Therukoothu: Theatre of the Mahabharata*

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Therukoothu, the rural folk threatre of Tamil Nadu, which is now confined to a contiguous area of Dharmapuri, North and South Arcot and Chingleput districts—traditionally known as Tondaimandalam—is a unique phenomenon, the like of which does not exist anywhere else in the subcontinent. The entirety of this theatre, the multifarious levels at which it operates, has not been known or made familiar even to the Tamils in general, much less to the outside world.

A virile and living festive expression, Therukoothu contains, layer upon layer, the cultural history of the Tamil country from ancient times. At various stages of its evolution, it has also absorbed windswept influences from other areas of the subcontinent. On the Therukoothu stage—the open field cleared of threshed-out paddy—one sees the tribal rituals of exorcism, hears the devotional hymns of the Shaivite poets of the Bhakti era (6–8 centuries), witnesses the enactment of the epic poems of Villiputhurar's *Bharatam* (14th century), sees intimations of Kathakalakshepam (brought into Tamil Nadu during the rule of the Naiks in the 16th and 17th centuries), and hears dialogues from plays written in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. One sees Kattiakaran (Bharata's *sutradhara* and *vidushaka* rolled into one) wax obscenely eloquent, lampooning anyone he fancies from Yudhishthira to the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu. All this might suggest an incongruous patchwork, but Therukoothu actually achieves a streamlike flow right from the time the villagers gather at the Draupadi Amman temple to hold their annual festival down to its conclusion on the 20th day with a fire-walking ritual. It is theatre, annual temple festival, rites of passage, fertility rites, and an act of community and private worship all at once.

As a form of worship, Therukoothu was born of the Mother Goddess cult. The tribal cult of hero worship extended to the epic characters of the

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Mahabharata, and Draupadi was deified and merged with the Mother Goddess and the guardian deity (*Kaval Deivam)* of the village. As theatre, Therukoothu is a *re*-enactment of the past, unfolding the present. The arena moves back and forth between the Draupadi Amman temple, the village tank, and the open field cleared for performance.

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There are large areas of commonality in the traditional theatrical forms of south India. It is possible that Therukoothu, Kathakali, Yakshagana, Teyyam, Bhutam, Mudiyettu and other forms had a common origin in a protoform before branching off as separate performances. Their resemblances are in make-up, theatrical practices, themes, ritualistic preliminaries, structural framework and nomenclature.

The first element of similarity is in the elaborate *aharya* many of these forms share among themselves: the tall headgears, the painted faces, the fluffy, flaring skirts stuffed with paddy straw (common to Teyyam, Kathakali, Mudiyettu and Bhutam), the large, high shoulder-plates—all exaggerated in order to visibly establish a character from a distance. The loud, large percussion ensembles in these theatres are also similar. Above all, they are distinguished by the ferocity, heroism, wrath and revenge of the dominant demonic and heroic characters.

For the rural audiences of Tondaimandalam, the enactment of the Therukoothu story is only a part of the comprehensive spectacle of the 20-day ritual. It achieves its goal when the actor, possessed, is able to make the audience share his experience. He is but an instrument in a larger scheme of propitiating the guardian deity of the village, Draupadi Amman. It is this perception that has helped Therukoothu survive to this day. Draupadi Amman gives the ritual its life.

We do not know when the Mother Goddess of Tondaimandalam became Draupadi Amman. But we do know of many guardian deities like Kamakshi of Kanchipuram (reminiscent of the pre-Aryan Kamakhya cult of Assam), Meenakshi of Madurai, Kanyakumari of Kanyakumari, etc. around whom myths were woven from the time of the Pallavas (7 century) —when the Hindu reaction against the spread of Jainism manifested itself. This reaction took the form of a resurgent movement to absorb the Dravidian gods and customs into the Hindu fold. We have references to these Mother Goddesses, fertility deities and guardian deities in the Sangam texts—written during the first two centuries of the Christian era—where they do not belong to the Hindu pantheon. The cult of the Mother Goddess is embedded deep in the Dravidian psyche. Thus, it would

