

FOLK MUSIC IN THE LIFE OF TAMILNAD

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Imagine a village of the Tamils. In the early hours before dawn, the temple bells are ringing. Various drums are throbbing. Pipes of different shapes and kind are blown. The courtyards of the houses are swept clean by rustic, feminine hands that add beautiful and complicated patterns of *kolam* (*rangoli* or *alpana*). Palm and coconut leaf festoons criss-cross the streets. Plantain trees with fruits and aricanut trees with tender shoots decorate entrances of holy places. The women pray to the flawless flame of the lamp (*jothi*) which symbolises divinity and prosperity and to the holy *tulsi* plant, their guardian angel. The girls are busy performing *kummi*, a community dance popular among women around the *mulaippari*.¹ The children in their best costumes run about enjoying the various folk dances around the temple. They are equally attracted by the colourful petty shops, selling sweet-meats, toys etc. The *poosari* (chief priest) attracts a big crowd around him with his devotional music on the chief deity with the rhythms of the *udukku*. Villagers from far and near attend the festival, some trekking long distances and others arriving by canopied and decorated bullock-carts. They camp in shady groves, cook their own food and offer worship to the deity in whose honour the festival is held. They roam about the village in a relaxed holiday mood, attend all-night shows of folk entertainment and return home with a complete sense of satisfaction and exhilaration.

This is a common scene in any village of Tamilnad during the summer months April — June. These are purely folk festivals centering round the temple. Such festivals abound in folk music and dance. Generally they have a rich spiritual atmosphere which is at times subtle and at times strong.

¹*Mulaippari* : Seedings of 18 varieties of grains are grown in small decorated pots and treated with great respect and sanctity. They are supposed to be a living symbol of the Goddess. This custom seems to be popular in different parts of India. This is also known as *Patigai* in the South, *Mandavi* in Gujarat and so on.

This ancient land of the Tamils has been justly famous for its wonderful temples with beautiful sculptures and delicate architecture. All other fine arts were very easily coupled with religion and grew around temples. Its ancient literature reveals the past glory of this land in all spheres. Great kings, scholars, saints, artists and architects have lived here. These rich traditions extend also to the folk arts.

A nation is best known through these arts for they form the nucleus and quintessence of its culture. Folk music and dance are only a spontaneous expression of the people's feelings of joy and sorrow, hope and aspirations and disappointments. These emanate naturally from the very life of the rustic folk. They are simple, natural, unsophisticated and free from any kind of inhibition just as the people themselves are. People, irrespective of caste, colour or creed take an active part. These folk arts of the Tamils have had a great part to play in the all-round development of the Tamil country from time immemorial.

There have been references to folk music and dance forms in ancient Tamil literature such as the *Tolkappiyam*, the earliest extant work in Tamil, in *Sangam* literature, the immortal poem *Silappadikaram* (the Story of the Anklet) etc. Many of the forms prevalent today in Tamilnad can be easily traced back to the forms referred to in this literature. Some folk forms, like the gypsy's song, agricultural songs, *Ammanai*, a game with small balls played by girls, have later developed into a set type of literary form like *Kuravanji Prabandam*, *Pallu Prabandam*, *Ammanai Prabandam* and so on. This only shows the great vitality of the folk traditions and the writers of those times who did not consider it below their dignity to imbibe such beautiful concepts into their literary compositions.

An Indian's life cannot be strictly divided into secular and religious parts since every action has a religious aspect. The Tamils are no exception to this. The majority of Tamil folk belong to agricultural groups. Their life is one of hard toil and labour. Music, poetry and devotion to God are an inseparable part of their lives. In their diverse activities, there is hardly any occupation without music. The villager fears and respects the elements of nature like the sun and rain on which he depends so much for his living. The theme of the majority of the songs is devotion to God in His various manifestations, though there are other themes like love, laughter, wonder, sorrow, epic heroes, covering the whole gamut of human feeling and emotion.

For practical purposes, the songs can be generally classified as, Occupational Songs, Festival Songs, Recreational Songs and Women's Songs. A large number of folk songs are meant to be sung by groups, for most of the work is the outcome of collective effort. There are some that are sung exclusively by women, others exclusively by men, and one or

two by both. The group songs are invariably led by an individual and followed by the group.

