorporating ritualism, vocal and instrumental music and dance and painting (Kurup 1973: 17). This form of folk art in Kerala is called *Teyyam*. Its origin is also linked to an ancient socio-religious ceremony and a sacred dance performance for the Goddess *Kali* or *Bhagawathi*, by which every village in Kerala was bound and had its own common shrine, in front of which the dance was performed on a regular basis. *Teyyam* is a popular ritual dance form of North Kerala, particularly in Kannur and Kasargod districts. The *Teyyam* represents a mythological, divine or heroic character. *Teyyam* is always performed by men. They also enact female roles wearing exotic make up and colourful costumes. There are over 350 *Teyyams* performed in northern Kerala, of which *Raktha Chamundi*, *Kari Chamundi*, *Muchilottu Bhagawathi*, *Wayanadu Kulaveni*, *Gulikan* and *Pottan* (all names of various mythological stories being enacted) are the most spectacular. Unlike other dance forms of Kerala which are onstage performances, *Teyyam* is performed in front of village temples, without stage or curtains.



Figure 3: Teyyam at Arayambath Tharavad Kalari, Kannur

Costume and Makeup - Costume (**Fig. 3**) of the *Teyyam* makes it a spectacular dance form. The hierarchy of Gods, Goddesses, Heroes, Demons, Spirits and other mythical characters are personified in the plays. Different costumes like leaf dress, headdress, breast plates, arm ornaments, bangles, garland and other body decorations are to be prepared by the artists for performance. Some of the costumes are made up of tender coconut leaves, bamboo planks and they are used only for single performance. Preparation of these items of makeup and costume is a specialised art requiring skill and training. These are done by artists who have learnt the art through their family elders and the makeup is based on organic material available naturally in their surroundings like banana leaf, coconut, herbs, flowers, fruits etc. It is believed that the person performing *Teyyam* has curative powers. *Teyyam* is performed annually from October to May. It may be interesting to note that the source of light during this night long performance is basically *olachuttu* (torch made up of dried coconut leaves).

Music - Musical Instruments used in *Teyyam* are still the traditional ones i.e. Drum, Cymbal, *Kuzhal* (horn), *Perumbara*, Conch, *Cherututi*, *Utukku* and *Chermangalam*. The rhythm varies from one performance to another. The entire *Teyyam* is expressed in the form of singing and dancing by the same person and his companions. According to the style, the dance is classified as *Thandava* or the masculine and *Lasya* or the feminine.

2. Thullal

The word Thullal means ‘to leap or jump about playfully’. This art form emerged in the eighteenth century. A solo performance combining both dance and recitation, Thullal is the explication of a tale - normally drawn from the *Puranas* (ancient texts), narrated in verse. The Thullal performer sings and he is supported by another singer who repeats the verses and is accompanied by an orchestra of *mridangam*, harmonium and cymbals. The performer through the classical acting

techniques portrays the various characters in an episode and does the narration. Unlike Kathakali and Koodiyattom, the humorous and satiric mode of presentation and the use of simple Malayalam language made Thullal very popular among the ordinary people. Usually performed during festivals in the temple premises, Thullal does not require a stage or any other formal arrangement.

Makeup - The makeup, though simple, is very much similar to that of Kathakali. The face is painted with yellow arsenic mixed with blue. The eyes are blackened and lips reddened. The full painting of the face is retained for the expressive advantage. The dancer wears a breast-plate adorned with golden pearls, necklaces and colourful tassels. The white waist clothes resemble skirts. The head-gear is small, made of light wood, studded with bright stones and decorated with golden paper. The bracelets, amulets and waistbands with bells are almost the same as in Kathakali.

3. Aivar kali

This means the play of the five sets. This was a ritualistic art form performed in almost all important temples of Kerala. Today it is found in central Kerala. This is also known as *Pandavarkali*, which means the play of the *Pandavas*, (mythological heroes), and is performed by *Asari*, *Moosari*, *Karuvan*, *Thattan* and *Kallasari* communities. This ritualistic dance is performed beneath a decorated *pandal* (stage) with a traditional lamp at its centre. Five or more performers with their leader called *Kaliachan* enter the performance area after a ritualistic bath, with sandalwood paste over their foreheads, dressed in white dhoti, and with a towel wrapped around their head.

