

Folk Nrityam

folk dances of southern India



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Introduction to folk dances

Even the primitive man in his awakened thought could clearly see that life manifests itself in rhythm. Heartbeat, breathing, walking, all these signs of a living body are basically rhythmic. The difference between living and dead is that while the former has rhythm within him, the latter has no rhythm, So his faculty of reasoning suggested to him that if he engages himself in some kind of exalted rhythmic activity, life will be celebrated giving him a sense of immortality, even if for a while. And what rythamic activity else than dance and music could be more exalted for celebrating life?. That is why man began dancing long before he learnt to speak any dialect.

The range and variety of folk dance traditions surviving in India is indeed amazing, every region having its own style of folk dance. Folk dancers enjoy the pulsating togetherness in their dance deeply. Therefore, folk dances have recurring movement, decorative clothing and rhythmic music.

This book mainly focuses on the various folk dances existing in the various parts of South India.

Yaksha gana

Origin

Yakshagana literally means the song (gana) of the yaksha (nature spirits). Yakshagana is the scholastic name in Kannada (used for the last 200 years) for art forms formerly known as kelike, ata, bayalata, and dasavatara. It was first introduced in Udupi by Madhvacharya's disciple Naraharitirtha. Naraharitirtha was the minister in the Kalinga Kingdom. He also was the founder of Kuchipudi

A performance usually depicts a story from the "Kavya" (epic poems) and the "Puranas" (ancient Hindu texts). It consists of a story teller (the bhagawatha) who narrates the story by singing (which includes prepared character dialogues) as the actors dance to the music, portraying elements of the story as it is being narrated.

All components of Yakshagana—including the music, the dance, and the dialogue,are improvised. Depending on the ability and scholarship of the actors, there will be variations in dances as well as the amount of dialogue



Music & Clothing

A typical Yakshagana performance consists of background music played by a group of musicians (himmela); and a dance and dialogue group (mummela), who together enact poetic epics on stage. The actors wear resplendent costumes, head-dresses, and face paints.



A Yakshagana performance in Karnataka

Huttari



A Huttari performance in Madikeri

Origin

Huttari dance, also known as Kodagu dance, is one of the most spirited folk dances of Karnataka. It has various local variations. This slow dance is performed at the occasion of harvesting season as an yearly tradition.

It is traditionally performed by the Kodava tribe. Kodava are the benevolent Ethno-lingual community from Kodagu situated in the state of Karnataka. They originally spoke a language, named after them, Kodava. Most Kodava people are agriculturists with combative customs.

Music & Clothing

The Kodava outfits precisely differ as per the dance form performed.

Bolak-aat dance is performed by the men of Kodava. They dress fully in black with an oil lamp in an open field. They wield a Kodava sword held in one hand and a chavri (yak fur) on the other hand. The dance is performed on the tune given by Dudi, which is an hour-glass shaped drum.

Ummatt-aat is performed by the women of Kodava dressing in the conventional Kodava outfit. It includes a red-colored silk sari and a red full-sleeved Coorg blouse along with a red-colored scarf around their head. They also wear bangles, necklaces, and other jewelry. The dance performance is done in a circling motion and a swinging tune. Women have brass (bells) in their arms. One woman stands in the middle holding a pot to resemble Mother Kaveri.



Suggi kunitha

Origin

Suggi kunitha is a dance performed at the time of a harvesting festival in Karnataka. It is commonly known as Suggi dance. It is performed for entertainment by the Halakki tribe.

Halakki tribe people are agronomists living in the coastal parts of the Uttarakannada area of Karnataka who have a very enriched folk traditioned past. They are followers of Lord Shiva. They perform the Suggi dance at the time of the holy Festival. The dance is performed by the Halakki tribe men.

Suggi dance is performed by a group of twelve to fourteen dancers who dance to the beats of the drum. The dance continues as they go from village to village with the beats of the drum and sing in unison and also gather grains and cash as they keep singing and dancing. Dance steps used in this type of dance are compared to the sea waves, curves on growing vines, or rivers flowing directly relating its dance form to the varying aspects of nature.



