

BOOK REVIEW

Nataka Medai Ninaivuhai: Forty Years Before the Footlights

Pammal Sambanda Mudaliar

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Pammal Sambanda Mudaliar was a colossal figure in the theatre of the South in the early decades of this century. He was a playwright, producer, director, and the principal actor in most of his productions from 1891 (mounted when he was barely eighteen years of age) up to 1938 when he retired from active participation in the activities of the theatre company he founded, Suguna Vilasa Sabha. His work in Tamil theatre would constitute by itself the initial chapters of a history of modern Tamil theatre.

Keeping in mind the heterogeneous readership of this journal, I feel the need to introduce Pammal suitably before going on to his book.

Pammal's contributions to Tamil theatre were manifold. He changed its character and substance at a time when Tamil theatre practices were hardly distinguishable from the folk form *Therukoothu*, which had also fallen upon bad days. His founding of Suguna Vilasa Sabha in 1891, when he was eighteen, was a remarkable event — not only was he very young, he also came from a well-to-do family educated in English, part of a Tamil urban elite whose orientation was hostile to theatre. This hostility was initially shared by Pammal himself — engendered partly by the unaesthetic theatre of the time.

Pammal introduced a variety of reforms in his theatre. For the first time in the Tamil theatre tradition, he insisted that there should be a definite script, maintaining that there was no room for improvisation on the stage — on which alone an actor's reputation was built in those days. He introduced costumes appropriate to the role and period of each play, as well as sets which were modelled on the visiting Parsi theatre companies. He fixed the duration of a play, going against the well-established practice of letting a

play drag on till the early hours of the morning. He also sought to cut down the number of songs gradually, with the ultimate objective of doing away with them altogether. This he achieved over some decades of dedicated work on the stage, fighting the fierce resistance not only of his own orchestra, or of actors whose reputations rested on their singing prowess, but also of an audience which thronged theatres only to hear their favourite songs — clumsily inserted in any which play irrespective of the situation. (See the account of the early years of Sambanda Mudaliar's work in Chapter I of the memoirs, published in translation in *Sangeet Natak* Nos. 121 - 22.) For authenticity of costumes and sets he would draw upon all available sources — temple sculptures, miniature paintings, frescoes, literary texts, etc. Such an approach to production was unheard of, and considered wholly unwarranted, in those days. A few scenic backdrops used to be available in the company stores and these would be used for any play, regardless of relevance. Pammal put his foot down on all such incongruities. He made it a rule that sets would be made in accordance with the character and period of each play mounted by his company. All this of course took time to be accepted, practised, and finally assimilated in the theatrical norms of the time. But things did change. And many of the groups that sprang up, spurred by the success and excitement generated by Suguna Vilasa Sabha, looked up to Pammal as a leader, a pioneering innovator. Whatever Pammal did became in time a norm of the Tamil theatre of his day, to be followed by all other theatre groups.

Since Pammal belonged to an elite family, he could gather around himself a host of theatre-loving people of his own class; in course of time, Suguna Vilasa Sabha had among its members men of eminence from all walks of life, even of national stature: Sir C.P. Ramaswami Iyer, R.K. Shanmugam Chettiar (later the first Finance Minister of India), Satyamurti (deputy to Bhulabhai Desai and the most articulate Opposition leader in the Viceroy's Legislative Council), and several judges of the Madras High Court. They were all active participants in this

theatre group. This gave theatre a place in polite society, a respectability that made possible further recruitment to the stage from the upper and middle classes. Pammal himself wrote the plays for his group. By the time he retired in 1938, the Sabha had more than ninety plays in its repertory — an assortment of translations from Western classics, some original plays, and adaptations from folk legends, puranic tales, and the epics.

The Suguna Vilasa Sabha at the peak of its success and glory had several wings, each wing staging plays in a different language, each with its own director and set of actors. The company became famous throughout South India and toured other provinces, even sailing to Ceylon, Malaya, Burma, Singapore and other places for month-long performance tours.

It was a long and adventurous journey for Pammal to raise theatre from the condition in which he found it in 1891 to a position of eminence, gaining for the stage prestige and respectability in society. For all this, the Sabha he founded remained an amateur venture.

