

# Coating the Surface: Folk Theatre As Ritual

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**Abstract** - This paper aims to provide an overview of some Folk Theatres in TamilNadu with special reference to *Terukuttu, Kattaikuttu and Natakam*. Theatre is an oldest form of Communication which is deeply rooted from India's vibrant culture. In many parts of India, Folk Theatres are also being performed in ritual. In TamilNadu, like all other states, folk theatre includes all other forms of literature and fine arts into music, dance, mime, painting, architecture and sculpture. These forms are mixed together and called as 'Natya' or theatre in English. Like all other live creatures, *Terukuttu, Kattaikuttu and Natakam* traditions also grow. Folk art is being used for conveying message to the people who are living in remote areas. This paper revolves around folk theatres although some folk theatres are giving contemptible entertainment; most of these dying art forms serve to amuse the people.

**Keywords:** Folk Theatre, entertainment, communication, natya

## I. INTRODUCTION

*Terukuttu, Kattaikuttu and Natakam* are some of the renowned theatre forms of common people in most part of Tamil Nadu. The performers of these art forms share similar social and cultural backgrounds and speak their native language. In the context of changing social and economic circumstances, the article discusses the challenges to *Terukuttu, Kattaikuttu and Natakam*, and also underlines the social and cultural significance of these art forms. All these art forms provide a powerful cultural medium of expression and that is more towards the entertainment and ritual/religious demands of its rural spectators.

Most of the folk theatres adapt the theme from either an epic, Mahabarata, or to some extent they comment and reflect their own stories. These famous episodes sometimes used to focus on current political and social issues as visualized by the underdogs. The supply of information, about the problems in the universe, through this kind of art form, is for people who are uneducated. Thus, folk theatres are mostly commonly for the ordinary people.

## II. GENRES

From the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, there had been terrorization due to the intrusion of British East India Company, Portuguese and Muslims. The kings too did not have harmonious mind to take an effort to carve message expressing their achievements in performing arts because of the severe war between the native and foreign intruders. Perhaps during the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Adiyaarkkunallaar gave an annotation to *Silappathikaaram* and he had quoted a poetic verse to mean that there were several folk performing arts in Tamilagam in his period and it is believed there are some folk performing arts might be in this land. The following list of folk performing arts are there in the poem:

1) *Sindhu*, 2) *Pizhukkai*, 3) *Santhi*, 4) *Kovunthi*, 5) *Kavusi*, 6) *Kuadpizhukkai*, 7) *Kanthan pattu*, 8) *Aalankaattuaanndi*, 9) *Parumannaadal*, 10) *Nellich*, 11) *Soola attam*, 12) *Thoondil attam*, 13) *Aanndiattam*, 14) *Vethaazh attam*, 15) *Komaazhiattam*, 16) *Paandipizhukkai*, 17) *Paamppaatti*, 18) *Sadaimuni attam*, 19) *Veeran attam*, 20) *Kaaman attam*, 21) *Magilsindu*, 22) *Vaamana attam*, 23) *Vigada Kathaiyadal*, 24) *Vaazh attam*, 25) *Papparappen attam*, 26) *Athasamparam*, 27) *Sangu kathai sollal*, 28) *Sithu adal*, 29) *Tapparai attam*, 30) *Manmathapaannam*, 31) *Kuravai attam*, 32) *Papparai attam*, 33) *Pithan attam*, 34) *Maanni Perumpizhukkai*, 35) *Katkazhi*, 36) *Kizhiyaanthattu attam*, 37) *Koththaparai attam*, 38) *Tholkoothu*, 39) *Kizhavan-kizhavi aadal*, 40) *Kizhupraandi*, 41) *Ammaanai*, 42) *Pandu aadal*, 43) *Kazhangaadal*, 44) *Aaliattam*, 45) *Kaazhi attam*, 46) *Virarkonthei attam*, 47) *Thani Vanndu attam*, 48) *Pitchi attam*, 49) *Saddathari*, 50) *Vidai attam*, 51) *Pidaari attam*, 52) *Thazhipaattu*, 53) *Sadhurangam*, 54) *Malaiyaazhi attam*, 55) *Vethaazha attam*, 56) *Vaanni attam*, 57) *Kuthirai attam*, 58) *Vedan attam*, 59) *Thalaiyil thiruvizhakku*, 60) *Kurathiyattam*, 61) *Pallaanguzhi*, 62) *Pagadi*, 63) *Baghavathi attam*, 64) *Vaazhveechu*, 65) *Avalidi*, 66) *Poorazhi*, 67) *Yoginichi*, 68) *Kunnalai koothu*, 69) *Thanthiyam*, 70) *Kalikoiyal*, 71) *Aiyanpattu*, 72) *Padupazhi*, 73) *Kanniyan koothu*, 74) *Kumbeedu*, 75) *Kunaattam*,

76) *Summaippu*, 77) *Sonaaga Manjari*, 78) *Ulaimai*, 79) *Paraimai*, and 80) *Varikkoothu*. Perhaps, analysis of these art forms is hardly known.

