

स्वागत

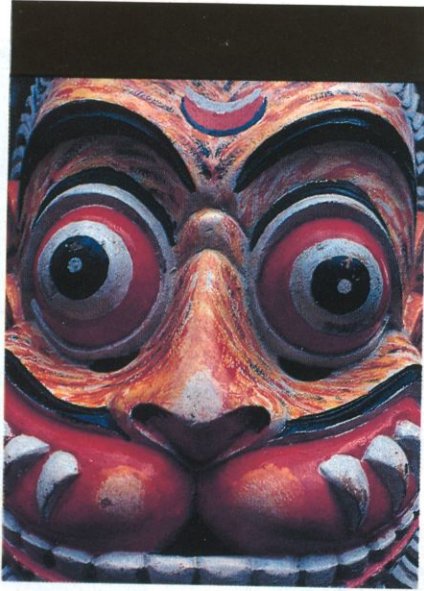
SWAGAT

नवम्बर NOVEMBER 1994

विमान में पढ़ने के लिए
FOR INFLIGHT READING



 इंडियन एयरलाइन्स
Indian Airlines



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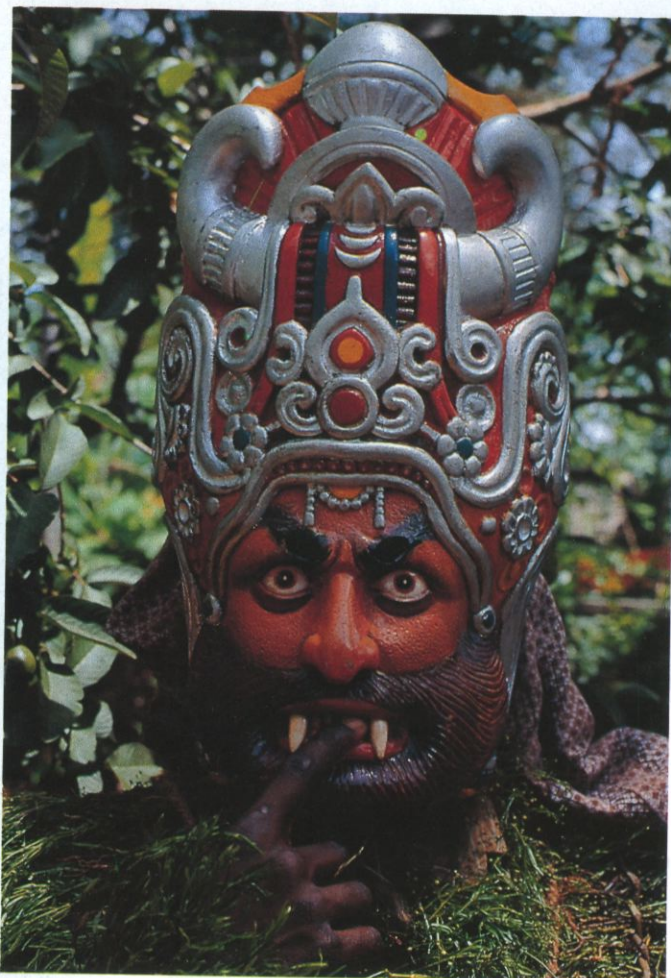
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The Street Performing Arts of Onam

Text and photographs: Nibal Matbur



"If you want to enjoy the *Onam* festivities in Kerala, then come to Trichur," said Mr. Gopi Marar with an air of finality, adding, "after all, Trichur is considered the cultural capital of Kerala." I immediately took his suggestion but then, what I was more interested in seeing was not the classical arts of *Kathakali* or *Krishnattam*. On the contrary, I was keen to see the dynamic expression of young working class men who culminate their week-long *Onam* celebrations in spirited performances called *Kummatti* and *Pullikalli*.

And so I arrived in Trichur right on time to witness the two events. What was common between them was that they attracted, by and large, young men who gave vent to their pent up

energy by participating in these art forms that involved vigorous dancing through the streets. Since these performances were social and not ritualistic in character, they appealed to a large cross section of society, cutting across religious and caste differences. In these street expressions of the young there was a feeling of camaraderie and oneness that was in keeping with the larger spirit of *Onam*.

Celebrated on the fourth day of *Onam*, *Kummatti* as I was told, was generally performed in the nearby villages of Trichur. I accompanied Mr. V.P. Paul — who has done much to preserve this fading art form — to the villages of Kuttur and Choollissery, some 10 to 15 kilometres away from Trichur with the idea of seeing differ-



ent groups and their performances.