Occupational Songs: Agriculture is the most important occupation in Tamilnad. In spite of all the modern technological developments, the various agricultural operations are still laborious. But the rustic folk cleverly manage to relieve the burden of their work and increase their productivity and efficiency by song and chant. This is true even today. Though there may be words directly relating to the work at hand, a large segment of the work-songs have nothing to do with the task. The themes deal with incidents of all types — almost everything under the sun.

Generally, on all auspicious occasions, the women produce a siren-like sound known as *kulavai*. So also, before getting into the slushy field for transplantation, they sing *Kulavai Pathi* (Kulavai song) and invoke the blessing of Lord Ganesh, the elephant-god, and all the other village deities. Transplantation and weeding are tedious operations in the hot sun when long ballads are sung by the women.

Fields without proper irrigational facilities are watered by means of *yetram* (picotta) which means the lifting of water from a well or pond by two or three men walking up and down along a horizontal pole placed crosswise on a vertical pole. At one end is a bucket which is handled by the singer to bale out water. There is no rhythm but the song records the number of buckets baled out, and may therefore be termed as a cumulative song. There are songs invoking the various gods for rain.

During harvest, both men and women sing while they reap and collect grain on the threshing floor. The grain is then taken in bags to the nearby market-place in bullock-carts for sale when the cart-men sing in order to keep awake and perhaps to keep courage up, too. They thereby keep the bullocks alert and perhaps the poor creatures forget the strain of pulling the load. Such songs are known as *temmangu* which form has established its own style of rendering.

Fishing, mixing mortar, carrying or pulling loads are other minor occupations with a variety of songs. The fishermen sing often, but only when they are at sea. Mixing mortar (for construction) is a monotonous job but music cuts the monotony. With the advent of cement, both the mortar mixing and along with it these beautiful songs are dying. Load-carrying or lifting or pulling heavy things by human labour is made lighter with songs both of rhythmical and non-rhythmical character and which reflect the type of work.

Festival Songs: Village festivals are generally held after the major harvest, starting with *Pongal* or the harvest festival in January. It is only during the summer months that the villagers are comparatively free. The happy *Pongal* is a sort of thanksgiving to the sun god. A special day is dedicated to the birds and animals, particularly the cattle which share the work-burden along with their human owners. The women carry out colourful ceremonies known as *Poononbu* (festival of flowers); in certain districts this is rather an elaborate function — lots of flowers in multi-farious colours decorate the baskets of dry cowdung balls kept in front of their houses in the previous month with veneration, and the women perform *kummi* around it. The baskets are taken to the nearby river, pond or well. They offer *puja* — including a variety of foodstuffs — to the decorated baskets which are then thrown into the water. After this, the women and children have a good feast on the river banks and return home.

Karagam — a decorated pot carried on the head — is an offering to the goddess Mariamman who is the chief deity to ward off epidemics and other diseases. The goddess is believed to descend on the pots and they are carried around the village to the music of the *naiyandimelam* — a folk orchestral group. Songs are sung in praise of the deity intermittently and the man who carries the pot dances in ecstasy. The orchestral group too dance as the tempo increases.

Kavadi is an offering to propitiate Murugan (Kartikeya), the favourite god of the Tamils. Here also the *naiyandimelam* is played for which the devotee dances with the *kavadi* on the shoulders. Streams of devotees offer such *kavadis* of various types and it is a sight to see all of them dance to music. *Kavadichindu* is a popular pattern of folk melody with variegated rhythm and songs on Murugan.

