

## Foreword

Our myriad and beautiful land is as ancient as it is modern. Moving as time has moved across the threshold of the past. For many thousands of years, people from far and near have streamed into our world and become one of us. Travelers, learners, conquerors, occupiers, merchants, teachers and preachers, poets, plunderers, scholars, kings, musicians, dancers, and brilliant wise men and women who carried many religions, ideas, beliefs, thoughts and philosophies. They have all crossed into our shores. People of many places and of many races have woven their customs, traditions, and beliefs into a continuous and intricate pattern of culture with abundant creativity, beauty and a plethora of arts and crafts. Together, their minds have imagined ideas and built schools of thought. They have written poetry, sung songs, penned great epics, and created wondrous art for over thousands of centuries and perhaps longer. And they have shared, taught and bequeathed as history has across time to this very world we live in today.

Across the pages of the past, all successful cultures, without exception, have worked tirelessly to retain their individual values and 'vibrancy' in every sense is the core of our sensitivity. 'Art' is the mirror of people. It is the identity of who they are and what they say. It is in the stories they tell and in the songs they sing. It is their unsaid identity of who they want to be.

It is in this important context of history and development, that we look at one artist and teacher whose pioneering work in classical dance, ritual dance, theatre and folk art in our nation has written its own history for the present, and for the future.

Shri Venu's life and body of work is seminal. It is astonishingly wide and to the discerning observer, it is evidently obvious that there are few parallels to the breadth and depth of his life's work. A humble man, from a simple background inspired by an exceptional father who kindled the flame that was later turned into a blazing fire of creativity and commitment through the guidance and work of extra-ordinary teachers and a few visionary artistes who recognized his potential. There have been many who have worked with one subject and one art form, but perhaps few who have straddled so many worlds and imprinted an indelible mark on all of them.

This book is a story of determination. It is a rare chronicle of a lifetime in art and lays bare a man of tremendous tenacity. Shri Venu carries within him a vision and commitment loved by many. He can be shockingly original, curt and clear. He can be irrefutably correct, fearless, and determined with the focus of a hawk. These qualities, he embodies with the nobility and grace of a swan.

Through his six decades and more in the passing of time, he has put forward a collective body of work in art curation, training, styling, preservation, and documentation of classical arts of Kerala that has hardly seen a parallel. When one looks through the pages of this inspirational life, it is a journey of discovery. It is a voyage of passion and a deep sentimental commitment to learning, understanding, teaching, documenting, and preserving art.

One recalls the long-forgotten story of the early Chinese Buddhists who intended to travel to India in search of knowledge and wisdom. It was said that one such traveler faced a total of no less than 86 obstacles in his quest to reach India and was at last awarded with the illumination of her grace and benefaction.

Shri Venu's quest has been much the same through his life and as the traveler did long ago, he too has stepped into the light of his own endeavors. It is evident in his work, his books and in the generation of artistes he has inspired. One can only wonder at this man who was initiated in Kathakali by the brilliant maestro Keerikaatu Shankara Pillai, the only son of the immortal Guru Kochu Velu Pillai, one of the greatest performers of the Kathakali from the south of Kerala and a seminal master of the elusive art of 'netrabhinaya'. The only parallel this Guru had was the legendary Thottam Shankaran Namboodiri – Kathakali Guru of the inimitable Uday Shankar.

It is also notable that both Kochu Velu Pillai and Thottam Shankaran Namboodiri were trained by Mathur Kunzhupilla Paniker, whom Mahakavi Vallathol Narayana Menon himself had conceived to be perhaps the most suited to establish 'Kerala Kalamandalam' in 1930 before he finally achieved it with Pattikkathodi Ravunni Menon.

Thottam Shankaran Namboodiri himself had been initiated into the art of 'Netrabhinaya' by legendary Chakyar family who were masters of the closely guarded and protected craft. This was the backdrop upon which Shri Venu's journey in Kathakali began at the age of 10, in southern Kerala in the little town of Nedumangad although the family home was originally at Paapanangodu near Thiruvanthapuram. It was in this tiny town that Shri Venu first witnessed a Kathakali performance of 'Narakasuravadham' that fascinated him and set him on his journey of discovery that continues to this day.