Music & Clothing

The Suggi dance has an enriched analogy linked with nature. An exceptional turban garnished with ornaments of various colors, small birds made of wood, and feathers of a peacock relate to a tree is worn by the dancers. The songs used in performances are compared to ones in Hindu Mythology.



A Suggi kunitha performance in Karnataka

Karaga



A Karaga performance in Karnataka



Origin

Karaga folk dance is a traditional dance devoted to Draupadi. It is performed on a full moon night. It is also known as Droupthamma. Karaga is celebrated by the Tigala group in the Karnataka region. The Tigala community believes themselves to be the offsprings of Draupadi, who are most commonly horticulturists.

The dance and its traditions are related to the epic Mahabharata. "Vastrakshepa" (stripping) of Draupadi, the banishment of Pandavas, and the demise of Draupadi's sons by Ashwatthama are the common scenes that are performed in this dance.

Music & Clothing

Karaga means a mud pot. A tall flowered pyramid is made to stand above it. It is balanced on the head of a person called the carrier. The pot's contents stay unknown for a long time.

The arrival of the carrier is awaited by a large group of people being bare-chested and wearing a turban on the head. Their lower body covered in dhotis, they carry unsheathed swords. The wife of the carrier acts as the widow. Her "Mangal Sutra" and bangles are given to her husband to wear. The wife will not see her husband or the pot until the end of the festival. The dance is done to rhythmic drum beats.

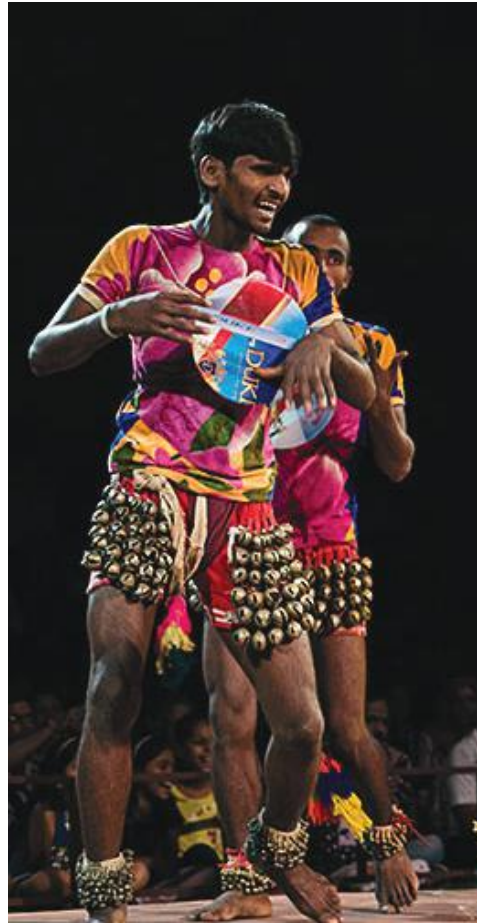
Tappeta gullu

Origin

Tappeta Gullu dance derives its name from the instrument used in the dance itself. Tappeta is an instrument that has the shape of a flat drum. It is widely popular in North Andhra districts like Srikulam, Visakhapatnam, and Vizianagaram. Tappeta Gullu is regarded as a devotional dance as it is performed to please the goddess of rain Gangamma.

In old times, Tappeta Gullu was used by shepherds to invoke the goddess of the rain.

When Tappeta Gullu dance is performed in a ritualistic form, first a man takes a water pot decorated with ornaments all around the village. After this performance starts in the evening when everyone can witness this performance. Themes for the dance are mainly taken from Ramayana or Bhagavata Gita. This performance is also done for lord Vishnu. It shows ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu that he has taken in Indian mythology



Music & Clothing

The dancers wear shirts and dhotis. They are not different from daily clothing only the colors which they wear while performing are more vibrant than the clothes they wear in daily life. Dancers also wear a bell around their ankle.

