

## The Kootiyattam Artistes of the Ammannur Family

G. Venu

The Chakyars are a small sect among the Ambalavasi (temple-dwellers) caste of Kerala who have been for centuries practising the histrionic art—the theatrical art of presentation and enacting of plays—as a hereditary family profession. In the field of drama they have made a creditable and very valuable contribution: they have preserved intact Kerala's ancient Sanskrit theatre tradition called Kootiyattam. Kootiyattam, it must be remembered, is the only model, now extant, of the ancient Sanskrit theatre of India. In addition to Kootiyattam, the Chakyars have been practising another allied art called Koothu as a traditional family profession.

When the Chakyar, in the guise of the *Vidushaka* (jester) relates Puranic stories in a manner replete with interest and humour, the performance is called Koothu (known as Prabandha Koothu). By and large the stories in the *Ramayana* or the *Mahabharata* are narrated. While relating the story, the Chakyar monoacts the parts of the characters he is talking about. In the course of his discourse, the Chakyar makes very witty and satirical thrusts at persons among the audience; usually he does this by treating them as characters in the story he is narrating and addressing them or pointing them out as such. He creates opportunities to make fun of them or to ridicule them. Often he directs his satire not at individuals but at some social problem or evil, ingeniously bringing it into relevance with some event or episode in the story. The Chakyar has full freedom to ridicule any person in the audience however great he may be, provided, of course, that he depicts him as a character in the story and the satirical remarks that he makes are relevant to some context in the story.

When Kootiyattam is presented, separate actors take on the part of different characters in the drama. In the list of dramas used in Kootiyattam, *Abhisheka Natakam*, *Svapnavasavadattam*, *Pratijnayaugandharayanam*, *Balacharitam*, all assigned to the poet Bhasa, *Naganandam* composed by Harshavardhana, Shakti Bhadra's *Ascharya Choodamani*, *Subhadra Dhananjayam* and *Tapatisamvaranam* composed by Kulasekhara Perumal and Nilakantha's *Kalyanasaugandhikam*, deserve mention.

There were in Kerala some eighteen Chakyar families who were the custodians of the arts of Koothu and Kootiyattam and who had been traditionally practising these arts for centuries as a family profession. These families were known under different clan names, like Ammannur, Kuttancheri, Koipa, Potiyil etc. Each of the families was allotted a certain number of temples and it was the

responsibility of the Chakyars of that family to conduct Koothu and Kootiyattam in those temples. Koothu and Kootiyattam were religious performances conducted within temples at prescribed seasons or period as part of the rituals of the temple. As remuneration for this service the Chakyar families were given agricultural lands by the temple, the income from which would be quite sufficient for them to live in reasonable comfort. The land thus given to a Chakyar family by the temple was called Koothu Viruthi. If a family defaults in giving performances at the right time and in the right way, the land given to them could be taken back by the temple.

The Chakyars could not till the land themselves because they had to devote the whole of their time to the study and practice of their arts. So they rented out the land to tenants or Pattom. These tenants or Pattom-holders cultivated the land and gave a part of the produce to the Chakyar family.

In the performance of Koothu and Kootiyattam the Chakyars were assisted by Nambiars and others. They were also dependants of the temple and so the temple provided them with lands and other means of income. The temple also met all the incidental expenses for the performance of the Koothu and Kootiyattam. These two arts were able to survive and flourish only because of this generous assistance and patronage rendered by the temples.

The working of this system suddenly came to an end, adversely affecting the Chakyars and their arts in 1970, when the Kerala Government made drastic changes in the land-laws of the state. Under the new laws the Chakyars lost all rights on the land and the tenants or Pattom-holders became the owners of the land. All of a sudden the Chakyars and Nambiars were reduced to poverty. The Chakyar families could no longer live on the meagre income from the practice of their arts. The result was that the young members of the family had to give up their traditional profession of Koothu and Kootiyattam and seek other means of livelihood. There are today only a very small number of Chakyars of the old generation who still practise this traditional art and who are making a valiant effort to keep the art alive.