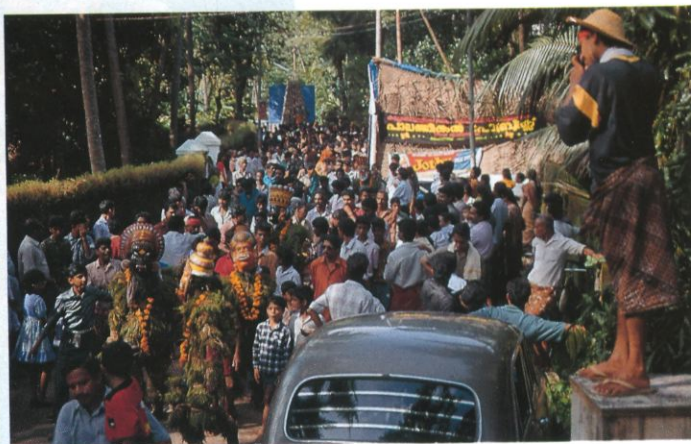
It was mid-afternoon and everywhere I went, I saw groups of young boys being prepared for the event. *Kummatti* as I discovered was the name of a type of green grass that was tied around the body of the performer. What was the real significance of covering the participant's body with grass never became clear to me since some said that it had medicinal value while others said that it only grew during this season. Whatever the reason, what was certain was the fact that this grass had lent its name to the dance form.

But the major attraction of *Kummatti*, however, are the masks that are donned by participants after the grass is tied. Very colourful, the masks included faces of an old man and woman, Ganesha, Hanuman, Narasimhan and other gods whose names sounded as strange as their faces looked bizarre.

These masks were carved out of wood and troupes vied with each other in bringing out the most appealing ones for the annual show. Paul said that once upon a time they were made from the dry outer covering of the plantain stem but because of their short life, they were now being made out of wood.

As soon as the troupe of 12 was ready, a band began to play setting the tempo for the festivities which were to follow. Before this however, a caparisoned ceremonial elephant arrived to complete some formalities before the dances began.

Meanwhile, a festive spirit had built up and then suddenly, it all became terribly confusing as a crowd collected and some women in white saris with open hair appeared from nowhere and began to sway in rhythmic trance to the beat of the drum. Men appeared carry-



ing a stylised wooden horse. Tribal people I was told, who were doing their own gig called *Kadiakalli*, unconnected with *Kummatti*. Then to confound the situation completely, a few men made an appearance wearing enormous masks typical of *theyyam*.

I was quite overwhelmed by the spectacle.

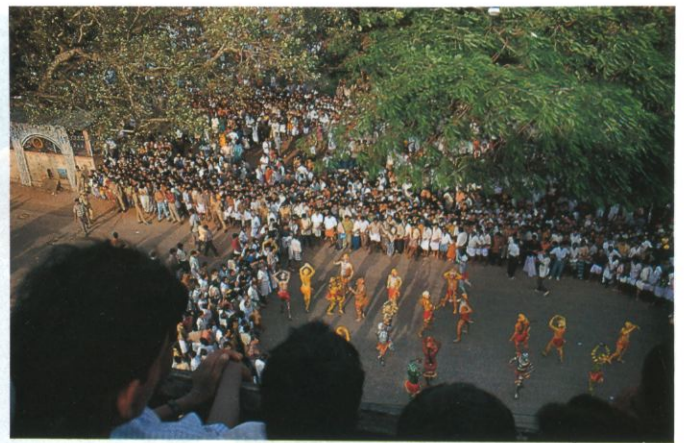
In a matter of minutes, a brief *puja* was done, joss sticks were lit, a coconut was split open and before I could register what was happening, the procession had started down the road!

Though I was quite happy with what I saw, Paul suggested that we rush off to another nearby village, Cheroor, to see yet another group. So off we went to the house of Govinda Menon, a man in his fifties, who had patronised this dance form for the last 26 years. It was in his house the young men had gathered to dress up for the

Kummatti dance. With the grass and the masks, the pattern was much the same, including the band. After they were ready, they all went to the nearby temple where amidst a lot of drum beating, fanfare and *puja* they set off dancing through the streets.

Lined by people, especially children, the streets gave a hype to the performer's dancing. And with the absence of any choreography, the dancing seemed more like an aerobic workout that employed a free style body movement to the beat of the drum. Stopping every now and then at intersections, I was told that the artist, well disguised by wearing a mask, often seized the opportunity to expose social evils and lampoon erring leaders, much to the delight of the audience. Paul said that earlier the dancers went from house to house in the neighbourhood where they were given gifts



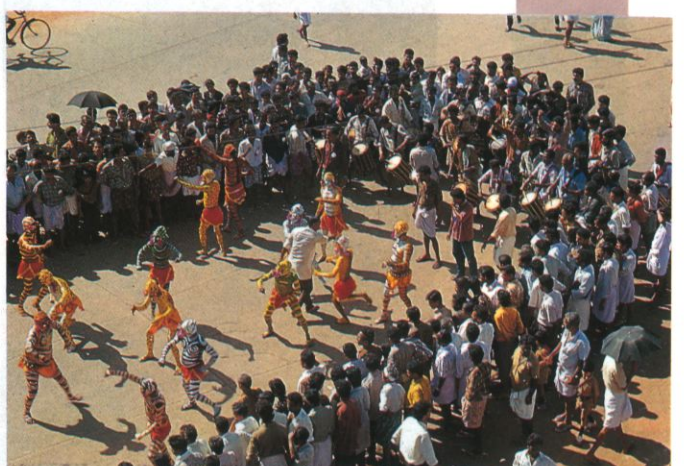
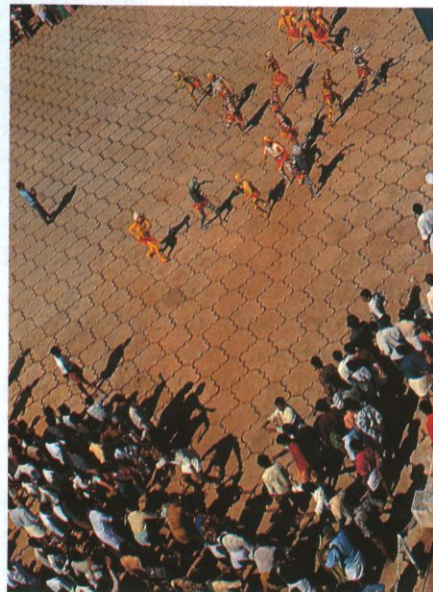