Duryodhana in Therukoothu.

seem that the deity was incorporated in the Hindu pantheon when Hinduism asserted itself in the land. Apart from Draupadi, Yudhishthira—also known as Dharmaraja—and all the Pandavas are also idols of worship in the Draupadi Amman shrines. These shrines are known also as Dharmaraja *koil.*

There are varied local forms of ritualistic performances in south India based on or inspired by the Mother Goddess cult. These enactments are based on mythological stories of the local deity—Karagam, Kaniyan Attam, Kavadi, and the like. The manifestation of the deity through the performer is an integral part of many such rituals, like Teyyam and Mudiyettu of north Kerala and Bhutam of south Karnataka and Tulu regions. These shamanistic performances are accompanied by high-pitched rhythmic instruments, propitiatory songs, and dancing.

It is likely that Therukoothu emerged from these forms as Kathakali emerged from two different streams—classical Kudiyattam and the folk forms of Teyyam and Mudiyettu. Similarly the Yakshagana of Karnataka absorbed elements from Bhutam and its structural scheme from the Yakshagana dance-drama of Andhra, whose name it took later. But the point to be noted here is that Kathakali and Yakshagana refined themselves as theatre arts by snapping their shamanistic umbilical cord with the earlier folk forms. But Therukoothu did not. It retained the connection and built on it. The account of the 20-day-long festival that follows will show the palimpsest or collage that it is. Some versions of the associated rituals are still current in Teyyam, Mudiyettu and Bhutam performances in the neighbouring States.

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After the harvest is over the village elders decide to hold the Draupadi Amman festival, also called Bharata Vizha, and fix an auspicious day for its commencement. On the morning of the chosen day they gather at the shrine, collect the temple flags, sacred arms like swords and *trishul*, and go to the village tank in ceremonial procession accompanied by drums, the Nadaswaram or Mukhaveena. They bathe, collect water from the tank in pitchers and return to the shrine, where the ritual bathing of the deity (*abhishekam*) takes place. Then the deity is taken out in procession around the village. The procession terminates at the flag-pole of the temple and the sacred yellow flag is hoisted. The raising of the flag signifies a formal announcement of the decision to hold the festival. Even if there has been some discord in reaching a decision and the dissenters succeed in hoisting a flag undetected at night, the village has perforce to go on with the

celebrations. This is called *thirutu kodi*—flag raised on the sly. If this happens, the ceremony is repeated on the next new moon day, culminating in the raising of the true flag (*mei* or *unmai kodi*).

The mode of funding the festival is also decided at this time, each caste group coming forward to meet the expenses for different days of the festival. The money is collected from the members of the caste group according to their means. The same day, a traditional exponent of Villiputhurar's *Bharatam* is engaged for daily exposition of the epic and a Therukoothu troupe for the enactment. Both receive a token offering of money and *thamboolam*—betel leaves, areas nuts, etc. The beating of the Parai drum announces the commencement of the festival to the surrounding villages. These days, leaflets have largely replaced the function of the Parai.

On the first day of the festival, two important rituals—*karagam* and *kappu*—take place. The temple manager (*dharmakarta*), the temple leader (*kannachari)*, and three important heads *(kumara vargam)* are initiated as *kappukarar. Kappu* means 'to protect'. In the context of the ritual, it also refers to a band smeared with turmeric tied around the wrists of the *kappukarar.* The five participants in the ritual wear turmeric-coloured *dhotis* and remain in seclusion in the temple precincts; they have to abstain from sex, meat, toddy and narcotics. They are the principal *karagam* pot-bearers. Draupadi Amman is supposed to manifest herself in the Karagam pots. Hence, filled with water from the tank and tied with turmeric-coloured cloth, the *karagam* pots are kept in the inner sanctum of the shrine and taken out only in ceremonial procession. Once the *kappu* ritual is over, with the attendant recitation of songs in praise of the deity and other gods and goddesses, the *kappukarar* have to follow various prescriptions and proscriptions. It is obligatory for the temple *pujari* and Pambai drummer to join the band of *kappukarar.* Other heads of various caste groups also join the group. The *kappu* is tied on the *alagu kathi* (the ritual sword of the temple) and the Pambai too.