Forty years was a long haul for this band of amateurs, and in the 1930s cinema made its entry in the Tamil country; the Tamil audience lapped up films voraciously. By then Pammal had advanced in years and retired from the stage, but he took to the new medium with effortless ease. Many of his plays were made into successful films. Indeed, so many of his plays have seen so many successful film versions, decade after decade, that many Tamil cinegoers of the present day do not even know that *Manohara*, *Sabapathi*, *Vedala Ulakam*, *Sathi Sulochana*, etc., are actually Pammal's creations. This only goes to show how widespread and deep Pammal's impact has been.

As mentioned earlier, in anything Pammal did, a preparatory drill was gone through and strict discipline maintained. One may get a glimpse of his approach to acting from the account he has given of his preparation for the role of Hamlet (published in translation in *Sangeet Natak* No. 123). He has written copiously about how an actor should prepare for a role. He has also written about films.

Pammal's most lasting literary contribution is, however, the memoirs he wrote during the years 1932 to 1938 in the form of a weekly column in the Tamil daily *Swadesamitran*. Intermittently during these years, the contributions were put together and published by the author in the form of booklets. There were six such volumes, and the last came out in 1938. The book under review brings together these six volumes in one, published again after a gap of more than sixty years.

Pammal had a long and distinguished innings on the stage, and became a legend in his lifetime. He was also honoured by the state. When he retired as a judge of the Small Cause Court in 1928, the British government gave him the title of Rao Saheb. The Padma Bhushan was conferred on him by the Government of India in 1959, and the Sangeet Natak Akademi honoured him with its award the same year.

There is a persistently self-questioning, confessional note in Pammal's memoirs which reminds one of Gandhi's autobiography or Rousseau's *Confessions*. He holds back nothing and is clearly concerned with rendering a truthful account of all that he did.

Hence, at one level, the memoirs are a record of his life and personality, and his long struggle to fashion a theatre after his vision against all odds. On the other hand, these memoirs also record his theatre's interaction with the audience, with contemporary society and its norms. Thus, at another level, they become a rare document giving us glimpses of the milieu in which Pammal worked, and of Tamil social life during the period. There is probably no other work as revealing and informative in this respect.

The chief merit of the publication under review is simply that it brings together for the first time, in one volume, a work that was unavailable for over half a century. Stray volumes of the original work may have been in the possession of a few individuals or libraries, but by and large Tamil readers of the present generation have had no access to these. The book had actually been all but forgotten, and the present edition makes it available again to readers interested in theatre, literature and social history.

For this we should be thankful to the International Institute of Tamil Studies, which has published the book, and to Sangeet Natak Akademi, which gave a grant for the publication; no private-sector publisher would have risked the venture. (The International Institute of Tamil Studies has brought out a number of such rare books in the past few years: translations of the Sangam texts *Pathu Pattu* and (selections from) *Purananooru* by N. Raghunathan and G.U. Pope respectively; Ramachandra Dikshitar's translation of *Silappadikaram*; commentaries on the oldest treatise on grammar, *Tolkappiam*, etc.)

Having said this, I must also spell out the omissions and lapses in the present work. These lacunae should have been noticed and attended to by those responsible for the publication.

Firstly, the publication data given on the imprint page of the book claim that this is the first edition of the work. Perhaps what is meant is that this is the first combined edition of this multi-volume work, which of course it is. In that case, why not say so? One expects a research institution — an “International Institute” — to be meticulous in recording the publishing history of a book. The beginning of the book as a weekly column in *Swadesamitran*, and its publication, later, in six volumes should all have been acknowledged. I have a nagging suspicion that the Institute has unthinkingly followed the unethical practice in Tamil publishing, in recent decades, of suppressing the publishing history of books, claiming that every publication is a

first edition. This is done in order to be able to dump a sizeable part of the print-run on state-funded libraries which do not entertain second editions. This should not have worried the Institute anyway, because it does not depend on library sales for its existence.

My second point — this volume of 700-odd pages should have contained an exhaustive index to facilitate the work of students and scholars.

Thirdly, this being a landmark document in Tamil theatre history, it should have been prefaced by a scholarly introduction meant for readers removed from Pammal by six decades. More so, in a period which rejects Pammal's kind of theatre : text-based, realistic, and proscenium-bound. (Today's Tamil theatre is also proscenium-bound, but declares itself to be anti-proscenium.)

Finally, since this is the work of a theatre personality detailing his work in theatre from the 1890s to the 1930s, a period far removed from us, the publication should have been illustrated, to the extent possible, with photographs of Sambanda Mudaliar's stage, his costumes, and of the author himself in some of his roles. Photographs of Pammal's theatre are not published anywhere, and this was a splendid opportunity to supply visuals to supplement the thespian's words.

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