

Kerala. Koothambalam is as sacred as the sanctum sanctorum of the main temple. And what is more, only men and women of the Chakyar community can perform Koodiyattam inside a koothambalam. Others are not usually allowed there.

But Gopalakrishnan was determined to cross these hurdles, and how he made the documentary reads like a sensational movie plot.

Once he had made up his mind, he began his search for the most impressive koothambalam. His hunt took him beyond Kottayam, and he saw koothambalams in Thirussur, Haripad, Irinjalakuda, and many other places. He was not quite impressed by these, till his journey took him to Kidangoor, a beautiful village between Kottayam and Pala divided by the Meenachil River. On the southern side lies the 1500-year-old Subramanya Swamy Temple in which Gopalakrishnan saw the finest of koothambalams. It was love at first sight in a very classic sort of way, and he decided that his documentary on Koodiyattam would be set there.

The temple is owned by a few Brahmin families, whose permission he sought and even received. However, when he was all set to begin his shoot, he got telephone calls from strangers who warned him against filming inside the koothambalam. A day before the camera was to roll, an ultimatum came: do not shoot there or face the consequences. Gopalakrishnan was prepared to do just that.

The Chakyars who had assembled there to perform were visibly nervous, and they advised their director to pack and leave, not to quarrel with the protestors, rowdies that they were. But Gopalakrishnan was not one to run away, and at almost midnight the day before work was to begin, he met the district collector, 'a nice young man', who asked the police to round up the potential trouble-makers.

A few hours later, the shoot began, but not before the cameramen were coaxed out of their hotel room, where they had closeted themselves hoping that their director would have packed up. The work progressed, and the documentary created history. The director of UNESCO flew to Thiruvananthapuram to watch the documentary, three hours in all, and so impressed was she by it that she at once made plans for the UNESCO board and jury to see it.

Originally, the documentary was ten hours long, but was later edited down to three. Of these, the UNESCO jury saw barely fifteen minutes and decided to honour one of the greatest oral traditions the world has ever known.

By the time Gopalakrishnan shot the documentary, he had a fair idea of this theatre, having learnt about it by watching innumerable performances. Appukkuttan Nair, founder of Margi (a centre for advanced training in Koodiyattam and Kathakali), renowned scholar of Koodiyattam and chief engineer in Kerala's Public Health and Engineering Department, was fond of him and began taking him to the shows, where he learnt the nuances of this art form and began appreciating them.

Adoor reminisces, 'I was not very close to Koodiyattam at that time. I had hardly seen any of it, and I did not care much, because it was too difficult to access this form. Once Nair asked me to go along with him to watch a concert. So I went with him.' Gopalakrishnan must have been greatly attracted to it, for he began to accompany him every Friday to watch this theatre. Gopalakrishnan gradually realized that Kathakali, an art form he had grown up with, was simpler

than Koodiyattam, and more popular.

Sitting on Nair's right at every Friday show, a special place that only the privileged were entitled to, Gopalakrishnan was initiated into Koodiyattam. It took a few years, but it happened, and his fledgling curiosity for it grew into a lifelong passion.

Koodiyattam has a set of rigid conventions: for instance, no performance can take place unless there is at least one scholar of this art seated in the front row. Yet Gopalakrishnan's documentary was screened to a jury that knew very little about this theatre. Maybe, nothing at all. There was none there initiated into it. No scholar of the art. However, it is in this scenario that Koodiyattam emerged from Kerala's languorous backwaters to be fêted and feasted upon in the global arena.

I really wonder how in the first place Gopalakrishnan made a mere three-hour documentary on a theatre that is unimaginably long: it takes fifteen to forty-five days for just a single act to be staged, and an epic like the *Ramayana* may well take a year to unfold. The UNESCO jury saw a mere fifteen minutes: maybe, they saw the most significant quarter hour. Or, was the documentary so well and tightly shot that every frame had the power to enslave a viewer?

Whatever it may have been, Gopalakrishnan's role in reviving Koodiyattam will be written in the annals of Indian art history.

He has two guiding principles before doing a documentary. He would take up a project only when he is fascinated by it, and the research he does himself goes a long way in helping him understand the subject in its most minute detail. And when the film emerges out of the cans, it wows us.

Like his latest, *Mohiniattam: Dance of the Enchantress*. Adoor says that he has been waiting to document this form for almost twenty-five years. This is more of a non-fiction feature rather than strictly a documentary. 'The traditional concept of a documentary has already undergone changes,' Adoor explains. It is more than just a record of events. It has gone beyond that. And his latest documentary does precisely that.

Although it does not work on the element of fiction, it has the appearance of one. But Adoor contends that he was merely trying to heighten 'a certain reality'. What is this reality: a girl, who is learning Mohiniattam from a guru. She is a dreamer, in love, waiting for him, longing for him. Gopalakrishnan interweaves this romance with the seductive appeal of the dance, and he choreographs it with such finesse that the images and music blend into rhythmic harmony. So perfect is the composition of each frame, so ethereally lit, that it begins to glow with supreme joy.

The girl's fantasy is portrayed with pain and pleasure: her wait, her union, her motherhood and finally her separation from the man she adored. At the end, we see her putting the baby to sleep with the lullaby, *Omanathinkal Kidavo*...

In contrast, we see her teacher—a single parent nurturing her little daughter and facing life's hurdles and handicaps. These seem pitted against her student's flight of imagination. The teacher is a great performer, and her student a passionate learner.