After the *kappu* ceremony, the procession starts again. The *karagam* bearers, accompanied by the ensemble of percussion and wind instruments, go around the village and, returning to the shrine, place the *karagam* pots in the sanctum sanctorum. The image of Draupadi Amman is then taken out in procession around the village.

When these rituals are over around noon, a procession is taken out from the shrine to invite the *prasangi* (exponent) from his house and take him to the specially erected and decorated *pavilion* near the temple. His *prasangam* consists of recitation of Villiputhurar's *Bharatam* right from *Adi Parva* with simple discourses explaining the moral teachings. On the tenth day of the festival, the wedding of Draupadi is the subject of discourse,

followed in the evening by the enactment of the episode by the Therukoothu troupe. This is the first Therukoothu performance in the festival, and the pattern holds till the conclusion of the festival on the 18th day with the exposition and enactment of *Duryodhana Vadham*.

Among the important episodes after Draupadi's wedding is the burning of the wax palace. Near the shrine, a hut of dry grass, straw, and coloured paper is constructed, representing the wax palace of the Pandavas. The whole village gathers to witness the burning. After a simple and brief ritual prayer, the hut is set on fire.

Soon after, the killing of Bakasura by Bhima is enacted. This involves the whole village. The Bhima performer (in the guise of a Brahmin) and the temple idol of Bhima (a terracotta figure) are seated on a bullock cart and drawn through the streets of the village. Bakasura walks alongside the cart, engaged in a fiery exchange of words with Bhima. At every doorstep, the cart is loaded with food and sweets offered by each household as its share. Draupadi Amman brings up the rear of the procession, accompanied by the beating of the Parai. The procession culminates with the killing of Bakasura and the distribution of the food collected among the low-caste poor of the village and the Koothu performers. By about nine at night, the scene shifts to the Therukoothu arena.

Before gathering at the arena, the performers go to the temple to worship Draupadi Amman and come back singing songs in her praise. The green-room is a thatched, enclosed area behind the performing arena—the open ground in front of the temple. Before the performers proceed with their make-up, they offer prayers again to the lighted lamp (*koothu villakku*), representing Draupadi Amman. The Mridangam is also worshipped. This *ranga puja* is a necessary preliminary to Therukoothu performance every day. Once the make-up is over, the percussion instruments are played. The beating of the drums is prolonged and at high pitch, running over the whole gamut of the major *talas*. This is the message to the surrounding villages that the Koothu is about to start.

After a series of songs of invocation to Ganesha and other gods, the performance begins. A curtain is brought in, held by two persons; this is called *thirai varudal* (curtain entrance). Behind the curtain is Kattiakaran who sings *thirai vriddam* (curtain songs) announcing his appearance on the stage. He then emerges from behind the curtain to introduce the day's play. Kattiakaran is there throughout the enactment as commentator and interpreter. He has the freedom to barge in any time and take on any role he wishes—for instance, he can casually pick up a cloth and stretch it across his shoulders to become a *sakhi*, exchange improvized dialogue, and throw off

the cloth to become Kattiakaran again. He is also the buffoon, with a broad sense of humour, and a narrator who appears frequently to recount what had happened before and to announce what is to follow. *Kattiam* means announcement, Kattiakaran meaning a herald. The proscenium theatre that emerged as *natakam* towards the end of the 19th and early 20th century lifted Kattiakaran wholesale from Therukoothu.

Behind the performance arena, the chorus of musicians and singers sits on a bench. The performers sing and deliver the dialogue from the script each troupe chooses to follow. The hand-written script is the personal possession of the troupe's director and head—mostly the family elder. Since the script is handed down from generation to generation, the troupe knows it by heart. However, the performers take a good deal of freedom to improvize dialogues. They also have a fair idea of the *ragas* and *talas* by virtue of years of stage practice. When a character sings, the chorus repeats the song. The chorus also participates in exchanges with the character on stage; these dialogues are improvized to emphasize and elucidate a situation.