Recreational Songs: It is during such festivals that all the other recreational songs and music of the villagers find an outlet. While the women specialise in *kummi*, *kolattam* (stick dance) and *pinnal kolattam* (a dance with long ropes and sticks—plait dance), the men train themselves in varieties like *oyilkummi* (a rather graceful dance), *kaichilambu* (a dance with anklet-type of instruments in hand), *kaliyal* and *vaindanai* (a variety of *kolattam* by men), *silam bam* and *varmaniya adimurai* (the art of fencing or *dharma yuddha* with drums) etc. There are also ballad-singing groups with a number of folk instruments. *Lavani pattu* is an interesting musical debate by two persons representing the two different views of the story of *Kamadahanam*. The emphasis here is on fluency of thought and expression and the songs are more recitative than musical. *Villuppattu* is one of the richest types of ballad singing with a *villu* (bow-like instrument). *Kaichilambu pattu* and *kaniyan kutu* (which includes music and dance) are popular

in some districts. The dummy-horse show or the *poikkal kuirai* with loud orchestral music draws huge crowds.

Terukkoothu (street-play) and *bommalattam* (puppet-show) are two popular forms of folk theatrical arts. *Terukkoothu* is the most ancient medium of mass communication; it still keeps alive the tradition. Its enactment is considered as typically folk-style, but it fulfills the grammar of drama according to Bharata's *Natyasastra*. In some of the Northern districts of Tamilnad, there is no festival at all without a *terukkoothu* performance. Such all-night shows are the most popular.

Women's songs: One of the glorious assets of Indian culture is the concept of our womanhood. Our women have been a source of inspiration for generations. They were silent, but not dumb — they were dynamic but not violent. Even in the realm of folk music, they play a prominent part. Rustic lullabies of Tamilnad are rich both in their musical and literary content. They feed the growing children with simple, lovely and wholesome concepts of divinity. They have songs for all kinds of play among which the swing songs and ball songs are popular among girls. A number of women's songs could be heard at the ceremony held in honour of the girls coming of age (puberty) and marriage functions. Some of the wedding songs are full of humour sung by both the bride and bridegroom's parties, teasing each other, in a very sportive spirit.

Some communities celebrate nuptials on a grand scale when beautiful songs of an amorous type are heard. Such functions only show how these people had once so thoroughly 'socialised' their emotions that even the most intimate man-woman relationship was, or had to be, publicly acknowledged to receive social approval. The songs are given a spiritual slant, by the device of making the address apply to some god or goddess.

There are songs for *masakkai* (a pregnant woman's liking for certain odd eatables) *seemantham*, *valai kappu* (bangle-wearing ceremony), and *poochoottal* (flower-decking ceremony). Ceremonies performed during the period of pregnancy — when the pregnant woman is decorated and made to sit while all the elders bless her.

The beggars' songs addressed to the lady of the house contain high philosophical meaning, though clothed in simple words. Some of the street cries of vendors are most musical and some sing in praise of the goods that are sold.

Dirges (*oppari*) are in praise of the departed. Such singing is believed as protective for the living and as comforting and as propitiating the spirit of the dead. Here, the improvised musical content is not of a very high

order; the 'on the spot' recitation of verses in praise of the dead is remarkable and of a high literary value.

Thus, for rustic folk, every conceivable occasion and event is filled with music. A very important factor is that the vitality of folk music and dance can be felt only when it is heard and seen in its natural setting. The peasants can sing with full-throated ease only when they are at a particular piece of work in the customary environment. To join them in their work is a thrilling experience. They lose their charm and glamour, when they are heard in artificial surroundings. It is rather difficult to make a rustic mother sing a lullaby without a child on her lap.

Some leading musicologists of the world have pointed out that sophisticated compositions can be traced back to some primitive folk origin. The well-developed classical system of music (of Tamilnad) has definitely its deep roots in folk music. Since folk music, an unchartered sea, is purely perpetuated by oral tradition, it is quite conceivable that the melodies have undergone many changes through the ages, suiting the tastes, temperament and capacity of different people. With the general changes in society, music also changed. A few gifted individuals who had the power of more refined conception, lent colour to the crude melodies and gradually there developed a variety with principles, rules, regulations, science, and grammar. Thus we now see both the traditional style of music and the much evolved classical Karnatak music. During the process of evolution, we reach a stage which could be termed as 'stylised' folk music. This has the characteristics of both the rustic and refined systems, but cannot be classified under either. Living examples of such a stage are the songs sung by the Brahmin ladies during weddings, other ceremonies and *kolatta javandarai* and *kummi* functions during *Pongal* and *Deepavali* (festival of light).