Among the Chakyar families, the Ammannur family has from ancient times occupied a high and outstanding position. The contribution of this family to the arts of Koothu and Kootiyattam is invaluable. They have not only spread and popularized these two arts and preserved them from extinction, but have also scrupulously maintained their distinctive styles and modes of presentation in all their originality, without allowing them to be modified or adulterated.

The Ammannur Chakyar family, which has been practising Koothu and Kootiyattam for centuries, originally belonged to the village of Koppam near Pattambi. This place was in Valluvanad. The ruler of Valluvanad had some quarrel with a Nambootiri and, in a fit of anger, he had the Nambootiri burned to death very secretly in an oven of the Uttupura (the kitchen and dining-hall attached to a temple). This crime was kept a close secret. Once, in the course of a Koothu, a Chakyar of the Ammannur family made an oblique reference to the event in such a way as to bring the ruler's crime to light. Enraged by this the ruler ordered the Chakyar to be bound and brought before him. But the Chakyar got scent of this in advance, and so, to escape capture and punishment, he fled with his family from Koppam and settled down in the place called Muzhikulam in Travancore.

Thus the Ammannur Chakyars became permanent settlers in Muzhikulam. We have records only about the great exponents of Kootiyattam since the time of their coming to Muzhikulam. From the records we know that in 1874 A. D. a branch of the Ammannur family settled down at Irinjalakuda in Trichur District.

There was one famous Parameswara Chakyar of the Ammannur family who was a contemporary of the celebrated poet Melpathur Narayana Bhattatiri. He was a very distinguished exponent of the arts of Koothu and Kootiyattam. He was followed by another illustrious Kootiyattam artiste named Ittiyamman Chakyar. He was a contemporary of the great Malayalam poet, Kunchan Nambiar, of the eighteenth century. It was in the performance of Parakkum Koothu that Ittiyamman Chakyar distinguished himself most. Parakkum Koothu is an episode in Harshavardhana's play *Nagananda*. The enactment of that part well demands special skill and talent of a very high order. In the fourth act of that play, *Nagananda*, there is a scene where Garuda swoops down from the top of a hill, picks up Jimuta Vahana, lying on the ground, with his beak and returns to the top of the hill. The enactment of this episode, which is very difficult, is called Parakkum Koothu.

To enact this scene another special stage, at an altitude to represent the hill, is necessary. At one side of the ordinary stage, another stage having a height of about 45 metres (44.88 metres to be exact) is built. This stage must also be equipped with a mizhavu (drum). The other participants in the performance, Nambiar and Nangiar, should be present also. This stage represents the hill on which Garuda is to appear. Sixty-four strings are tied to sixty-four different parts of Garuda's body. On the ordinary stage, at a lower level, Jimuta Vahana lies with his body covered with a red silk cloak wearing a garland of Chethi flowers (a red flower used in all *puya*-s) on his head. Garuda flies straight down towards Jimuta Vahana. When Garuda flies, every small movement of his is directed and controlled by the Nambiar, sitting on the upper stage, by cleverly manipulating the sixty-four strings. The Nambiar controls Garuda as a puppeteer controls the movements of a puppet. This means that the Nambiar must have extraordinary skill in this task. The Chakyar who plays the part of Garuda flies round and round in circles and descends gradually to the ground. He picks up the Chethi garland from Jimuta Vahana's head and returns to the upper stage which stands for the top of the hill. This part of the play is called Parakkum Koothu. It is said that whenever Ittiyamman Chakyar played the part of Garuda in Parakkum Koothu, the Nambiar who operated the strings was the great Kunchan Nambiar himself.

There is a "Shloka" which clearly refers to the performance of Parakkum Koothu by Ittiyamman Chakyar on the 23rd of Metam in the year 920 of the Malayalam Era (1745 A.D.). Whenever Parakkum Koothu was performed in a place, that place subsequently came to be called Koothuparambu. There are today places called Koothuparambu in Tripunithura, Tellichery and Irinjalakuda.