During the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries few folk performing martial arts became popular, of which few were already faded away and some are popular even in this milieu. Several Tamil researchers have found that *Kummi attam*, *Kolattam*, *Karaga attam*, *Oyil attam*, *Kurathi attam*, *Dhasi attam*, *Aali attam*, *Kaliyal attam*, *Therukoothu*, *Udukai Pattu*, *Kodangipattu*, *Kavadiyattam*, *Thappattam*, *Ethirkathaiyadal*, *Manthira Padal*, *Thol paavai* and *Kaduva attam* are being performed on the occasions of temple festivals and other rituals.

### III. THERUKOOTHU

Popular theatres in northern Tamil Nadu are *Terukuttu*, *Kattaikuttu*, *Nadakam* (or 'Drama'). Majority of the folk art forms are being performed by the low-caste, non-agricultural families. *Terukuttu* shows the lives of the ordinary people and let the audience to connect themselves with the play. Although the *Terukuttu*, exactly has a destructive edge, the entertainers cannot stand to be fundamental in the verbalization of their point of view for the fear of implied supporters. Economically, village communities are supporting the *Terukuttu*. Although we have many popular Tamil cinemas, rural people prefer to have the live performances on the occasion of religious village festivals. Perhaps *Terukuttu* performance also happens during funeral rites of important individuals. In general, folk art form provides a varied labour market and also reflects the local relationships.

### IV. NATAKAM

From the period of English Renaissance, drama started emerging in literature. Many acting companies were established. *Natakam* (drama, in English) was the standard means of well-known multi-media entertainment until the entrance of cinema in 1930s. It represents one of the modernistic theatres, emerged in India during the second half of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century. This art form is open to individuals and groups from different caste and religious backgrounds.

### V. KATTAIKKUTTU

Compared to *Terukuttu*, and *Natakam*, people believe that *Kattaikuttu* is on the border/extremity of dying. *Kattaikuttu* has its firm root from the urban-based middle classes and the arts establishment. Thus this art form is now considered as degraded from the flourishing tradition. The artists of this art perform in a local context and would not be able to establish professional companies other than very few. Perhaps, every newspaper or monthly magazines have special column for arts by mentioning the venues and dates. But they do not have or they are not publishing the venues and dates of *Kattaikuttu*. Why? Because we have very limited set of local audiences for this art form and it is the only the rural people who have lifted up *Kattaikuttu* as their own cultural expression. Like the dance performances by the rural Devadasis, the *Kattaikuttu* performances were the rights of a limited number of descendants. The usual amount was no longer adequate to engage the entire company of performers. This financial trauma played an important role among the performers to abandon the practice of *Terukuttu* and to focus more only on *Kattaikuttu*. Thus *Kattaikuttu* provides employment to people who are 'gendered' differently.

### VI. ARE THESE ART FORMS DEAD OR ALIVE?

The recognition of folk theatres requires some exposure as high cultural art form. In addition to publications about the *Terukuttu*, *Kattaikuttu* and *Natakam* in the popular press, the establishment of these art forms is merely based on the performances during cultural festivals. As they take place outside the local area, the context for all non-traditional audiences (educated and having refined tastes) are unexpressed and this gives them vague ideas. If these art forms take place in an open arena, then they do not provide to the audibility and admiration of the forms. In general the idea of degradation of these forms extends to the popular Tamil stage.

The function and causes will have to be determined with high responsiveness by taking the social, cultural and economic changes, in order to understand the nuances, status and vitality of popular theatres. The conventional image of folk forms seems to have been re-enforced by the rise of modern Tamil theatre movement (*de bruin*, 57). The idea of tradition exists not only among the contemporary folk theatre performers but also among the urban elite. The performers also compare the present situation with that of their forerunners, asserting that things have changed worse. Although this may be a psychological functioning to cope with the fastest changes, the present status of all

these folk theatres and some of the popular stage demands self-observation on the side of the arts establishment as well as on the side of performers, if the well-known forms are to remain alive in a respected and economically reasonable method.

## VII. CONCLUSION

Before focusing on the challenges to all these art forms, in particular, we should raise questions on in what way these art forms have something to offer to the society. Should we stand firm on keeping it alive? I think *Terukuttu, Kattaikuttu and Natakam* provide a powerful cultural medium of expression and that suits to the demands of the rural spectators. In *The Performing Arts and Development in India: Three case studies and a comparative analysis*, Ross Kidd observed that,

The plays grew out of the situations, experiences, and analysis of the actors who are themselves villagers... they create their own dramas out of their own collective analysis of their immediate situation and the deeper structures in which they are embedded. This is a genuine expression of the people. (*Ross, 117*)

Religious village festivals have different idea in which goddess plays a pivotal role to the well-being and welfare of the village and that are closely related to the agricultural cycle. Folk theatres face a breakdown in the transmission of the tradition. Due to the lack of financial supporters, the low social status of the profession and the lack of recognition in the society, have discouraged the youngsters from becoming folk art performers. This culminated in the inadequate trainers who know the dos and don'ts of the theatre and who can bring out a new generation of performers. Perhaps, some deny in transmitting the tradition and culture, and some growing with the caste issue. So, it is the hands and minds of people not to look at these art forms as caste based activity. Indeed we are all in educated lifestyle, and if we come forward to change the perspective, we can definitely change the system and provide a healthy lifestyle to the future generation.

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