The acting style of Therukoothu is as exaggerated as its make-up, high-pitched singing and delivery. The actors strut about the stage with violent thumping of the feet, throw their hands about, and execute fast pirouettes. The colourful make-up, the flaring skirts against the glow of oil lamps, and the music create an eerie, magical atmosphere for the audience gathered in the open field on moonlit nights. The festival begins on a new moon day.

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We may now go back to the first day's enactment—the tenth day of the festival. The episode is the wedding of Draupadi. It starts with *swayamvaram* in the palace of the king of Panchala. When the king orders the bow to be fetched, the enactment on the stage stops. It is past midnight now. Some performers dressed as *mallars* (the warriors/wrestlers talked about in ancient Tamil literature) go to the temple and fetch a 30- to 40-foot-long bow made of bamboo. This is the bow the assembled kings try to lift but fail, but Arjuna succeeds in lifting and shooting at his target.

The Koothu performance ends with the wedding of Draupadi. The marriage of Draupadi is celebrated once again the next day in the temple. An idol of Arjuna is placed by the idol of Draupadi in the sanctum sanctorum. All the marriage customs are observed including the tying of the sacred wedding thread (*thali*) around Draupadi Amman's neck. The idol is then taken around the village. Here again the guardian deity merges with

Draupadi Amman; the fusion of epic (*prasangi*), theatre (Therukoothu), and ritual (Draupadi Amman) is accomplished by the ritual. Similarly, when the episode relating to Subhadra's marriage comes up, the marriage ceremony is repeated with all attendant rituals and celebrations.

The most important part of the festival is the day of *Draupadi Vastropaharanam*. It must be remembered that Draupadi here is not just a character in an epic, but the guardian deity of the village. This accounts for the emotional outrage the episode evokes in the audience. When Draupadi is brought on the stage and is about to be disrobed, the enactment stops. Kattiakaran comes on the stage, sings in praise of Draupadi Amman, and prays for her forgiveness. He lights camphor and prays: "Mother, forgive us for what we do here. Bear with us as you did with the Pandavas. Have mercy, as we do it to fill our bellies." He gives the sacred *veeragandam* to Draupadi and Dussasana. When the disrobing of Draupadi begins, Draupadi screams for Krishna's protection. As the disrobing continues, the audience screams out "Govinda", "Krishna", and rushes to the stage to protect Draupadi. Many become possessed; those who are not control the situation. The Draupadi and Dussasana performers also become possessed and finally collapse on the stage.

Draupadi's sari is donated for the festival by the Idayar (cowherd) community of the village. It is their prerogative to make the donation because it was Krishna, a Yadava, who came to Draupadi's rescue. The Idayars also believe that by this donation they receive Draupadi Amman's special blessings.

On the 13th day of performance Arjuna's penance to obtain *Pashupadastra* from Shiva is enacted. In preparation for this episode, the villagers fell a tall palmyra tree, chosen before the start of the festival. The tree is trimmed and ladder-like steps of bamboo are fitted along the stem. A platform is erected on the top of the tree, which is painted all the way up in alternate stripes of red and white like the compound walls of south Indian temples. The pole is then lowered and planted in a deep pit near the Koothu arena. On the day of performance, the women of the village plaster it with cowdung and decorate it with *kolam*—floral designs with rice flour. The pole represents Mount Kailash, the abode of Shiva, which Arjuna mounts to perform his penance. On the night of performance Arjuna goes to the temple in procession, fully made up, worships Draupadi Amman, and returns to the arena. He takes leave of his brothers and walks towards the pole.

