

FRIDAY REVIEW

Endowed with divine talent

Koodiyattom exponents, Madhavan Chakyar and his disciple, G. Venu, were recently honoured by Dakshina Chitra. KAUSALYA SANTHANAM meets the award winners.



“Abhignana Sakuntalam”... enacted by the Koodiyattom artistes at Dakshina Chitra. — Pic. by S. R. Raghunathan

THEY COMPLEMENT each other perfectly: the master who is a dedicated performer of an ancient, sacral art form and the man who introduced him to the outside world. [Guru Ammannur Madhava Chakyar](#) and his sishya-researcher [G. Venu](#), are getting ready at the **Dakshina Chitra** to receive the **virudhu** for lifetime achievement in the folk performing arts. While the 88-year-old [Madhava Chakyar](#) is the senior most practising exponent of **Koodiyattom**, — the oldest surviving Sanskrit theatre tradition in India — [G. Venu](#) is the moving spirit behind the revival of many traditional forms including **Pavakathakali**, (glove puppets) and **Tholpavakoothu** (shadow puppets) of Kerala.

Despite his frail appearance, the veteran [Chakyar](#) is alert to every question that is being asked while [Venu's](#) wife [Nirmala Paniker](#), a dancer, acts as an interpreter. "I was five when along with the other children in the family I started learning the art through observation. We would watch the artistes get ready for the performance and assist them — grinding the stone to obtain the paste for the make up and getting the palm leaves ready from which the **kaajal** is applied. Formal training was imparted by our uncles — as you know it is a matriarchal system — from the age of 7-11. But one never stops learning and one practises all one's life," he says with a twinkle in his eye. No wonder for he has performed continuously for 76 years! "At seven we started chanting the dialogue in the typical Koodiyattom style." The [Chakyar](#) had only a few years of formal schooling. "He was keen to learn English but the elders did not allow him to as it would affect the special intonation of the **vacchaka**," says [Nirmala](#) and he nods regretfully.

Older brother [Parameswara Chakyar](#) was a wonderful guru.

By 13, the young [Madhava](#) was fluent in Sanskrit, Malayalam and the old Tamil called Nambiar Tamil. Each family has a different style and the **Ammannur paksha** is noted for linking emotional expressions to breath control, a technique that was evolved by a ruler of [Kodungallur](#) who researched the tradition in depth.

"This is the golden period for **Koodiyattom**, especially after it

was recognised recently by the **UNESCO** as 'a masterpiece of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity' "[Venu](#) joins the conversation. "There is public patronage for the art and numerous artistes have emerged from the training school which we have set up in [Irinjalakuda](#)." [Venu](#) also initiated a research and performing centre

— [Natanakairali](#) — in 1977.

It was in 1974 that [Venu](#) saw [Madhava Chakyar](#) (54 years old) perform at the [Vadakkunathan \(Siva\) temple](#) in [Thrissur](#).

Koodiyattom was going through a slump as there was no help from the authorities and [Madhava Chakyar's](#) performance was only seen in the temple by a few people.

Once patronised by the kings, the art form went through a period of neglect during the British rule.

[Venu](#), a trained **Kathakali** performer, who had become deeply interested in researching the ancient art forms and had travelled all over the country, was stunned by the divine talent of the performer, "This is what I was searching for." [Venu](#) was inspired to write numerous articles on him and he arranged a number of performances by the veteran. "[Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay](#) and [Kapila Vatsyayan](#) played a major role in encouraging **Koodiyattom**."

The divine spark in the [Chakyar](#) was recognised and he received much acclaim. He received the **Sangeet Natak Akademi award** in 1979 and other honours followed.

[Madhava Chakyar](#) performed in the festivals of India abroad and was conferred **Padma Bhushan** in 2003. [Venu](#) became his student and they formally established a centre to propagate the form which had been only performed in the **Koothambalam** in the temple. "I left all my engagements and became a full time secretary of the institution," says [Venu](#). "We now have young, world class artistes and our best performers are women.

We are interacting with world theatre. **Koodiyattom** has similarities with the **Noh** theatre of Japan." [Venu](#) has written 12 books on **Koodiyattom** and other performing art forms —mostly on notation.