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MUSIC

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Kerala school rescues temple music

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The day at Kerala's temples used to begin with the sweet sound of the conch, but that was when people believed it a divine job to learn the temple arts and play before the presiding Deities of the temples. But, as happened with other temple traditions, a period of decline set in. Temples lost their properties following encroachments and the land reforms act, artists who were earning their bread by playing the percussion and other instruments found the job insufficient to sustain their families and shifted to other occupations. Managers found it difficult to run the temples without trained musicians to play the tavil drum and nagaswaram horn and to sing the divine songs before the sanctum sanctorum, leave alone to blow the early morning conch. To remedy the situation, the government opened the Kshetra Kala Peedum in 1982 on the premises of the famous Vaikom Mahadevar Temple.

The school of temple arts conducts three-year courses in sacred singing, nagaswaram and the playing of various percussion instruments including edakka, thimila, chenda,

maddhalam and tavil. Thirty new students are enrolled each year. They are provided free accommodations and pocket money. Only boys between fifteen and twenty who have completed high school may apply, and they are selected according to their aptitude in the arts, explained the school director, Dr. N. R. Eledom. Most take the training to secure employment, a few for the love of the divine job.

A graduate earns a beginning minimum monthly salary of ^{us} \$45.00 (Rs. 2000, a decent wage for a youth). There are about 3,000 temples in the state. Employment is easily gained. The boys are also hired by non-Hindu religious groups in Kerala who have introduced the playing of such instruments at their festivals. Besides, all the ceremonial functions of the government need traditional musicians, altogether creating many opportunities for supplemental income.