4. Arjuna Nritam (Mayilppili Tukkam)

Arjuna Nritam or Mayilpili Tukkam is a ritual art performed by men of Ezhava community in the Bhagawathi temples of south Kerala. The costume includes a garment made of *mayilppeeli* (peacock feathers). This garment is worn around the waist in a similar fashion as that of Kathakali. The performers have their faces painted green and wear distinctive headgears. The all night performance of the dance form is usually presented solo or in pairs.

5. Makachuttu

Makachuttu art is popular among Ezhavas community. In this, a group of eight performers, two each, twin around each other like serpents and rise up, battling with sticks. The techniques are repeated several times. Sandalwood paste on the forehead, a red towel round the head, red silk around the waist and bells round the ankles form the costume. This is a combination of snake worship and martial art forms of Kerala.

6. Parichamuttu kali

Parichamuttu kali is a martial folk-dance prevalent among the Ezhavas. It is also performed by Christians and some other Hindu communities. Its origins date back to when *Kalaripayattu*, the physical exercise of swordplay and defence, was in vogue in Kerala. The performers dance with swords and shields in their hands, following the movements of sword fight, leaping forward, stepping back and moving round, all the time striking with the swords and defending with shields.

7. Poorakkali

Poorakkali is a folk dance of the Ezhavas of Malabar, usually performed in Bhagavathi temples as a ritual offering during the months of March/April. Poorakkali requires specially trained and highly experienced dancers, trained in *Kalaripayattu*, a system of physical exercise formerly in vogue in Kerala. Standing round a traditional lamp, the performers dance in eighteen different stages and rhythms, each phase called a *niram*.

8. Thitambu Nrityam

It is pure dance, completely absorbed in, and regulated by rhythm. Surprisingly, it has not been included among the temple arts of Kerala though connoisseurs admit that this is an art, and a ritualistic one. It is believed that this dying art form came to Kerala from its neighbour Karnataka. It is performed by male members of the priestly class i.e. Namboodithiris who carry the replica of the idol on their head while dancing to the tune of drum beats.

Challenges faced by Dance Forms of Kerala

Kerala is one of the most developed states of India. It has the highest literacy rate in the country. Due to high levels of education Kerala society has undergone remarkable change. Caste system is no longer practiced although people are aware

of caste groups. Education has opened avenues of employment for the rural folk who no longer have to depend on the professions assigned to them traditionally as part of their respective castes. However, the decline of the caste system affected many traditional art forms especially dance forms. Over the years with the advent of computers and fast paced lifestyles younger generations are not keen to take up any profession that requires years of training including dancing. This generation is not keen on taking up traditional art forms that are symbolic representations of caste groups.

Solutions for Safeguarding Traditional Dance Forms

Most of the traditional dance forms survived with the patronage of the ruling or upper classes/ castes. With the decline of the traditional social hierarchy and set up, the dance forms too started to decline. The traditional dance forms can only survive with active intervention of the government. While the governments at the Centre and State levels have created academies to monitor and support art forms, much more is required. The senior artists need to be identified and they need to be supported monetarily. This would be an encouragement to take up new students under their fold and pass on their art to the next generation. Also, these art forms need to be popularised throughout the country for which there could be periodic interactive workshops among the artists of various states or within one state. Also India has some of the richest industrial/ business houses. They may be encouraged to take up sponsorship of some of these dying art forms. Many of these dying art forms could be showcased as part of our traditional culture in tourism promotion programmes. Though this may draw flak from the conservative groups of artists, at least the dance forms will be kept alive for future. Efforts to document these dying art forms which may be lying scattered in different places may also be sponsored by these business/industrial houses.

What is of utmost importance is to ensure that the future generations know of these dance forms which were once the most popular sources of entertainment for their ancestors. It is also important to share and preserve this traditional knowledge.

Glossary

<i>Brahmins</i>	} Names of four caste groups among Hindus in India
<i>Kshatriyas</i>	
<i>Vaisyas</i>	
<i>Shudras</i>	
<i>Ezhavas</i>	A backward community in Kerala
<i>Kari</i>	Denotes Black facial colour used in Kathakali
<i>Kathi</i>	Denotes red facial colour used in Kathakali
<i>Pachha</i>	Denotes Green facial colour used in Kathakali

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