Where did the dream emerge from and how did it evolve?

These questions were answered through simple and ordinary beginnings which were to shape the future that was to come. An exceptional father Chitoor Goaplan Nair who was a painter, photographer, singer, and an instrumentalist. After nearly two decades of study under the artist Manakkatu Ramakrishna Ashari, he specialized in portrait painting and breathed life into numerous canvases turning them into works of art. This atmosphere, nurtured by a warm, caring and generous mother, Smt. Sumathikutty Amma led to a theatre space at home where anybody with an interest in dance, music or theatre got a chance to perform without question or comment. Is it perhaps in the absence of pretense that one starts to see genuine art start to take shape?

A belief that is close to Shri Venu's heart and mind, and one that he explains eloquently, is the truth that Indian classical arts are best nurtured and crafted under the 'Gurukula' tradition. That is where the student or shishya internalizes the art into his or her blood. The bond of enlightened understanding of the art strengthens and infuses it with a fragrance and life that lasts until his or her own passing. This is a tradition which seems elusive and almost impossible in these days of urgency and immediacy.

Following his initiation, Shri Venu's study of observance followed under the master pioneer Guru Gopinath whose personality and insight induced in him an inner strength and belief. Later, his sojourn to Delhi and his friendship and years of association with O.V. Vijayan, the novelist and cartoonist influenced his mind and thought process. This was the spark that kindled the flame of documentation in his own mind and what followed from thereon is history.

Shri Venu's original system of notation began with a pencil, a notebook and a huge wall of obstruction that he had to scale. He achieved that with sheer belief and conviction. Fascinated by the experience of learning, his notation system started to take shape and his need for validation came in the form of the unforgettable K.C.S. Paniker, the unparalleled modern painter, sculptor and art evangelist who was impressed with the work and urged Shri Venu to continue his endeavor. What followed was the first publication of his work through the visionary inducement of respected N. V. Krishna Warriar, then Director of the Language institute of Thiruvananthapuram who was also at the time, editor of 'Mathrubhumi'.

Shri Venu's 'Alphabet of Gestures in Kathakali' was published in 1968 and there was no looking back. He needed to explore further, and this meant moving out of the geographic confines of Kerala and this he did as a Kathakali teacher under the ministry of the Madhya Pradesh Government with a post in Bhopal. This exploration was to be another turning point and a new direction. An accidental meeting with the mind of Shri Ashok Vajpayee, the Secretary of the Dept of Culture, changed everything. It was Shri Vajpayee who first saw the potential of Shri Venu's work and set him free to pursue his quest and belief in the importance of 'documentation' for the benefit of posterity.

The Madhya Pradesh sojourn was to also bless Shri Venu with an incredible meeting with Baba Allaiddin Khan who was perhaps better known as the Guru of the Great Ravi Shankar in the obscure village of Maihar. 'Baba', as he was better known, was a centenarian by then and the greatest Hindustani musician, performing artiste and music Guru of modern India.

While at Bhopal, Shri Venu was also introduced to the world of puppetry by Devidhar Samer of Rajasthan and travelled with him to understand the value of the art of puppetry and its possibilities. This introduction inspired him later to visit Kunathara near Shoranur where he met with Ramachandran, Lakshmanan and Vishwanathan, all of whom were performers who had diligently carried and kept alive, as best they

could, a dying art form of Kerala known as 'TholpavaKoothu'. This was to inspire Shri Venu to execute a monograph on the form, which today serves as a record and evidence. This paper now looks to be the only source of information on this old art form - past, present and perhaps the future too.

Later, through his time and association with artists of Krishnattam, Shri Venu first set foot outside of India through the benefaction and vision of an extraordinary French connoisseur and supporter Marie Petoit who organized a highly successful tour of Europe.