There are several stories current even today which glorify the unequalled talents and mastery of Ittiyamman Chakyar in the art of Kootiyattam. Once a 'Sastri' deeply learned in *Natya Shastra* came to Muzhikulam. Having heard again and again of the unparalleled greatness of Ittiyamman Chakyar as a Kootiyattam actor, Sastri became desirous of seeing him and so he went to Muzhikulam. Arriving at

Muzhikulam in the evening he spent that night in the temple. Next morning he went to the river to bathe. After finishing his bath he sat on one of the steps of the ghat and started *japa* (prayer). Just then, somebody came to the river and went down the steps, but Sastri did not take any notice of him. That man went into the water and finally when he came out, he pressed his long hair to squeeze out all the water and threw the wet hair back. While he did this, Sastri sitting on the step above, fancied that a drop of water from the man's hair fell on his body. He was enraged because he thought that his body had been polluted in the course of his *japa* by that drop of water and so he glared at the man with anger. But he saw to his great amazement that the man below him had not a single hair on his head; his head was perfectly bald. His squeezing the hair, throwing it back and sending a drop of water from it were all a piece of magnificent acting! The astounded Sastri asked him; "Are you not Ittiyamman Chakyar?" Thus Sastri had an experience of Ittiyamman Chakyar's great talent in acting, without actually seeing any of his performances on the stage.

The death of Ittiyamman Chakyar was followed by a slack interregnum in the Ammannur family when there was not a single competent master in the family to teach the art of Kootiyattam. It almost seemed that the long tradition of practising Koothu and Kootiyattam, which the Ammannur family had kept up without a break for centuries, was going to end. But this catastrophe was averted by the timely advent of one Parameswara Chakyar. Parameswara Chakyar was the son of Ittiyamman Chakyar's niece. He came in time to maintain the long-standing tradition of the Ammannur family. In the absence of a competent preceptor in the family, Parameswara Chakyar, in his boyhood, had been forced to go elsewhere for learning the art. He went to the house of a Nambiar in Chengannur and there got training under a 'Nangiar' who had made a name for her roles as heroine. Parameswara Chakyar spent about eight years there in the course of which he mastered all the techniques of Kootiyattam. Later on he became very famous. He was known by the name 'Valiya Parameswara Chakyar'.

Valiya Parameswara Chakyar had a number of disciples. The most brilliant and outstanding among them was his own nephew, Cheriya Parameswara Chakyar. [The male members of the Ammannur family were given only the names of either Vishnu or Shiva. The most common names are Madhava and Parameswara. When two members of the same family have the same name, the older member is called 'Valiya' (Senior) and the younger, 'Cheriya' (Junior).] There is a famous story which brings out the extraordinary skill of Cheriya Parameswara Chakyar in acting. Once when a dog came barking towards him he hurled a stone at it and the dog was injured a little. The owner of that dog, an Englishman, accused Cheriya Parameswara Chakyar of unnecessarily injuring his dog. Parameswara Chakyar gave a convincing reply not in words, but by action. Without taking a stone in his hand, he feigned throwing a big stone at the Englishman; his acting was so realistic that the Englishman felt that a stone had hit him. Parameswara Chakyar told the Englishman that he had not really thrown a stone at the dog, but only enacted that part. The Englishman now believed it because he himself had experienced it. In order to convince the Englishman still further, Cheriya Parameswara Chakyar now demonstrated before him another piece of acting. He enacted Ravana's lifting the Kailasa Mountain. The Englishman was watching the performance with great attention. At one stage the mountain slid to one side. The Englishman thought that the

mountain was going to fall on him. He made a move to escape and the result was that he fell on the floor with the chair. The Englishman was so impressed by this piece of superb acting that he gave several presents to Cheriya Parameswara Chakyar.