The childless women of the village now gather around the pole. They come after a ritual bath, still wrapped in wet saris and with flowers round their wrists. Carrying the *puja* offerings of coconuts, plantains, and betel

leaves, they go round the pole. Arjuna too goes round the pole thrice singing *vriddam* chants. These chants are drawn from various sources—from the songs of the Shaivite saints, from *Thevaram*, as well as more recent compositions in praise of Lord Shiva. Arjuna offers coconut, betel leaves, *bilva* leaves and flowers to Shiva on reaching the platform on the top of the pole. He continues singing songs in praise of Shiva. Finally Shiva appears in the guise of a hunter and a verbal duel ensues between Arjuna on the top of the pole and Shiva down below. When Arjuna comes to know the hunter is Shiva himself, he lights camphor and offers *puja* on the platform. As the *puja* offerings of flowers, *bilva* leaves, and *vibhuti* (sacred ash) begin to fall, the women standing around the pole collect it all in their saris. The day's enactment ends when Arjuna comes down and gets his *Pashupadastra*.

On the 14th day, the killing of King Keechaka is enacted with acrobatic fighting scenes which are extremely entertaining for the children in the audience.

The 15th day's episode relates to *Virata Parva*. On this day, the scene of action shifts to an open field on the outskirts of the village. The cattle of the village are driven to the field; the ceremonial procession also terminates there. After the *prasangi* has delivered his exposition Arjuna, disguised as a hermaphrodite, and Uttara Kumara of Virata arrive on the scene and pray at the altar of Kali. With the sacred sword (*bali kathi)* of the shrine, Arjuna fells a plantain tree placed there and drives the cattle to the safety of the village. Uttara Kumara runs up and down the field unmindful of the fleeing cattle. The whole village turns up to witness the enactment. The performance of *Virata Parva* is sponsored in isolation from the rest of the story in areas where the rains have failed. it is believed that the enactment of this episode ensures rainfall.

The episode of Krishna's mediation is enacted next. All the expenses for the show are met by the Yadava community as Krishna was a Yadava. Besides, all the Yadavas of the village carry sweets and food to the performing arena to be served to Krishna as the guest of Vidura. This episode is never sponsored in isolation as it ends with Krishna's failure to bring about a reconciliation between the two warring clans. It is believed that an isolated enactment of this episode would leave the village torn in strife.

The sacrifice of Aravan is enacted on the 16th day of the festival, preceded by ritual preliminaries. A huge 25-foot figure of Aravan is erected in front of the Kali shrine in the village. The head with Aravan's crown is separately made of clay; it is baked by the village potter and painted in the same fashion as other Therukoothu characters. The painting of the eyes is a

Bhima

ritual called *kan thirappu*. Aravan's head is carried in procession to the site near the Kali shrine where the huge brick body has been erected. It is a seated figure—legs crossed—holding a bow in one hand. After the head has been fixed on the body, the village priest arrives on the scene sword *(bali kathi)* in hand, escorted by two men: he is in a state of possession. The priest worships Kali and approaches the Aravan figure for the sacrifice. He goes round the figure and brings down his sword on a pumpkin smeared with vermilion to simulate blood. (In the past, goats used to be sacrificed in the ritual.) The 'blood' is then sprinkled on the body of Aravan. A Koothu performer in the role of Nagakanni rushes in to lament the death of Aravan. In the Therukoothu enactment of this episode that night, a cock is slaughtered at the sacrifice of Aravan. Aravan then becomes possessed and is carried away bodily to the green-room. The Aravan sacrifice follows the pattern of earlier Dravidian rituals of worship. The sacrifice of Aravan may or may not be enacted. If it is skipped, *Abhimanyu Vadham* is enacted instead. This episode is confined to the stage and has no extension in the larger village arena.

The 17th day's episode deals with the killing of Karna — *Karna Moksham*. In the daytime, the *prasangi* goes into a detailed exposition recounting the life of Karna. The high point of the Therukoothu enactment of *Karna Moksham* in the evening is the sword-fight and verbal duel. The sword-fight employs all the acrobatic skills of the Therukoothu actor.