Upon his return, it was a brief stop at the provincial town of Trichur one evening, while on his way to the temple town of Guruvayur that an extraordinary set of events and a new history was about to unfold. Shri Venu decided to attend the last day of the annual festival at the famed Vadukunnathan temple. That evening, with just a handful of people in the audience, Shri Venu witnessed his first Koodiyattam performance on stage by the legendary Guru and performing master Ammanur Madhava Chakyar in the role of Ravana. He was spellbound and the experience, quite literally, changed his life from thereon. The art of 'breath control' and the fascinating world of Koodiyattam had found its way to Shri Venu and it was there to stay. His association, sincerity and relentless pursuit of the great Guru finally saw Shri Venu being accepted as a shishya and from there on his association with Guru Ammanur continued until the day of the Master's passing. Shri Venu was to be not just a disciple of the art and the Guru but also helped to found the Ammanur Chachu Chakyar Smaraka Gurukulam at Irinjalakuda.

Documentation of the teaching of Koodiyattam had hitherto been closely managed by the Chakyars and it was Shri Venu who first received a thirteen-page writeup from Guru Ammanur written by the hand Painkulam Rama Chakyar who explained the dissemination process of the art of teaching and training of the ancient art and the sensitivity of its craft.

The document became the foundation of the learning experience and became the seminal guide to the teaching of the form.

Shri Venu trained under Guru Ammanur, and Guru Parameshwara Chakyar. These two bothers along with Painkulam Rama Chakyar were the visionaries who had established the first Chachu Chakyar classical training institute for Koodiyattam as early as 1920 long before any formal study of any art form through an established institution existed anywhere in Kerala.

After Koodiyattam, Shri Venu's insight into the rare and UNESCO preserved art form of 'Mudiyettu' caught his discerning eye which manifested into a close association with Pazhur Kucham Marar and Pazhur Damodaran Marar. This association led to the introduction of the art form at the National Centre for Performing Arts (NCPA) and, along with the support from Smt. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, toured several other cities opening the minds of many to the age-old art form and its origins.

This journey of discovery was further embellished when Shri Venu's keen insight identified yet another dying art form of Kerala, 'Kakkarshi Natakam' which was a folk-art tradition performed by simple gentry and thrived on passion and spontaneity. Through Shri Venu's efforts, principal practitioners of the time Shreedharan Asan and Govindan Asan received the recognition that had previously eluded them and led to the art form being recognized, understood and ultimately preserved in documented memory.

Through his world of vision, Shri Venu's companion, on his journey of discovery, has been his partner in life and in art, Smt. Nirmala Paniker herself a Guru of Mohiniattam, an erudite scholar and teacher of great repute. Among her five published books, her work on the notation of Mohiniattam serves as an education guide to teachers, students and artistes alike.

It was inevitable that these two creative thinkers would combine to produce an artiste of the caliber, strength and dedication of their daughter and disciple Kapila Venu who carries the past forward brilliantly and is today a respected name amongst Koodiyattam artistes of India and the world.

In the context of the world stage, Shri Venu's work with the great visionary Director Peter Skarsen in Copenhagen led to the work with the world theatre project. This was a combined vision with Manuela Seuru from Mozambique, Henry Maya from Sweden, and Ma Khey from the Beijing Opera.

Their workshops in China, Africa, Japan and Korea documented world theatre – a feat not achieved by any other group in terms of sharing creative ideas. Their work claimed its place on the world stage and the story continues. The Theatre Project apart, Shri Venu's association with Eberhard Fischer who was an art historian, Director of the Reitberg Society in Switzerland and a scholar of miniature painting is also critical and it is in the synthesis of this 'global vision' that the soul of art is preserved.

Shri Venu's work with the Intercultural Theatre Institute of Singapore is also one where he has left an indelible mark as a visiting faculty. He has also maintained a long association with Amsterdam based Ludwig Pesch, a Carnatic flautist, friend, supporter and himself an illustrious alumnus of Kalakshetra. Ludwig Pesch is the author of the hugely informative Oxford University Press publication 'An Illustrated Companion to South Indian Classical Music.' On the national scene, Shri Venu's many years of association with the National School of Drama at New Delhi has strengthened the capabilities of several stage and screen personalities of today through his lectures and camps on the study of 'Abhinaya.'

Shri Venu's vision is clear as it is unique. His belief is in the continuity of every tradition in art. Not as an ancient form to be regarded as a relic but to be understood, studied and nurtured as our identity and as contemporary 'spirits' that are within our culture and tradition. They are a part of who we are as people. His intent is one of regeneration and continuity for the art forms to live, breathe and grow. His mission is one of preserving performing art traditions with a focus on research, training,

innovation and performance. His six decades of work with notation alone has produced over 2400 plus variation of 'mudras' and annotated the same number of physical communication keys that will help dancers and scholars for generations to come.