With regard to the musical content, the folk music of Tamilnad represents a high cultural level, next only to the highly developed classical system. This is perhaps due to the fact that there was harmony in the villages, the various classes reacting healthily on each other. The temples and its festivals on the one hand and the weddings and other kinds of ceremonies and functions celebrated by the wealthier section of society on the other, provided free entertainment of music, dance and drama of a very high order which the entire village enjoyed. Great musicians, dancers and artistes living in villages imbibed into their arts whatever was healthy in this folk music.

Raga system, being the quintessence of classical Karnatak music, the *chayas* or the melodic contour of almost all important *ragas* of Karnatak music are found in the folk melodies of Tamilnad. The compass of a folk melody is generally limited to an octave or even less, and it is this fact that

almost precludes the possibility of the full contour of the *raga* being perceived. Another factor is that the untrained folk-singer does not employ the variety of *gamakas* or ornamentation that is usually exhibited in classical music.

Folk music rarely uses the full heptatonic scale but all 12 notes (*swarastanams*) of an octave occur in them, taken totally. *Pratimadhyama* was supposed to be absent in folk music altogether. This is not so, though it is a rare occurrence. The prevalence of *pratimadhyama* frequently in the tribal music of Tamilnad is all the more interesting. Though there are only a handful of tribes, some like the *Pulayars* of Madurai District, *Kotars* of Nilgiris and others like *Ten Kurumbars*, *Kunnuvars* etc., are very musical, their music being in a class by itself. All these tribes, almost untouched by any sort of invasion when compared to those of North India, have preserved their music so well that an extensive research may reveal very interesting links with the music of the distant past.

The most frequently used scales are *Harikambhoji* and *Sankarabharam*. It is said that the origin of many of our grand old *ragas* like *Navaraj*, *Senjuritti*, *Kurinji Manji*, *Ghanta*, *Anandabhairavi*, *Punnagavarali*, *Saindavi*, *Mangalakaisiki* etc., are found in folk music. It is rightly so, for even now they are heard more among the masses but are out of vogue on concert platforms. Due to the treatment of notes, which is slightly higher or lower than those of their classical counterparts, they baffle the listener. More than fifty *ragas* are recognisable in folk melodies. This is a good number indeed, considering the fact that the number of classical *ragas* popularly handled by musicians would not exceed a hundred. Many so-called *ragas* of classical music do not exist outside the compositions, having a very limited scope for *alapana* (extemporisation of the melody). So also there are folk-tunes which are entities by themselves but do not suggest any *ragas*. There are mixed melodies wherein two or more *ragas* even figure. These may be called *Sankirna Varnamettus*. *Kavadichindu* may be classified under this group. *Temmangu* is a particular type in which freedom of improvisation as in *raga alapana* is allowed.

While rhythm is more fixed in folk music than in art music, it is interesting to note that the most popular rhythms or *gatis* in both are the *Chaturasra* (4) and *Tisra* (3). Though the concept of *tala* or time-measure as such is insignificant in folk music, the rhythm remains predominant, though not consciously so. Rhythm with 7 beats (*Misram*) is popular after *Chaturasra* and *Tisra*.

Folk-poetry is like a jungle tree with its roots deeply imbedded in the past, continuously putting forth new branches, leaves and fruits. The original composer of a folk song is anonymous. Folk songs vary from couplet to couplet in complex patterns. Metre is not deliberate. Language

is easy, conversational but confirms to prosodical rules. The songs give us a fund of knowledge about the history, customs, manners of the people.

Instrumental music generally plays only a subordinate, but interesting role in folk music. Instruments are used only for specific types of songs. Most often a natural accompaniment supplied by sounds which are not strictly musical but pertaining to the sound of the work itself, serves. Though the singing voice is the fundamental instrument of a folk-singer, they do have other instruments ranging over all the three classical groups of percussion, wind and string instruments. Among them, the percussion group predominates.

It is generally felt that in folk music tradition, music is only incidental to the words. Most of the Tamil folk songs begin with meaningless syllables like *tannane*, *yelo yelo*, *rari rari*, etc., which not only form the main refrain of the song but also maintain the rhythmic structure. Different words are sung with slight adjustments to different tunes, only after such refrains. Hence folk melodies are conceived, remembered and expressed musically first and verbally only in a secondary manner.

