



Kathakali Club, Thrissur

792nd Programme

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Kathakali Keechakavadham

(Aattakatha by Irayimman Thampi)

(Storyline)

Among the literary masterpieces composed during the reign of the Travancore kings in the eighteenth century, the Aattakathas of Irayimman Thampi occupy a distinguished place, reflecting the remarkable evolution of Kathakali literature. His three celebrated works—Keechakavadham, Utharaswayamvaram, and Dakshayagam—are admired not only for their dramatic excellence on stage but also for their outstanding literary merit.

While Keechakavadham and Utharaswayamvaram are based on episodes from the Mahabharata, Dakshayagam draws its story from various Puranas. Irayimman Thampi skillfully adapted these narratives by introducing suitable modifications and incorporating accepted textual variations, thereby creating vivid and compelling dramatic compositions.

His works beautifully blend the lyrical elegance and dance-oriented style characteristic of Aswathi Thirunal with the majestic, symbolism-rich style of Karthika Thirunal. Every word in Thampi's compositions is carefully crafted to express emotion while maintaining musical richness. Even his Yuddha (battle) Padams possess remarkable melodic beauty. The poetic excellence that distinguishes his Aattakathas is equally evident in his Padams, songs and Keerthanams, making his literary contributions truly exceptional.





Story Summary

The events of Keechakavadham take place during the Ajnathavasam (had to live in another kingdom without revealing their true identities. If anyone recognized them before the one-year period ended, they would have had to repeat the entire 12-year exile and the one-year incognito exile) of the Pandavas in the kingdom of Virata. Living in disguise, each Pandava serves in a different role within the royal court.

Keechakan, the powerful commander-in-chief of King Virata and brother of Queen Sudeshna, becomes infatuated with Malini, who is in reality Draupadi, serving the Queen under the assumed name Sairandhri.

With the assistance of his sister Sudeshna, Keechakan attempts to lure Sairandhri to his private chamber and tries to possess her by force. Protected through the intervention of the divine messenger sent by Surya, Sairandhri escapes and approaches Bhima, who is living in disguise as the royal cook Valalan, narrating the humiliation she has suffered.

Following Valalan's instructions, Sairandhri invites Keechakan to the Nrithasala (dance hall). There, believing that Sairandhri awaits him, Keechakan approaches the person lying covered in a cloth. Instead, it is Valalan. Bhima seizes Keechakan in a crushing embrace and kills him.

For this performance, the earlier scenes, as well as the events following the death of Keechakan, have been omitted. The presentation begins from the moment Keechakan first sees Malini.





Rangam 1

Keechakan & Sairandhri

Having seen the extraordinary beauty of the princess of Panchala, Keechakan, the mighty commander and brother of Queen Sudeshna, is overcome by desire. Following the introductory Slokam, the performance begins with Tiranokku (the first ceremonial appearance of the character).

As the curtain is lowered after the Tiranokku, Keechakan beholds Malini, standing gracefully while gathering flowers. Enchanted by her beauty, he begins the celebrated Padam commencing with "Malini...", rendered in Chempada Tala and Padi Ragam.

The Charanam beginning "Malleessara Villinodu Mallidunna Ninte Chilleelatha kondenne..." is often elaborately interpreted through expressive Abhinaya, portraying Keechakan's intense admiration and infatuation.

Sairandhri then replies with the Padam beginning "Saadaram Nee Chonnoru Mozhi..."

She firmly rejects his advances, declaring that his words are improper and warning him that desire for another man's wife can only lead to destruction. She reminds him of the fate of Ravana, who abducted Sita after becoming consumed by desire and was ultimately slain by Rama.

She further reveals that she has five Gandharvans as husbands, mighty warriors who would surely destroy anyone attempting to dishonour her. Having delivered this warning, Malini departs.

Keechakan, however, dismisses her words with arrogance. Confident that no Gandharva could overcome his strength, he wonders how he may still win her. Finally, deciding to seek the assistance of his sister Sudeshna, he exits the stage.



Rangam 2

Keechakan & Sudeshna

Following the Slokam beginning "Krishodareem...", the curtain opens to reveal Keechakan and Sudeshna together.

Keechakan respectfully salutes his sister with the Padam beginning "Sodari Rajni Mouli..."

He confesses that he has become deeply enamoured of Malini and cannot free himself from his overwhelming desire for her.

Sudeshna cautions him against pursuing Sairandhri. She reminds him that the lady is protected by her five Gandharva husbands, and that any attempt to approach her with improper intentions would inevitably bring disaster.

Keechakan, however, dismisses her warning. Boasting of his own unmatched strength, he declares that he has no fear of the Gandharvas and insists that no one can prevent him from obtaining Malini.

Unable to change her brother's determination, Sudeshna finally agrees to devise a means of bringing Sairandhri before him, thereby concluding the second Rangam.



Rangam 3

Sudeshna & Sairandhri

After Keechakan expresses his desire for Sairandhri, Sudeshna summons her and instructs her to go to Keechakan's residence to bring back wine for her. This episode is introduced through the Slokam, after which the curtain rises to reveal Sudeshna and Sairandhri on stage.

Despite Sairandhri's reluctance, Sudeshna insists that she should carry out the Queen's command and sends her to Keechakan's palace. Having issued her instructions, Sudeshna exits the stage.

The Dandakam beginning with "Kshoneendra Patniyude Vaneem Nisamy..." follows.