The distilling of art education, sharing of knowledge and dissemination of a timeless tradition is best evidenced in Shri Venu's work on his now legendary 'Navarasa Sadhana' workshops that are now attended by dancers, theatre artists, writers, actors, rasikas and even simple folk who carry a deep interest in the art of abhinaya.

This unique program of study equips each participant with the understanding of the concept of abhinaya through all the experience of Indian classical theatre broken into elements and is explained and taught as a full-fledged training session spread over weeks that include 9 'Sthayi' Bhavas, 33 'Vyabhachari' Bhavas, along with their 'Satvika' delineations, and the related 'Anubhava' experiences associated with them. These workshops are engaging and evolved learning experiences developed through a distilled process developed after decades of thought, planning and preparation. Over the decades, over 700 performing artists have attended and trained under Shri Venu through his 'Navarasa Sadhana' workshops. These include artistes from the fields of Bharatanatyam, Mohiniattam, Kuchipudi, Odissi and Kathak. Numerous film and stage personalities have also pursued the astute training under him and benefitted immensely.

Time is related to everything creative and active, and life itself carries an ever-present opportunity. It is fascinating to see the relationship between the past and the present shaping an invisible future. As in life, art has to maintain its own character and individuality. That is what defines our identity and for an identity, we need a history – and that is the life's work of Shri Venu.

Much like the continually supported research and preservation work at the 'Smithsonian Institutions' across the United States or the British Museum in the United Kingdom and many other bodies around the world, the work of dedicated research, performance, and documentation along the lines of what Shri Venu has achieved is remarkable!

While the former two are historic institutions, Shri Venu is just a single individual whose lifetime of work is of national importance. His 18 published books on art, dance, and theatre art forms alone singularly stand apart from many in terms of documented thought.

If research and preservation programs are to survive time, there requires to be within the system an outlook and a plan that supports and nurtures a continual environment. Governments and art organizations need to identify and organize direct 'research' related funding to projects of national importance so that they can give birth to a self-fulfilling stream of creative endeavor. Financial assistance is clearly a necessity and rather than take a long and scenic path through bureaucratic channels, creative art funding should go directly to the artists and researchers.

A direct 'Government to Artist' path would be quicker, easier to manage, simpler to evaluate and the benefits more meaningful. A long-term funding of projects such as Shri Venu's work and many unknown others across India would benefit the history of our arts and their preservation immensely. Thanks to the documented work of Shri Venu, the truth is that we are 'aware' of the importance of the journey into the past of these arts it helps to be retained in memory. Our national artistic universe needs to remain committed to it.

It will require inspiration, commitment and perseverance - but what it will do is create tools and lasting material for artists, researchers, performers and most of all students. Over time, the conviction in thought and action alone will pave the way for a proud future.

This book and the history within it today, belongs to all of us. It is a living legacy that needs to be recognized and it needs to continue to live on. A life's work like that of Shri Venu is the sincere sentinel of what should be and how it should be – without compromise. His is a life of example, belief and commitment. His work is a reminder to us each day and hour. It is a beacon of tireless effort and relentless pursuit and it is up to each of us to protect and nurture the sanctity of that spirit.

When the pursuit of great art and a commitment to its preservation gets into man's system, when he is surrounded with the learnings of the past, the experience of the present and an imagined vision of the future, when he is focused on that and that alone all through his life through tireless work that he has paid for with his conviction, he is a spirit who paves the path ahead for our posterity.

As the decades pass, the life work of Shri Venu will continue to close the gap of time, keeping alive not just the art but also the collective memory of what was, what is, and what will be. History is happening and being passed to us.

For generations who will follow this one single spectacular life, this book is a repository of a memory.

One that cannot be erased, one that cannot be ignored, and one that cannot be forgotten.

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*His personal passion however is in art history and over three decades and more he has accumulated a vast repository of material on world history, literature, dance, art, music, film and theatre.*

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