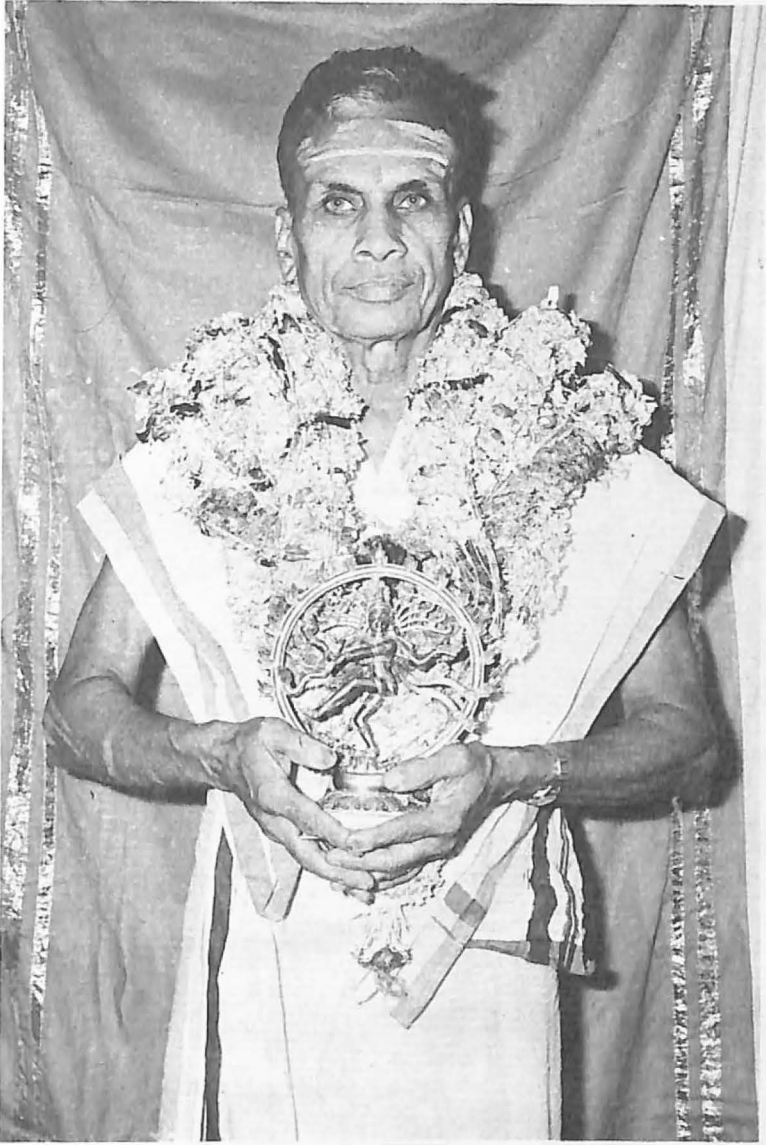
Cheriya Parameswara Chakyar lived at a time when Kathakali was slowly coming into fame and prominence. The most famous Kathakali actor at that time was Iswara Pillai. The Maharaja of Travancore (Uthram Tirunal) wanted Iswara Pillai to get better and additional training in the art of acting under Cheriya Parameswara Chakyar and for that purpose the Maharaja summoned Cheriya Parameswara Chakyar to his court. Chakyar went to the court in obedience to the summons but regretted that he could not accede to the Maharaja's wish because, according to long-standing tradition and custom, he could give direct instructions only to Chakyars, but not to anybody belonging to another caste. But he suggested a way out of the difficulty. The suggestion was that he would enact *Asokavanikamkam* Kootiyattam seven times and Iswara Pillai must watch his acting carefully and learn the techniques of acting by watching his performance. Most of the techniques of Kootiyattam acting have to be used in *Asokavanikamkam*; hence that particular play was chosen. The Maharaja and Iswara Pillai were satisfied. Iswara Pillai carefully watched the performances and learnt all the techniques. The Maharaja rewarded Parameswara Chakyar with a Virasringhala and many other presents.