The Dandakam is employed in Kathakali to portray the inner emotional state of a character as well as to describe the events that occur between two Rangams. Greater emphasis is placed on Bhava Abhinaya than on Mudra Abhinaya in this literary form.

Unlike a Slokam, which generally contains up to twenty-six syllables, a Dandakam is characterised by much longer metrical lines. Here, it portrays Sairandhri as she reluctantly proceeds towards Keechakan's residence.

The performer is expected to vividly express the Saptha Satvika Bhavas (the seven involuntary emotional manifestations) appropriate to the situation. These include:

1. Pathi kimapi Ninnu (Stambham) – stunned immobility
2. Vivasathayil Mungi –(Pralayam / Thalarcha – physical collapse and helplessness
3. Nadungi (Vepathu, Vira – trembling with fear
4. Sramasalilam (Swedam) – perspiration caused by anxiety
5. Nayana jalam (Ashru) – tears welling in the eyes
6. Malina tara vesha (Vaivarnyam) – change in complexion arising from distress
7. Pulakajatha (Romancham) – horripilation (goosebumps)

Remembering Surya Deva and praying for divine protection, Sairandhri proceeds towards Keechakan's palace like a frightened deer entering the lair of a lion, fully aware of the danger that awaits her.



Rangam 4

Keechakan & Sairandhri

The Slokam beginning with "Sabhajana Vilochana..." introduces this Rangam.

When the curtain rises, Keechakan is seen eagerly awaiting Sairandhri's arrival. She enters carrying the vessel entrusted to her by Queen Sudeshna.

Keechakan welcomes her with the celebrated Padam beginning "Harinakshi...", rendered in Kambhoji Ragam.

During this Padam, performers often elaborate through expressive Abhinaya on lines such as:

- "Taruni Ninnudaya Sancharadoona taram Charana Nalina Paricharana Paran..."
- "Madakala Kalahamsanchitha Gamane,
- "Thane Vannathinal Sashivadhane..."
- "Sundari Mancha mithinkalirunnu..."

These passages beautifully portray Keechakan's infatuation, admiration and seductive persuasion as he attempts to entice Sairandhri.

Having come only to collect the wine, Sairandhri requests the vessel so that she may return immediately. Instead, Keechakan forcefully attempts to embrace her. When she resists, he tries to overpower her through physical force and intimidation.

At that very moment, the invisible Rakshasa sent by Surya Deva, known as Madolkkadan, intervenes and prevents Keechakan from harming Sairandhri.

It is important to note that Madolkkadan does not appear physically on stage. His presence is conveyed solely through Keechakan's reactions and expressive Abhinaya, making the audience perceive the unseen divine intervention.

Protected by Surya's divine messenger, Sairandhri escapes from Keechakan's grasp and leaves the stage.



Rangam 5

Valalan & Sairandhri

Following the Slokam beginning "Itham Thenanuneetha...", the curtain rises to reveal Sairandhri entering the royal kitchen, where Valalan is resting.

Overcome with grief, she approaches him in tears and narrates the shame and humiliation she has suffered at the hands of Keechakan. Her anguish is expressed through the Padam beginning "Kantha Krupalo...", in which she pours out her sorrow and seeks justice.

Deeply moved by her plight, Valalan resolves to end Keechakan's tyranny. Remaining calm and determined, he devises a plan and instructs Sairandhri to invite Keechakan to the Nrithasala (dance hall) during the night, making him believe that she has finally yielded to his advances.

Valalan assures her that he will be there in her place and that Keechakan will receive the punishment he deserves.

He then sings the Padam beginning "Mathi Mathi Mathimukhi Parithapam...", comforting Sairandhri and asking her to cast aside her grief. He encourages her to have faith, promising that her suffering will soon come to an end and that justice will prevail.

With renewed courage and confidence in Valalan's plan, Sairandhri departs.



Rangam 6

Keechakan & Valalan

The final Rangam takes place in the Nrithasala.

As instructed, Valalan arrives before Keechakan and lies on the bed completely covered with a cloth, appearing to be Sairandhri awaiting her admirer.

When darkness envelops the hall, Keechakan enters eagerly, convinced that his long-cherished desire is about to be fulfilled.

The Padam beginning "Kandivaar Kuzhali...", rendered in Bhairavi Ragam, accompanies his entrance. Throughout this Padam, Keechakan expresses his excitement and anticipation as he approaches the figure reclining before him.

With the conclusion of the Padam, the Melam gradually subsides, creating an atmosphere of profound silence that signifies the stillness of the night.

Believing the veiled figure to be Sairandhri, Keechakan approaches the bed and attempts to embrace her.

In that very instant, Valalan rises and seizes Keechakan with tremendous force.

A fierce struggle follows. The mighty warrior Keechakan, whose arrogance had known no bounds, finds himself completely overpowered by the immeasurable strength of Bhima in the guise of Valalan.

Locked in Valalan's crushing embrace, Keechakan is unable to free himself. His immense physical power proves futile against the righteous wrath of Bhima.

The combat ends with Keechakan being killed by Valalan, thus avenging the humiliation suffered by Sairandhri and bringing justice to her.

With Keechakan's death, the dramatic episode of Keechakavadham reaches its powerful and triumphant conclusion

Keechakavadham remains a masterpiece of Kathakali, admired for its compelling dramatic structure, profound emotional depth, and exceptional scope for Abhinaya, making it one of the most enduring and popular works in the Kathakali repertoire.