The Bharata Vizha comes to an end on the 18th day with the killing of Duryodhana in the Kurukshetra war. The open field is turned into a battlefield (or *padu kalam* as it is called). A huge mud figure of Duryodhana lying on his back—70 to 80 feet long—is constructed overnight. The remains of the previous year's Duryodhana—a washed-out mound—is there already. But all through the night, the villagers bring in 50 to 60 cartloads of mud and pour it over the existing mound to make a new Duryodhana. The figure is made and painted to look exactly like the Duryodhana of Therukoothu. A mud pot filled with red water (to simulate blood) is embedded in Duryodhana's thigh; a wooden knife marks the spot. By noon, the entire population of the village collects at the site. People from the surrounding villages also gather there, set up shops and stalls, and a village fair begins. The performance starts early in the morning. Duryodhana and Bhima, fully made up, go to the shrine in ceremonial procession to worship Draupadi Amman. The procession returns through the streets of the village, with Duryodhana and Bhima threatening each other, held back by a long rope. Large crowds of people follow the procession and watch the confrontation between Bhima and Duryodhana.

By now the *prasangi* has delivered his discourse on the slaying of Salliyan

and others of the Kaurava clan. By the mud figure of Duryodhana five pits are dug where the five *kappukarar* recline, wrapped in wet sheets soaked with turmeric. They are spattered all over with turmeric paste; the men by their side sprinkle turmeric water on them frequently. The *kappukarar*, who are in a state of possession, represent the five Pandavas, treacherously slain in their sleep.

Duryodhana and Bhima enter the Therukoothu arena, the former concealed behind the curtain. The *prasangi* tells the audience that Duryodhana has gone into hiding in the deep sea. Bhima, waiting out in the field among the spectators, calls him out. The curtain is removed and Duryodhana comes out. Bhima and Duryodhana now confront each other, circling round the mud figure of Duryodhana. Both actors have lemons clenched in their teeth as they are in a frenzied state of possession. At the climax of the confrontation Bhima strikes at the mud figure of Duryodhana: he strikes on Duryodhana's thigh where the mud pot is embedded, splashing 'blood' all over. Bhima and Duryodhana, still in a state of frenzy, are separated from each other and carried away from the arena.

The idol of Draupadi Amman and the Draupadi performer are seated alongside the figure of Duryodhana. The blood from Duryodhana thigh is smeared on the loose locks of the idol and the performer. Thus Draupadi's vow is fulfilled. At this point a woman arrives on the scene, carried on a ladder in procession from the village. She has a broomstick and a bamboo tray used for winnowing grain. Screaming in lamentation, she represents the women of Duryodhana's household. She sits on Duryodhana's mud figure and laments her loss. The spectators offer her money. The Draupadi idol, after a brief prayer, is taken out in procession through the village to the temple. It is about noon now.

In the afternoon preparations are made for the last ritual of the festival—the fire-walking ritual. This is common to all Mother Goddess festivals. Draupadi Amman, according to Villiputhurar's *Bharatam*, was born of fire. A long rectangular fire pit is prepared with huge logs of wood, and at the end of the pit a small water pool is constructed. The five *kappukarar* now bathe in the village tank, come out wrapped in turmeric-soaked cloth and, adorned with garlands, go to the temple in procession with the villagers to fetch the *karagam* pots. After prayers have been offered, the *karagam* pots and the Draupadi Amman idol are taken to the fire pit. The Draupadi Amman idol is placed there, and burning coal is spread out evenly all over the pit. An idol of Agni is also placed at the site. The *prasangi* picks out a handful of burning coal from the pit, ties it in a piece of turmeric-soaked cloth, and places it on the lap of the idol. If the coal burns through the cloth, it is considered a bad omen. If it does not, one

can go ahead with the fire-walking ritual. Flowers are thrown into the pit of burning coal. The *karagam*-bearers, who are in a state of possession, walk through the fire pit thrice, stepping into the pool of water each time at the end. After the fire-walking ritual is over, the villagers gathered round the pit carry home handfuls of coal as a gift from the goddess.

The next day, the *pattabhishekam* (coronation) ceremony of Dharmaraja is performed in the temple. During this ritual the *prasangi* discourses on the relevant episode in *Bharatam* and crowns the idol of Dharmaraja. With this the 20-day festival comes to an end.

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All folk forms of performing arts are marked by spontaneity of expression; the performance is not based on a written text. Where a text exists, it is not of much literary value. Kuravanji, for example, had its origin in folk theatre but once it gained a text of literary value, it was elevated to a classical art. Though Therukoothu follows Villiputhurar's *Bharatam*, its theatrical expression really depends on body kinetics and visuals.