During the time of Cheriya Parameswara Chakyar, the Cheruparisha Chakyar family of Kitangur, being devoid of female members, adopted a woman from the Ammannur family. This led to a union of the two Chakyar families. Thence forward the Chakyars of both the families began giving Kootiyattam performances jointly. During a short period even the domestic affairs of the Ammannur family were looked after by the Chakyars of the other family.

The chief disciple of Cheriya Parameswara Chakyar was one Madhava Chakyar of the Cheruparisha family. Kitangur Rama Chakyar who later became a very famous Kootiyattam actor was a nephew and disciple of this Madhava Chakyar.

The next two illustrious Kootiyattam artistes of the Ammannur family were Madhava Chakyar and Chachu Chakyar. Madhava Chakyar was born in 1876 A.D. He showed unequalled excellence in playing the parts of Sri Rama in *Surpanakhankam*, Sugriva in *Balivadhham* and Hanuman in *Toranayuddham*. Chachu Chakyar, born in 1881 A.D., easily became the greatest Kootiyattam actor of his time. The real name of Chachu Chakyar was Parameswara Chakyar, but very few people knew him by that name. He was known more by the name Chachu Chakyar.

Chachu Chakyar distinguished himself in playing the role of *Vidushaka*. In the whole history of Kootiyattam it is doubtful whether there was ever a better actor of *Vidushaka* than Chachu Chakyar. While performing Koothu he showed remarkable ingenuity in inventing suitable occasions, that fitted very well into the story, for ridiculing or satirising people. There are several stories still current among lovers of Kootiyattam of Chachu Chakyar's extraordinary skill in this respect.



*Ammannur Madhava Chakyar*

A classic example, which is still remembered by many, of the witticism and inventive genius of Chachu Chakyar in delivering satirical blows obliquely at eminent men in the course of Koothu, is his ridiculing the Maharaja of Cochin who had just then abdicated his throne. A Koothu performance lasting for forty-one days by Chachu Chakyar was going on in the Koothambalam of the famous Vadakkumnatha Temple of Trichur. The abdicated Maharaja of Cochin attended the Koothu very regularly every day. Every day he would arrive at the temple a few minutes before the commencement of the Koothu and send word to Chachu Chakyar prescribing for him the particular episode or episodes of the story that he should narrate that



*Ammannur Chachu Chakyar*

day. The Maharaja was very particular that the Chakyar should stick to that episode and nothing else. Chachu Chakyar did not like this interference of the King in the choice of the topic for the day's Koothu. Having no choice in selecting the topic Chachu Chakyar found it difficult to prepare for the day's performance in advance. But Chachu Chakyar had to obey the Maharaja and so he yielded to his wish.

After he had put up with this inconvenient situation for some days, one day he called on the Maharaja. In the course of their friendly conversation, the King told Chachu Chakyar that his performance was not upto his usual standard; the reason

was that there was a noticeable fall in the power and cutting quality of his language. The Raja added: "The audience gets more pleasure from the witticisms and the ingenious sarcastic thrusts that the Chakyar makes at people than from his learned exposition of the meaning of the *Shloka*-s". Fortunately this remark of the Maharaja gave a chance to the Chakyar to air his grievance. So he readily replied: "Your Highness must know that I am labouring under a serious handicap. It is you who decide which portion of the story I must deal with each day. This is a great inconvenience for me. Give me a chance to choose my own topic for just one day. Then you will notice the great change in the quality of my performance." Realising the justice of this complaint, the Maharaja said: "Right, you can choose your own topic today and make me the target of your ridicule and attack."