(Excerpted with permission from Penguin Books India from Adoor Gopalakrishnan: *A Life in Cinema* by Gautaman Bhaskaran, Viking, Rs599)

# A new perspective on Latin America

*What If Latin America Ruled the World?*  
By Oscar Guardiola-Rivera

By Richard Gott

Everyone knows that interesting things are happening in Latin America, though their exact significance is not always immediately apparent. Hugo Chavez of Venezuela has been around for more than 10 years and is still going strong; Lula of Brazil is just coming to the end of his second successful presidential term; Evo Morales of Bolivia has outmanoeuvred his internal (and external) opponents, and is now safely established; Rafael Correa of Ecuador is in charge of a secure and radical government, as is Cristina Kirchner of Argentina.

All of them, and 32 other countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, came together this year in Mexico to form "a community" of nations from "the South" that excludes the United States and Canada and challenges the existing economic and financial order controlled by "the North". While the world's richest countries have been trembling on the brink of bankruptcy and collapse, many of the formerly ignored governments of Latin America, firmly supported by mass mobilisations of their peoples, have been constructing a radical, local and sustainable alternative to the recipes imposed on them until the end of the 20th century by the false prophets of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). How and why did all this happen?

Oscar Guardiola-Rivera, a philosopher from Colombia who teaches at the University of London, seeks to make sense of this development in a book that ranges from the most obscure corners of prehistory to the most recent press cuttings of 2010.

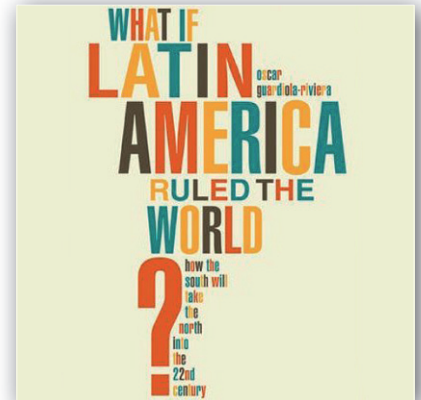
It is a large, rambling, anecdotal and ultimately confusing book, yet along the way it provides a handful of vignettes that illuminate and assist our understanding of an unfamiliar series of historical events.

He starts by recalling a time, long before the Aztecs and the Incas, when the indigenous inhabitants of the Amazon basin were agents of their own history. They were not the idealised peoples of European imaginings who lived in a prehistoric garden of Eden but a people who bent nature to their own purposes, creating canals and irrigation schemes and places above the water where large civilisations could flourish.

Owning their world in common, their daily struggle was to secure their survival in a sometimes unfriendly environment.

Guardiola-Rivera traces the significance of common land-ownership, through various examples elsewhere, including the Levellers in Britain and the Wampanoag in America, to the contemporary community battles in the Andes over land and water rights that have led to the electoral victory of Indian-backed governments in Bolivia and Ecuador.

He goes on to reflect on the development of European capitalism, constructed from the flows of silver from Mexico and the Andean silver mine at Potosí, and then writes, via an account of the independence struggles of the early 19th century, of the centrality of race in Latin American politics and the economy until today. This argument relies heavily on the recent pioneering work of George Reid Andrews and Walter Mignolo on Afro-Latin America, although Guardiola-Rivera brings his own specialist knowledge of Colombia and Panama to illuminate aspects of the story that



are often ignored in conventional histories of the continent.

The great mass of the peoples of Latin America are Amerindian and black, and their daily struggle has been (and still is) with the wealthy white elites, the heirs to the settlers from Europe, settlement having been vastly expanded in the 19th century.

Yet this internal struggle is also part of a wider battle against the white-dominated outside world, which controls the global economic system and its ancillary activities mining and plantations, the extraction of oil and gas that usurp the lands of the indigenous population.

Guardiola-Rivera delves finally into the recent history of development economics, praising the work of Ral Prebisch and his later followers at the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean. Much criticised during the years when the proponents of the neoliberal "Washington consensus" brooked no opposition, they campaigned for import substitution and later for endogenous development; it is their ideas that are now being revived by the new radical governments of the region.

Guardiola-Rivera also nods favourably in the direction of Che Guevara, whose unorthodox economic philosophy has recently been uncovered in a brilliant book by Helen Yaffe, *Che Guevara: The Economics of Revolution*, and towards the late Stafford Beer, the British cybernetician who gave Salvador Allende a helping hand.

So what of the title of the book? Here Guardiola-Rivera predicts the imminent Hispanic takeover of the United States, some time before the middle of this century. The US is already on the way to becoming a Latin American country, with the immense pro-immigrant marches of recent years in American cities resembling the huge popular mobilisations that have led to political change in Latin America.

Until recently, the Latinos in the US were perceived as the children of the white elites, refugees from the radical black and Amerindian governments in the south. Now, especially among those who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan, Latinos of a different complexion are beginning to look to the startling developments in their original homeland for political inspiration.

Do not despair, the book concludes. "There may be confusion, but there are in the world peoples who do not sit waiting for some priest to tell them where to go." These peoples, poor and oppressed, are motivated, at least in part, by "a memory of the lost commons of their Indian and African ancestors". This is a perverse and complicated book, but one that puts the solutions to the current economic crisis of the rich world into their proper global perspective. — Guardian News & Media