The tappeta drum is tied to their chest so they can perform easily without it getting in their way.



A Tappeta gullu performance in Srikulam

Veera Natyam

Origin

Veeranatyam or Dance of the brave (veera means brave; natyam means dance) is an ancient form of dance from the state of Andhra Pradesh, with associated religious significance. It started as a ritual that was performed in Shiva (shaivite) temples in honour of Shiva.

Veerabhadra is said to be one of the oldest godly incarnations on earth and the followers of Veerabhadra are best known for performing this style of dance, in particular the Veeramusti community in the state of Andhra Pradesh.

This is performed by men in East and West Godavari, Kurnool, Anantapur and Khammam, they worship Shiva in his most fierce form.



Music/Clothing

The dancers are dressed in colourful knee-length dhotis secured by waist-sashes smeared with vibhuti all over their body. The main percussion instrument is the 'Veeranam' or 'war-drum'.



A veeranatyam performance in Andhra Pradesh

Dhimsa



A Dhimsa performance in Araku valley



Origin

Dhimsa dance is a popular folk dance of Andhra Pradesh. It is prevalent in the Araku valley near Visakhapatnam. This folk dance is performed by the Porja tribe of Andhra Pradesh. This dance is ritualistic in nature as it is done to honor the deities and pray for peace and welfare.

This dance is performed by a group of fifteen to twenty people. Although men can participate if they want, mainly women perform this dance. The leading lady of the dance group performs with peacock feathers in her hands which shows peace. Women pray for a peaceful and healthy life while performing it.

Music & Clothing

During the performance of the dhimsa dance, women wear plain colorful sarees. They wear what they wear in daily life. No special costume is required for the dance.

The frequently used colors by women are green, red, pink, orange, etc. In ornaments, they only wear some tribal jewelry on the neck. Drum-based instruments such as Dappu are used for music.

Kolattam



A Kollattam performance in Hampi



Origin

Kolattam dance originated in the regions of Macherla, Ramappa, Hampi, Mahabalipuram, and Tripathi. It is also called Kolannalu dance.

The main prop used in this dance is a stick. It is a must-have for every dancer during the performance. The name of the dance itself has been derived from this prop used in the dance. The word Kol means small stick and Attam means dance or play. Thus the word Kolattam means a stick dance.

Kolannalu dance is based on the partnership of each dancer. The tune and dance are carried out from one partner to another partner. This is why it is not possible for a single dancer to perform this dance.

Music & Clothing

When the Kolannalu performance is being done on stage girls wear colorful skirts and sarees. When men and women participate in this dance they wear very plain clothes. It is very important for sticks to be of fine quality because the major sound made during the performance is by them.

Theyyam

Origin

Theyyam is one of the most outstanding and popular ritual arts of northern Kerala, particularly the area of Kolathunadu of the present Kannur and Kasargod District. The term Theyyam is a distorted form of 'Dhavam' or God. It is a rare combination of dance and music and reflects important features of a tribal culture as a whole. This folk dance is believed to be a divine expression and the local residents of Kerala invoke the blessings of God through this dance form.

A training in 'Kalaripayattu' is required for the Theyyam artist who performs the role of hero deities like 'Kathivannur Veeran'. Dancers perform this dance in front of the local village shrine and sometimes also might practise it inside residences for the purpose of worshipping ancestors, accompanied by intricate customs and rituals. Performance of Theyyam dancers, who play the part of deities last for 12 to 24 hours, interrupted by a few intervals



Music & Clothing

Different costumes like leaf dress or 'Tazha Adai', headdress or 'muti', 'arayoda' or 'Vattoda' and other body decorations are to be prepared by the artists for performance.

In the background folk musical instruments like 'Chenda', 'Tuti', 'Kuzhal' and 'Veekni' are played with rhythm.