Having got this permission from the King, Chachu Chakyar made a very judicious choice of the topic for that day. He chose a *Shloka* from the *Ramayana Prabandha* as the text for his discourse. The context was the fight between Rama and Ravana. In the course of the fight Ravana taunts Rama with references to some of his unmanly and undignified actions. Chachu Chakyar chose this particular portion because Ravana's derogatory remarks about Rama could be levelled against the Maharaja also. The *Shloka* runs thus: "Oh Raghava (Rama), you have defeated in battle a woman (Tataka), a Brahmin (Parashurama), a deer (Maricha disguised as deer) and an animal (the monkey, Bali). (The implication is that Sri Rama had not yet defeated a heroic man.) All this I know. And what is more, you have been exiled from your kingdom which was your rightful inheritance and sent to the forest and are now living on the roots and fruits available in the forest." This is the tenor of the *Shloka*.

Chachu Chakyar explained the meaning of the *Shloka* in which every line could be turned into a thrust at the Maharaja, because all the derogatory remarks made by Ravana about Rama were equally applicable to the Raja also. The Raja also, like Rama, had gained an unholy victory over a woman (a Nambutiri woman named Tatri was ostracised by the Raja on a charge of immorality); he also had a long-standing quarrel with a Brahmin in a sensational case and the Brahmin was brought to his knees in the end; the reference to Rama's eating raw fruits and roots was also applicable to the Maharaja because he was also a lover of fruits and roots; finally it was only recently that the King was forced to abdicate his throne though he had announced that he was abdicating willingly. But the truth was that he was forcibly dethroned and many people including the Chakyar knew this secret. When Chachu Chakyar was explaining this part, he turned to the Maharaja and directly asked him, of course feigning the question of Ravana to Rama: "Did you abdicate the throne of your own will? Or, were you dethroned? To save your face you will, of course, say that you gave up your throne voluntarily. But that is not the truth. You were really ousted from the throne. Why? Because your unkindly and undignified actions were becoming intolerable."

On hearing these words of the Chakyar, seemingly addressed to him, the Maharaja's face became red with anger. But the Chakyar continued his discourse calmly, undaunted by the frightening looks of the Maharaja. At the end of that day's performance, a messenger from the Raja told the Chakyar that the Raja wanted to see him the next morning. Chachu Chakyar, with some trepidation, went to see the King. By that time the Maharaja had lost all his anger and resentment. "Your rebuke

yesterday was splendid" said the Raja to him in genuine appreciation and presented Chachu Chakyar with Onapudava (a fine pair of dhoties).

There was a District Judge at Ernakulam who was in the habit of sleeping while proceedings were going on in his court. With his sarcastic strokes Chachu Chakyar once chastised him well in the course of a Koothu performance. The Judge had gone to listen to Chachu Chakyar's Koothu in the Shiva temple at Ernakulam. The story of *Dakshayaga* was the topic of the Koothu. The particular portion that Chachu Chakyar narrated that day was Sati Devi's exposition of Shiva's greatness to Daksha. The Chakyar, fixing his eyes on the Judge, quoted the words of Sati to Daksha: "Are you not in the habit of sleeping when people make remarks and complaints? Then, without understanding what they have said, you announce your verdict on the case. I tell you that this kind of indifference cannot be practised here. Don't you know that it is a great sin to act without understanding the facts and the situation?" The audience burst into laughter on hearing these words, and, it is said, that the Judge mended his ways and never slept in the court again.

From the above episodes it should not be surmised that Chachu Chakyar gave importance only to *Hasya-Rasa* (humour) in the performance of Prabandha Koothu. He was equally adept in rousing the other *Rasa*-s as well in the contexts appropriate to them. For example, while narrating stories like *Santana Gopalam* and *Rukmangada Charitam* he could actually make the audience weep. The Maharaja of Cochin honoured him with a number of awards and presents including a Virasringhala.