There are references to a variety of folk forms even in the earliest available literary works in Tamil, but we know nothing about their performance. All that we have are the names and ritual contexts. There is not a single dramatic text in Tamil literary history till we come to the *Kutrala Kuravanji* of the 18th century.

There was a total absence of any writing on Therukoothu till the '50s, when E. Krishna Iyer wrote stray articles drawing attention to this theatre. It was the first ever aesthetic response to Therukoothu from a connoisseur. E. Krishna Iyer also sponsored a Therukoothu performance by the legendary Natesa Thambiran at Madras when he was the head of an arts organization. Though he continued his advocacy of Therukoothu in the form of articles in newspapers and journals—mostly in English and published outside Tamil Nadu—this folk theatre never really drew the attention of the cultural elite of the South. In later years, though, some individuals wrote intermittently on Therukoothu. Their articles, brief and general in nature, did not have much to say about the art except to emphasize that a vigorous folk tradition was at the point of collapse.

In the '70s, three significant developments took place. The playwright N. Muthuswami, his curiosity already aroused by these articles, happened to witness a Therukoothu performance in Madras. He became a fanatical convert to Therukoothu and the coming years saw him totally immersed in the art. He developed intimate contacts with the Purisai group of Therukoothu performers (headed by Kannappa Thambiran after the

Above: Prahlada.
Below: Nrisimha and Prahlada.

demise of Natesa Thambiran) and wrote copiously on the subject. His articles on Therukoothu are now available in book form: *Anru Pootiya Vandi*. Muthuswami also wrote plays and established a theatre workshop. In fact, the overweaning influence of Therukoothu on this talented playwright resulted in his subsequent plays becoming mere performance scripts, denying themselves an independent existence as literary texts.

Secondly, Padma Subrahmaniam, a noted Bharatanatyam dancer, also fell under the spell of Therukoothu. She wrote and spoke extensively on the subject, and even sponsored Therukoothu performances.

Lastly, the Tamil department of Madurai Kamarajar University, under the inspiring leadership of a scholar of linguistics, Muthu Shanmugam, permitted its scholars to choose areas in folk performing arts for their research. This resulted in a good number of field studies on folk forms including a Ph.D. thesis on Therukoothu by Arivu Nambi, which was later published.

As a result of this stir in the literary/scholarly milieu, quite a few historical surveys of performing arts appeared, in which folk performances including Therukoothu received informative treatment. However, this is the extent of the available literature in Tamil on Therukoothu. It is not a large body of work, though it shows a wider recognition of Therukoothu in its native land.

Hence, if the blurb of Richard Armando Frasca's book (*The Theatre of Mahabharata: Terukkuttu Performance in South India*) proclaims that it is "the first major study of the Terukkuttu", casting "new light on the relationship between theatre and ritual and the role of performance in society", one must admit some justice to the author's claim.

Frasca came to Madras on a research fellowship to study Therukoothu in 1977 but extended his stay, financing himself, till 1982. These five years were devoted to a study of the classical performing arts as well: Bharatanatyam under V.P. Dhananjayan, vocal Carnatic music under Kallidaikuruchi Mahadeva Bhagavatar, Mridangam under Kumbakonam Rajappa Iyer. Besides, Frasca also acquired an appreciable knowledge of Tamil. Field research on Therukoothu took him to far-flung villages in three districts from his base in Kanchipuram and included training in Therukoothu performance as well. During this period he collected a vast amount of research material: 180 hours of audio tapes, 2,400 pages of performance transcripts, many unpublished manuscripts, and 20 published Therukoothu plays. He obtained a rare manuscript which suggests that in the past Therukoothu performance extended over a period of 18 days instead of the present nine: the text of the manuscript covers events relating to each day of the battle.