A Theyyam performer getting ready in Kochi

Ottam thullal

Origin

Ottam Thullal is a recite-and-dance art-form of Kerala, India. It was introduced in the 18th century by Kunchan Nambiar, one of the Prachina Kavithrayam (three famous Malayalam-language poets).

Like most Indian performing art forms, Ottamthullal has its principles influenced by the Natya Shastra. The word Thullal means “to jump” or “leap about” in the Malayalam language.

This highly stylized type of performing art form was created in 18th century. Kunchan Nambiar, who was playing the mizhavu for a Chakyar Koothu show, dozed off in the middle of the performance, thus inviting ridicule from the Chakyar. The humiliated Nambiar vowed to come up with an alternative art form to Chakyar koothu, and conjured up Ottamthullal as a result.



Music & Clothing

In Ottamthullal, a solo performer, with green makeup and a colourful costume, acts and dances while reciting lyrics. A chorus or one or more artists repeats each sentence as it is completed.

The folksy performance, is accompanied by a mridangam and/or the handy idakka besides a pair of ilathalam cymbals.



An Ottamthullal performance in Kerala

Kolkali



A Kolkali performance in Malabar



Origin

Kolkali is a folk art performed in Malabar region of Kerala, India. The dance performers move in a circle, striking small sticks and keeping rhythm with special steps. The circle expands and contracts as the dance progress.

It is said to have drawn elements from Kalaripayattu, a martial art practised in Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Every dancer moves according to a pattern, without touching each other or missing a beat. Towards the end, the dancers move in vigorous steps, with sweeping movements and turns.

Music & Clothing

The performance begins slowly, but gradually increases in tempo until it reaches a frenzy-like climax.

Mundu and Banyan are the commonly used costumes for the performance of Kolkali. Sometimes, a piece of cloth tied round the head is also part of the attire.

Koodiy attam



A Koodiyattam performance in Kerala

Origin

Koodiyattam is a traditional performing art form in the state of Kerala, India. It is a combination of ancient Sanskrit theatre with elements of Koothu, an ancient performing art from the Sangam era.

Koodiyattam, meaning “combined acting” in Malayalam, combines Sanskrit theatre performance with elements of koothu. It is traditionally performed in temple theatres known as koothambalams. It is the only surviving art form that uses drama from ancient Sanskrit theatre.

koodiyattam originated from the ancient art form koothu, which is mentioned several times in Sangam literature, and the epigraphs of the subsequent Pallava, Pandiyan, Chera, and Chola periods.

Music & Clothing

Traditionally, the main musical instruments used in koodiyattam are the mizhavu, kuzhitalam, edakka, kurumkuzhal, and sankhu. The mizhavu, the most prominent of these, is a percussion instrument that is played by a person of the Ambalavas Nambiar caste, accompanied by Nangyamma playing the kuzhithalam (a type of cymbal).

Elaborate costumes, decorative headdresses, and delicate makeup bring life to Kutiyaattam. Actors are dressed up in white, red, or black. Varied color schemes and designs depict various emotions, attributes, and moods.



Kavadi attam



A Kavadi attam performance in Tamilnadu



Origin

Kavadi Attam or more popularly Kavadi is a dance performed by the devotees of Lord Murugan, the Hindu God of war. The word kavadi in Tamil means 'carrying weight on shoulders'.

In Kavadi Attam dance, the devotees carry the burden on their shoulders and dance; and give their offerings to Lord Murugan. This dance is performed during the Thaipusam festival.

The devotees shave their heads and consume only one vegetarian meal a day until the day, refrain from drinking any kind of alcohol to avoid substance abuse till the end of the festival.

Music & Clothing

The performers wear dhotis or angavastrams, wear minimal jewellery and paint their faces. A distinctive song, known as Kavadi Sindhu, was composed to be sung while carrying the Kavadi.