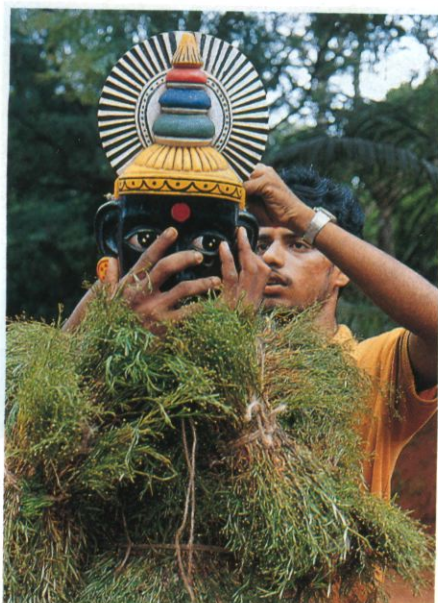
Vadakunnathan temple in Trichur during the *Onam* festival. Today, however, it has become more secular in character.

This was also the case with *Pullikalli* or 'Tiger Play' that is performed on the last day of the *Onam* week. Mr. Marar told me the curious origins of this street performing art which began towards the end of the 18th century. After the old State of Cochin came under British rule a battalion of 'native' soldiers was

of rice, coconut, paddy and clothes but donations were only made by some rich patrons.

As often is the case with folk performing arts, the origins of *Kummatti* are a matter of hearsay. And many stories abound wrapped in mythical imagery. There are some local songs that indicate the association of this art form with Shiva. Paul who has carried out an extensive research on *Kummatti* says that it was once customary for a Nair family to present this art form around the sanctum of the





stationed at Trichur which consisted mostly of Muslims who started *Pullikalli* as part of their *Moharram* celebrations. Not long after, this battalion was dismantled but the tradition continued with local Muslims and later gained favour with the Hindus who adopted it as part of their *Onam* celebrations. In days gone by *Pullikalli* used to be a riotous affair with the young participants dancing wildly but today it had become more disciplined with floats and tableau added to give it a 'cultural' look. Once again, the most important factor was that it was cosmopolitan in character with Hindus, Muslims and Christians all participating.

Paul very kindly agreed to take me to visit one of the *Pullikalli* groups the following morning. When I arrived around seven, I found a barber carefully shaving the body hair of the

participants. This I was told was the first step before painting the body could commence.

The painting session was in full swing with colourful tiger stripes and spots in bright orange, yellow, black and brown being painstakingly brushed on the young men's chests, backs, hand, legs and faces. But not everyone was made to look like a carnivorous feline. There were many men who were being painted over for just colour and design value, in phantom silver with black outlines or in a combination of chrome yellow and electric green.

Around three in the afternoon, the group of 15 young men came out of their makeshift green room and prepared to march on the street. An impressive line up of *chedda* drum players were also on hand to strike a deafening note.





After a *puja* the group got going through the neighbourhood towards the main roundabout in the heart of the city. It was definitely the drum beat that pulled people out of their homes to look at the colourful spectacle of passing 'tigers and leopards'. Keeping time to the beat, their dancing had more to do with rhythm rather than follow any rigid pattern. But I must admit, it had a

powerful primitive appeal nevertheless!

Slowly the group made their way to the Paramakkavu temple, where a huge crowd had gathered to see them dance. While others kept in tune, one member of the group went to the closed gateway of the temple and split open a coconut, propitiating the goddess within. Having paid their respects, the group now entered the Round Road of Tekkinakadu Maidanam which was full of a festive crowd of onlookers.

Meanwhile other *Pullikalli* groups from different parts of the city also began to enter the Round Road amidst a lot of din. They were all headed towards the main entrance of the Vaddakunathan temple where they would converge in a grand finale. Crowds lined either side of the road to cheer on the groups. I pushed my way through the mad throng to rush on ahead and take a vantage position on top of a building for a wider view. One by one the groups began to arrive, some dancing on the street below while others came riding mini trucks and floats. All of them however, were quite imaginatively painted to resemble tigers and leopards. Soon there was confusion as the traffic came to a standstill and I did not know what was happening.

I came down the street hastily and was immediately overwhelmed by a sea of humanity. Everybody was out to celebrate the last day of the *Onam* celebrations. So was I. Abandoning any further effort to chase my story, I quickly got lost in the crowd.