Frasca brings a multidisciplinary approach to his study of Therukoothu. Investigating its music, he traces elements that suggest its origin in the early Dravidian *pan* system, precursor to the present classical Carnatic system. Bringing in the findings of S. Ramanathan, he also establishes striking correspondences between the music of Yakshagana and the *pan* system, leading to the conclusion that there was a common musical tradition in the whole of south India. This view finds corroboration in the findings of K. Shivarama Karanth, who has listed a number of *ragas* in Yakshagana which are not found either in the Carnatic or Hindustani system, and which therefore belong to pre-Carnatic times. Similar findings emerge from the study of Sopana Sangeet of Kerala and the music of Bhutam.

Again, Frasca goes into the *tala* system and brings out the differences in Therukoothu practice from classical Carnatic music, though the *talas* are common to both. He examines how Therukoothu artistes, with no formal training, are able to intuitively choose appropriate *ragas* and employ them according to the requirements of the situation. Frasca illustrates this with examples and shows that the employment of various *ragas* follows a given pattern.

Frasca's training in Bharatanatyam enables him to analyze how the

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movements of Therukoothu performers vary from the classical *adavu* (unit of dance movement), *sollukattu* (rhythmic dance syllables), etc. He also examines how the choreographic pattern in Therukoothu differs from the Bharatanatyam scheme. His study of *kirigai*—the pirouettes and spins characteristic of Therukoothu—is particularly interesting. *Kirigai* communicates a tremendous emotional charge, though it may be dismissed as acrobatics by the classical-dance connoisseur.

Frasca argues that this reflects a blind adherence to the dictum of medieval commentators that *nritta* (pure dance) is *bhava-vihina* and *rasa-vihina*, refuted by Padma Subrahmaniam in a different and general context. Frasca, quoting Padma Subrahmaniam approvingly, maintains that the *kirigai* of Therukoothu is *nritta* and that it serves to communicate and heighten emotions. (*Nritta* is known by the term *chokkam* in ancient Tamil texts.)

Discussing the *aharya* of Therukoothu, Frasca examines details of costume and make-up, analyzing the concepts informing the well-thought-out scheme. He is perceptive enough to see that the *aharya* of Therukoothu is not of cosmetic nature but expressive of the personalities of various characters. He also notes the similarities between the *aharya* of all the folk and classical theatre forms of south India, pointing to the possibility of a common origin.

Frasca expounds the thesis that Therukoothu developed from *pattu* (song), particularly Villupattu—a narrative performance using songs and prose—which again might have been an offshoot of Katai, perhaps an oral tradition originally. He bases this conclusion on the evidence of Purisai Murugesa Mudaliar, a scholarly *prasangi*. The bias is understandable, but a survey of literary sources from the earliest works of the Sangam period would suggest a different linear development. It seems more likely that Therukoothu and Bharata Vizha developed from the shamanistic rituals, fertility rites, and the bardic tradition mentioned in Sangam literature.

Frasca's most important contribution is in his penetrating structural analysis of Therukoothu and Bharata Vizha in terms of the insights given by Arnold Van Gennep in his *Rites of Passage* and by Victor Turner in his works *Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure* and *From Ritual to Theatre*. The rituals of the festival destructure the society, free its members from the bonds of structured life, and take them to a plane of equality and sacredness. For the duration of the rituals the society attains a homogeneity that helps it function when people revert to their normal, structured life. The *kappukarar*, for example, who belong to various social strata, destructure themselves once they take on their ritual role, where their social status does not count. They leave their homes and abjure social and family

ties to live in the shrine in seclusion as equals.

The state of possession is again a case in point. Regardless of their status in society, the possessed become the human abodes of gods and speak with the voice of the gods. (In the ancient Tamil texts the possessed are mentioned with the honorific term *mudhuvai.*) Epic characters becoming gods, Draupadi being deified and identified with the Mother Goddess, the village becoming Kurukshetra in the ritual enactment—all illustrate the transition from a structured state to a destructured one. In the words of Frasca, "it is living in sacred time and space".

Frasca's work shows an emotional involvement with the subject one cannot always expect from a foreign author. He seems to have developed a love and admiration for Therukoothu and its practitioners, whom he had come to study only for academic purposes. □