Another wrong impression is that folk songs revel in erotic themes and are sung by men and women to each other in the fields. This is only a myth and nothing more. When folk-poetry is taken into consideration and classified, we may get a classification known as love songs. But, folk music is set into the realities of social life of a village, where the people hardly find any time, inclination or opportunity for such idyllic indulgence. In fact, the women folk never sing in front of men. Nevertheless, there are songs with erotic themes sung occasionally, that too, only in groups or alone, perhaps by a shepherd to his beloved in absentia. It is also noteworthy that except the *Pulayars* of Madurai District, no other community indulges in mixed dances, of both men and women. Rural romantic scenes are only born out of the fertile imagination of our poets and dramatists, which has now descended to tragically low levels in the films of today.

The folk music, dance and drama of Tamilnad had a wholesome influence in shaping and developing the cultural traditions of the people. The people have always had a creative faculty and whenever they were impressed by something new they were inspired by it and did not blindly imitate it. Now, times have changed. They are becoming passive spectators of films as a result of which they merely imitate and try to follow. Their creative faculty is fading and their participation is necessarily passive. This gives them only monetary satisfaction which is positively injurious to them individually and to the community in general.

Due to political, economic, sociological changes, men with talent have migrated to cities. Along with them, the classical arts moved away from the masses into a small nut-shell of aristocrats and intellectuals. A void arose among the masses and entertainment of a low order filled its place.

Industrialisation has also considerably affected the villager's music. Evidently the workers' music cannot keep pace with heavy roaring machines. In the inevitable essential development, there may arise a new type of music, but it is rather disappointing to see that even singing of lullabies is slowly falling into disuse. Rarely do we find people of the present young generation singing any old genuine folk-tunes. The tragedy is that the villagers themselves feel that it is something below their dignity to sing their own songs.

This is a very deeply disheartening situation, found not only in Tamilnad, but all over the country. The films have now a great influence over the masses. The usual argument of the Producers to support the vulgarity, obscenity and the inartistic hybridisation in the film music is 'popular demand'. With its potential power to reach millions of people simultaneously, the films have not only considerably wiped out folk arts but have corroded the moral, social and ethical fibre that was strengthened by these arts to a great extent. Our people are definitely not incapable of appreciating good, wholesome art. They have been doing so from time immemorial.

Art is bound to change along with the march of time. But it must not sever its basic roots and drift away aimlessly. All folk arts are now in this state and they need some sincere help to get back a new life.

Enormous work has been done in this field in Western countries. Tamilnad is yet to have a single publication of folk music in notation. We have a long way to go in this field and I am afraid we are already behind hand. The situation now demands attention. The Music, Tamil and other relevant Departments of Universities and the various cultural organisations should enlist the services of a band of dedicated and sincere workers for the collection and preservation of folk music. Such workers must be proficient in music and be able to sift the genuine from the spurious. Publication of folk music with notation must be encouraged. Even notation can hardly give the full picture of the song, as it misses the inflexional and pronounciational peculiarities. Original tape-recordings of songs taken on the spot in their pristine purity should prove more useful and they can be preserved for posterity. The Central Sangeet Natak Akademi in collaboration with the State Academies could depute workers in this regard.

Music teachers in schools must be compelled to learn genuine folk songs, sung on different occasions and the children should be taught such

songs. Many of the film songs are cheap (directly or indirectly) and hence a danger. Educational authorities should strictly see that such entertainments are scrupulously avoided in schools and colleges. Folk music and dance festivals could be held in schools and colleges on a smaller scale wherein local folk talent could be engaged and encouraged and the students also made to participate. The present system of education needs at least an hour a week for the teaching of moral and ethical values. During such classes, something must be imparted to the students about the glory and culture of our country and of the various regions in particular, besides mere historical facts..

The urgent needs of the hour is action. It is a crime to allow these arts to perish partly or wholly. Once they are lost, they cannot be reclaimed in their original shape.

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