

PATHAKAM—AN ART-FORM

AMONG the various new, original and striking forms of dance and dramatic entertainment evolved by the indigenous theatre of Kerala for the delectation of the masses, none is perhaps older or more popular than PATHAKAM. This interesting art-form which is regarded as older than *Chakyar Koothu*, *Thullal*, and *Kathakali*, belongs to the realm of story-telling. The *Chakyar Koothu* is an improvement upon *Pathakam*.

The Puranas enlighten us that Suthan, a delightful character, entertained the Rishies in the beautiful forest of Naimisaranyam with devotional stories. Popular belief is that *Pathakam*, a kind of story-telling, was evolved in Kerala for the purpose of entertaining the Malayala Brahmins of old, who were well-versed in the various branches of religious lore such as Vedas, Puranas and Ithihasas.

An Aesthetic Entertainment

Pathakam is an aesthetic entertainment which is usually performed after sunset, in temples and public places. Ordinarily *Pathakam* is not performed during daytime and in private residences. A typical *Pathakam* performance would last for two to three hours.

The *Pathakam* is in essence a popular and humorous form of story-telling, the avowed aim of which is to develop the cult of devotion to God and to make people more religious minded. The literary form of *Pathakam* is a harmonious combination of verse and prose, both Sanskrit and Malayalam, known as *Champu*. The

Pathakam aims at presenting Puranic themes before the audience in an attractive and popular manner. *Pathakams* are usually based on the Bharatham, Bhagavatham, and Ramayanam, the last however, being most popular. Masterpieces by such great poets as Hanuman, Sree Harsha, Maghan, Bhoja, Bharthrubari, Kalidasa and Melpathoor Narayana Bhattathiri, also form the subject matter of *Pathakams*. The compositions of these great Sanskrit poets, both in prose and verse, are recited by the artiste who performs the *Pathakam*. A *Pathakam* performance is accomplished by a single actor who is called *Pathakan*. He does not require anybody's assistance in his recital. There is no music or any stage effect for this performance which is from start to finish an one man's effort.

Costume and Make-up

The make-up of the *Pathakan* is quite simple and is in sharp contrast with the elaborate make-up of those who perform the *Thullal* and *Kathakali*. It is a rule that the *Pathakan* should bathe before dressing up for the performance. His costume and make-up, though not imposing, are certainly picturesque. He wears a conical cap on his head. The cap which is invariably of flaming scarlet colour is inlaid with silver stars and knobs. The head-gear worn by some of the actors contains the emblem of a crescent moon, done in silver. This emblem is regarded as a certificate of merit issued by aristocrats of light and leading at Thalippampu, to the performer after putting to test his

efficiency in the art. Those fortunate actors who have the privilege of possessing this distinction enjoy great vogue. The actor puts on a profusion of caste marks. He applies sacred ash, sandal paste and saffron on his forehead, arms, ankles and chest. He does not paint his face. Garlands of multi-coloured beads, shells, spangles and glass pieces adorn his chest. He wears an ordinary white cloth which reaches up to his ankles. Over this he ties a scarlet coloured silk cloth with gold lace border, which reaches above his knees.

The Performance

No curtain is used in a *Pathakam* performance. Only a brass lamp three to four feet high with two or three wicks and fed by coconut oil, placed in front of the performer, separates the actor from the audience. When the audience have gathered, the *Pathakan* appears before them. He faces the listeners who squat on the floor, and greets them with joint palms, and in low tones begins the invocation to God Maha Vishnu, in Sanskrit verse. The *Mangalam*, as this invocation is called, is rendered in low, devotional, and long-drawn tones. He then describes in dignified prose the laudable aims of the *Pathakam* performance, the great qualities of head and heart demanded from the performer as well as the audience. He impresses upon his hearers that the aim of *Pathakam* is to make the people more religious-minded and to enable them to lead better lives. The *Pathakan's* next business is to acquaint his audience with the story which he proposes to narrate. In simple, sweet Malayalam, he succinctly presents the gist of the story. Then commences the story-telling in full swing. The frame-work of the story is in Sanskrit. The actor recites the Sanskrit verses and then explains their meaning in chaste Malayalam enlivened with flashes

of wit and humour. He uses gestures to illustrate the meaning of his words. He also cuts jokes at the expense of the audience but not in such an aggressive manner as the *Chakayar* does while performing the *Koothu*. Though the *Pathakan* does not enjoy the same privilege of making fun of his audience as the *Chakayar*, he is allowed to indulge in good humoured raillery which does not malign any particular individual among his audience. The *Pathakan*, in the course of his expounding of the stories, discusses, by way of appropriate illustration to passing events, and exposes the frailties and follies of men. Into the fabric of his narration, he very cleverly weaves a lot of excellent didacticism and satire which applies the lash to the evils of contemporary society. He does not act like the *Chakayar* or *Thullakkaran*. A master of eloquent narration and lucid interpretation, his humour is dignified and always intended to drive home a moral. The performance concludes with a prayer to Goddess Saraswathi.

An Act of Adoration

The aim of *Pathakam* is to give an incentive to religious and aesthetic education. *Pathakam* is looked upon as a method of eradicating sins, if any, committed by both the *Pathakan* as well as the audience. One of the characteristic features of *Pathakam* is the close resemblance between the *Sruti Swaram* (recitation of Vedas) of the Malayala Brahmins and the long drawn out method of recitation employed by the *Pathakan*. The *Pathakan* should be pious, pure-hearted and a true *Bhakta*. The audience should be of pure descent, learned in religious lore, full of devotion, and endowed with noble qualities of head and heart. Such lofty requirements render the *Pathakam* an entertainment which is

possessed of great sanctity, and is looked upon as an act of adoration.

The *Pathakans* usually belong to the caste Ambalavasis. A few Brahmins from British India who have studied the art have also taken to it. To be a successful *Pathakam* performer, one should be an accomplished scholar in Sanskrit and Malayalam, a fluent speaker gifted with a musical voice, and a good judge of men and affairs. The right interpretation and graceful elucidation of tough Sanskrit verses depend mainly on the extent of scholarship and powers of expression of the *Pathakan*, who is a born story-teller.

A Living Art

Pathakam appeals considerably to the literate classes. This branch of dramatic entertainment which abounds in literary charm and is replete with dignified humour has contributed enormously to the growth of Malayalam literature. The importance given to Malayalam, the liberty of speech granted to the actor, the absence of elaborate hand poses and symbols, the simplicity and direct appeal of the costume

and make-up of the story-teller, the beautiful language employed by the actor, the narrative excellence and picturesque eloquence of the performer have contributed to the popularity of *Pathakam* which even today is a living art. This unique art-form has given a powerful impetus to the study of Sanskrit and the production of a number of first-rate works in that language. There are nearly a hundred works in Sanskrit which are largely used by the *Pathakans*. *Pathakam* has also encouraged the growth of literary criticism and interpretation.

Of the interesting indigenous entertainments provided for the devotees and sightseers during the festival season in the temples of Malabar, *Pathakam* continues to hold the audience spell-bound.

Preacher, propagandist, actor, satirist, critic, scholar and story-teller *par excellence*, the *Pathakan* is the exponent of an art which is immortal and the bearer of an effulgent torch of culture which has unflickeringly illuminated the life and literature of Kerala for centuries past.

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