Some of the great living exponents of Kootiyattam of the present age are disciples of Chachu Chakyar. Two of his greatest disciples, Ammannur Madhava Chakyar and Ammannur Parameswara Chakyar, are successfully maintaining the "Ammannur Kootiyattam Tradition". They are endeavouring to keep the art of Kootiyattam alive. Another famous disciple of Chachu Chakyar was Painkulam Rama Chakyar. His contribution to the development of Kootiyattam can never be forgotten. Chachu Chakyar died in 1967 at the age of 86.

The two great living exponents of Kootiyattam of the Ammannur family are Madhava Chakyar and Parameswara Chakyar. Both of them live at Irinjalakuda in Trichur District. Born in 1917, Madhava Chakyar learned the art of Kootiyattam from his own uncles, Chachu Chakyar and Madhava Chakyar, and received intensive training under them. His Arangettam (first public performance) took place when he was only fourteen years old at the Koothambalam of Tirumandhamkundu temple at Angadipuram. He played the part of Sri Rama in the play, *Surpanakhankam*. He studied Koothu and Kootiyattam in the traditional style for several years under his two uncles and took part with them in all the important performances in the various temples of Kerala. Madhava Chakyar is the recipient of several awards and prizes from numerous temples and patrons. In recognition of his invaluable contributions to the development of Kootiyattam, the Sangeet Natak Akademi honoured him with an award in 1979. In 1982 the Government of India conferred upon him the title of Padmashri. In 1982, under the leadership of Madhava Chakyar, a troupe of Kootiyattam artistes presented performances in "The Rencontres Nord Sud Culture" held in France and the Festival of India in London.



*Ammannur Madhava Chakyar as Bali in Balivadham.*

Parameswara Chakyar who is about one and a half years older than Madhava Chakyar has studied minutely and mastered all the techniques of Kootiyattam. He is very eager to keep Kootiyattam strictly as a temple ritual which means that its performance must be confined to the precincts of the temple. Not even once has he shown any willingness to perform Kootiyattam on a public stage outside the temple. In presenting the *Ramayana* story in twelve days and especially in enacting fully and perfectly the portion called *Anguliyankam*, which is presented as a solo performance, Parameswara Chakyar has no equal today.

Thirty-eight-year old Ammannur Parameswaran known as Kuttan Chakyar, nephew of Madhava Chakyar and Parameswara Chakyar, is the representative of the new generation of Kootiyattam artistes of the Ammannur family. Kuttan Chakyar, who has received intensive training under his uncles since his boyhood, is the great hope and promise of the future of Kootiyattam. Kochu Kuttan Chakyar, a member of the Muzhikulam branch of the Ammannur family, is another talented Kootiyattam actor. He has already achieved considerable fame as an actor of the part of *Vidushaka*.

My association with the Ammannur Chakyar family goes back to the year 1977. It was in 1982 that I began to study Kootiyattam in a serious way directly under the guidance and supervision of Madhava Chakyar and Parameswara Chakyar. Ammannur Chakyars have consistently refused to give instruction and training in Kootiyattam to any person who does not belong to the Chakyar community. I was fortunate and privileged in this matter for I was the first exception to this age-old custom. In October 1982 we started a training centre at Irinjalakuda as a memorial for Ammannur Chachu Chakyar. This Centre has been established with the object of giving training in Kootiyattam to selected candidates strictly in the traditional *Gurukula* style and also to bring back to popularity many of the ancient classical dramas, by presenting them through Kootiyattam, in all their original splendour. Seven students are at present receiving intensive training at the centre. Madhava Chakyar and Parameswara Chakyar are in charge of their training. One creditable achievement of this school is that it revived and enacted three Kootiyattam plays: *Ashokavanikamkam*, *Jatayuvadhamkam* and *Kalyanasaugandhikam* which had long remained forgotten. The school revived these plays and presented them in all their originality and details in the years 1982, 1983 and 1984 respectively. A group of Kootiyattam artistes trained at this institution, led by Guru Ammannur Madhava Chakyar, presented Kootiyattam performances at the Festival of India held in Switzerland in 1987 and in Japan in 1988.

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