

Kathakali [UPSC Art & Culture Notes]

The Indian subcontinent thrives in the midst of unity in diversity and culture adds to the essence of its philosophy reflected through a spectrum of art forms binding people across the nation.

Kathakali is an evolved dance form popular in the South Indian state of Kerala. This Indian classical dance involves storytelling activities through fascinating footwork and expressive gestures of face and hands accompanied by music and vocal performance. In this article, you can read all about Kathakali, which is an important part of the art and culture section of the [UPSC syllabus](#).

Kathakali Salient Features

The literal meaning of the term Kathakali is 'Story-Play'.

- It is a form of art that evolved from many socio-religious theatrical forms which existed in the ancient times of south India.
- **Chakiarkoothu, Koodiyattam, Krishnattam and Ramanattam** are a few ritual performing arts of Kerala which exert a direct influence on Kathakali in its form and technique.
- The ancient martial arts of Kerala also have an influence on this dance form.
- Kathakali can be observed in the temple sculptures in Kerala and the frescoes in the Mattancherry temple of approximately the 16th century.
- It is a blend of dance, music and acting along with themes based on Indian epics.
- The art form consists of the four aspects of abhinaya - angika, acharya, vichika, satvika and the Nritya and the Natya aspects.
- The gestures form an alignment with verses known as 'padams' that are sung.
- Kathakali draws its textual origin from Balarama Bharatam and Hastalakshana Deepika.
- The literature of Kathakali (Attakatha: story of dance) is written in a mixed language called Manipravalam that consists of Sanskrit and Malayalam.
- The plays used in Kathakali are derived from Hindu epics like the Mahabharata, Bhagavata Purana, Ramayana.
- Over a period of time, it was found that the religious theme for Kathakali was losing ground. Therefore, many secular themes were adopted for the plot.
- Stories like Kalyana Sougandhikam, Duryodhana Vadham, Nalacharitham have been taken from Mahabharata and used as plots for the dance performances.

Nalacharitham

- It is one of the most popular Attakatha in Kathakali literature and was written by Unnayi Varrier.
- This story takes its excerpts from Mahabharata and deals with the love story of Nala and Damayanthi.
- It narrates the highs and lows of the life of both the central characters with a prime focus on the

challenges posed by a character named Kali who also loved Damayanthi and desired to possess her by killing Nala.

RITUAL PERFORMING ARTS INFLUENCING KATHAKALI

- **CHAKYAR KOOTHU:** A PERFORMING ART OF KERALA CONSISTING OF MONOLOGUE WHERE THE PERFORMER EXPOUNDS THE STORIES FROM THE EPICS.
- **KOODIYATTAM:** A COMBINATION OF SANSKRIT THEATRE WITH ELEMENTS OF KOOTHU WHICH IS AN ANCIENT ART FORM OF THE SANGAM ERA. IT HAS BEEN RECOGNISED BY **UNESCO AS MASTERPIECE OF THE ORAL AND INTANGIBLE HERITAGE OF HUMANITY.**



Kathakali Costumes

Kathakali dance incorporates a detailed ornate costume, face masks, headdress and brightly painted face.

- The make-up code identifies characters of the acts, classifying them as sattva (goodness, virtuous), rajas (passion, egoistic) and tamas (darkness, viciousness) which are part of the theory of personalities originating in the age-old 'Samkhya' school of Hindu philosophy.
- Vellathadi or the white-bearded character denotes Hanuman and the performer wears the costume of a monkey.
- The costumes include seven fundamental make-up codes:
 - Pachcha - Green coloured make-up is applied with a red lip colour that depicts gods, sages and noble characters like Shiva, Krishna, Rama and Arjuna.
 - Minukku: Depicts virtuous and good female characters like Sita and Panchali.
 - Teppu: Special characters like Jatayu and Garuda are decked up with teppu make-up.
 - Kari: It is the code for hunters and forest inhabitants.
 - Tati: Depicts evil characters like Ravana.

- Pazhuppu: Ripe
- Kathi: Denotes knife

Instruments and Music:

- The Kathakali dance performance includes varieties of instruments like drums of three types such as 'Idakka', 'Chenda' and 'Maddalam'.
- Sopana Sangeetham tradition is followed in the Kathakali music.
 - It is said that the Sopana Sangeetham involves the singing of the Ashtapadis on the flight of steps leading to the sanctum sanctorum.
- Glimpses of Carnatic ragas can be observed in Kathakali music.
- Chempada is a musical tone used for the depiction of combat between good and evil and a concluding scene.
- Adantha musical tone is played during the virtuous and divine scenes along with Muri Adantha that is played during comic and light-hearted acts.
- Scenes involving teachers and sages are beautified by Tripura music.
- Panchari is used during scenes of unusual situations and Chempa portrays clash, argument, tension and discord between lovers.

Kathakali Latest News

The Prime Minister expressed his grief over the demise of the noted Kathakali dancer Ms. Milena Salvini. Milena Salvini will be remembered for her passion towards Indian culture and for her priceless efforts to promote Kathakali dance across France.

- Milena Salvini was an Italian born French exponent of Indian Classical dance.
- She was awarded the Padma Shri in 2019 for her significant contributions towards the enrichment and promotion of Kathakali.
- She obtained a scholarship to train in Kathakali dance at the Kerala Kalamandalam. Under the aegis of [UNESCO](#), she established a tour by the Kathakali troupe of Kalamandalam.

Important Points:

- The Kathakali dance begins with kelikottu which calls for the audience's attention followed by todayam.
 - In the introductory part of the performance, prayers are rendered to the almighty.
 - Kelikottu is accompanied by melodious coordination of drums and cymbals along with purappadu which comes as a sequel to this.
 - In melapaddu, the musicians and drummers exhibit their skills entertaining the audience.
 - Tiranokku is the debut on the stage that offers the introduction of the characters of the play after which the play begins.
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