Kummi

Origin

Kummi is a folk dance, popular in Tamil Nadu and Kerala in India, danced mostly by South Indian women in circle. Dancing may be different. In some places, it is very simple, with rhythmic clapping or beating of the drums. In other places dancers imitate various harvesting activities. Kummi is often accompany by songs, called "Kummi songs". It is often danced during festivals. It is also danced by Tamils of Sri Lanka.

The word "kummi" has originated from the Tamil "komma", meaning dance with clapping of hands and had originated at a time when instruments were not invented.

One village woman starts a popular song while others join in with singing and clapping to keep note of time. Songs are performed by the women dancing in circles. Men, when they join form the outer circle



Music & Clothing

Kummi dance does not follow any particular dress code thus the costume can be many. Generally, young girls wear pavadai chattai, teenagers wear pavadai dhavani, and the adult women wear saris. Dancers rhythmically clap for music and a tempo.



A Kummi performance in Tamilnadu

Bommalattam

Origin

Puppets from Tamil Nadu, known as Bommalattam combine the techniques of both rod and string puppets.

A few puppets have jointed arms and hands, which are manipulated by rods. The Bommalattam puppets are the largest, heaviest and the most articulate of all traditional Indian marionettes.

A puppet may be as big as 4.5 feet in height weighing about ten kilograms. Bommalattam theatre has elaborate preliminaries which are divided into four parts – Vinayak Puja, Komali, Amanattam and Pusenkanattam



Music & Clothing

The puppet dance is accompanied by an orchestra and a lead singer. The orchestra makes it possible for the viewer to understand the story the puppets are trying to convey. The puppets are dressed in colourful clothing and ornaments.



An artist with the puppets he made in Tamilnadu

karagattam



A Karagattam performance in Tamilnadu

Origin

Karakaattam is an ancient folk dance of Tamil Nadu performed in praise of the rain goddess Mariamman. The ancient Tamil epic says that this type of dance derived from Bharatham and a mixture of multiple forms of Tamil dance forms like Bharatanatyam postures and mudras. The offering of this dance is to the goddess to bless rain.

In the Karagam dance, intricate steps and body/arm movements decides the skill of the performer. This dance can be performed individually or in pairs, by both the genders. Some of the steps that are widely used are similar to the circus acts; dancing on a rolling block of wood, up and down a ladder, threading a needle while bending backwards and many more.

Music & Clothing

The attire for karakattam can vary as the main property is to have a karagam (Pot) on the head of the dancer. Common attire includes sarees or kurtha, colored towels and a pot.

The instruments that accompany this dance comprise of drums and long pipes. These musical instruments add vigour to the dance and make it look beautiful and sound rhythmic.







Conclusion

The folk dances of the south of India are diverse unique and rich in tradition. Despite being near one another each state and area has its own dances and traditions. Most of these dances have guidelines and customs attached to them and the dancers give great importance to doing the dance in the correct manner.

What is unique about folk dance is it inculcates a sense of unity; it brings common folk together and helps them understand that when people get together, they can create something powerful and big.

While some of these dances are performed happily and with a sense of joy others are done in a more serious and Pios tone. The dances are also extremely colourful and intricate. From the face painting to the colourful costumes and jewellery, everything is well planned out and given a lot of attention to detail. The music for most of these folk dances is beat and rhythm heavy, most of the music is also played by the performers themselves.

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“The difference between the living and dead is that while the former has rhythm within him, the latter has no rhythm”

Dance has been a big part of the lives of human beings for many decades together now. India being the very diverse country it is, paved way for many unique and intricate folk dances which are rich in tradition. The range and variety of folk dance traditions surviving in India is indeed amazing, every region having its own style of folk dance. Folk dancers enjoy the pulsating togetherness in their dance deeply. Therefore, folk dances have recurring movement, decorative clothing and rhythmic music.

Folk nrityam is a book consisting of folk dances of various parts of southern India, it attempts to explain how these dances originated, who they were created by, where they were first performed and how they make an impact visually.

