

DEVOTED TO A DIVINE DANCE FORM

Noted koodiyattam artiste Kalamandalam Charu Agarar tells us about his passion for the art

Kalamandalam Charu Agarar



Charu as Soorpanakha in the play Ascharyachoodamani

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His sister Devi Chandana's face is as familiar to TV viewers as that of a popular actress. And his name, as unique as it is, is a popular one among the connoisseurs of Kerala traditional arts. For koodiyattam artiste Kalamandalam Charu Agarar has been performing across the State left, right and centre at renowned venues for the past few years. The 28-year-old, who will soon be back at Changampuzha Park in Kochi for another performance, is interestingly someone who landed in the world of art because he despised that of maths and physics problems like many students.

"My sister is eight years older than me. I grew up watching her getting trained in multiple art forms and preparing for youth festivals. Interacting with artistes and getting to observe them closer was a daily affair," says Charu, who hails from Alappuzha.

The youngster also used to learn a few of the art forms like chakyarkoothu with his sister even when he was very young. "Funnily enough, I don't even remember it, but my parents did and they say I used to perform very well." The guru under whom they trained was the noted artiste Margi Madhu. "He suggested to my parents that it would be good if I am well-trained in koodiyattam," Charu says.

Charu lived the life of a typical English medium school student till Class 7, when his parents asked him a life-changing question. "They asked whether I am interested in joining the Kalamandalam school, where there is a lot of focus on learning art forms, alongside the regular academics. As someone who was quite thoughtful about how maths and physics were turning into nightmares and the increasing course load, I was thrilled at the idea," he says, with a laugh. Maybe, Charu didn't realise that what awaited him was an even more hectic schedule at the institution, where the day started at 4.30 am.

"And as it was a residential system, we had classes even in late evenings and till Class 10, we had to focus on all the subjects like in the regular system. After that, the focus slowly shifts to the art form," says Charu. He completed schooling as the top scorer at the institution, and the winner of the Achutha Kurup endowment, after which he did a BA koodiyattam course from Kalamandalam itself. "All the while, probably without much of my knowledge, I was getting deeply attached to kood-



Charu, with Devi Chandana

iyattam, even beyond that of a performer-art form connection," recalls Charu.

He went on to do MA in theatre arts from Sree Sankaracharya University and is now also doing a PhD in the same from Calicut University. However, Charu is focusing more on koodiyattam, which he says, is his passion. The artiste has even staged 14 hour-long performances in places like Paris in 2016, which had made headlines.

"Five stories were strung together for it and the programme was coordinated by renowned French theatre personality Ariane Mnouchkine. Though the performance was only 14 hours long, our work stretched to about 28 hours with the six-hour make-up, elaborate stage and character settings, entries and the like. Regardless, every minute of it was worthwhile," recalls Charu, who is also the winner of awards like Kalpatharu Kalasamman and Nrithyanjali Award. Padmasri Kalamandalam Sivan Namboothiri and Kalamandalam Rama Chakyar are among the gurus of the artiste.

The name Charu Agarar can't escape questions on its origin, and here's the story. "My dad Vasudevan Pillai, a retired school teacher, writer and poet, wanted a name that goes well with that of my sister's. Agarar refers to Agarwood tree and Charu means beautiful. Agarwood is something commonly found alongside Chandana or sandalwood and 'akulum chandanavum' is even mentioned together often in Malayalam. And hence, my name," explains Charu, whose mother Jalaja is a retired banker. He also credits the incredible support of his family for being able to follow his passion for arts, from a young age.

Charu is preparing to perform soon in Dubai and also has shows lined up in Kerala but amid it all, he dreams to do more to take his art form closer to the younger generation. "Yes, it is tough, it calls for the understanding of Sanskrit and puranas to follow it, but I want to give it a contemporary conditioning to connect it better to today's youngsters, and I am working on the same. My sister and I also dream of staging a performance together, which has always been delayed due to time constraints. She is planning to take koodiyattam lessons soon and I hope sometime soon, we get to materialise it," he signs off.