

TRADITIONAL TAMIL DRAMA AND THE PRESENT IMPASSE

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What can really be called drama in the Tamil language can be said to exist only for the last century and a half, though there is evidence that there existed a Tamil theatre of sorts, at least from the 10th century onwards. An inscriptional record in the Thanjavur temple speaks of a drama on Raja Raja Chola being enacted in the temple precincts sometime in that century.

The normal division of Tamil literature into three classes—*iyol*, natural or poetic, *isai*, the musical, and *natakam*, the dramatic, seems to date from a somewhat older division, though the dramatic in this context seems to derive from the definition of dance as drama. For instance, the Tamil epic of the *Silappadhikaaram* is often spoken of as a dramatic poem on the strength of its speaking about the dance of the courtesan Maadhavi in somewhat technical terms. In a similar manner, Kamban's retelling of the *Ramayanam* is also spoken of as dramatic, because there are in the text dramatic situations, though there is no drama as such.

Evidence of the existence of folk-drama among the Tamils is available but all the evidence belongs to the fourteenth or fifteenth century and after. The only folk-drama of any merit that has survived in entirety is the *Mukkutarppallu*, the story of a *harijan* farmer who married two wives from distant places and had to reconcile them in their rivalries—which he does with God's grace. The *Mukkutarppallu* is more a poem than a drama though the dramatic element is emphasised and is in dialogue form.

Probably slightly later in time was the *Nondi Natakam* which clearly

talks of the period when Muslims were masters of the country and horse-stealing was punishable by loss of limbs. One such offender worships the Muruga of Tiruchendur and gets his limbs back again, narrates the *Nondi Natakam* in mediocre but vigorous and often vulgar terms. The dramatic intent is clear and alone amongst the traditional dramas can be considered a pure Tamil effort at drama of the most elementary kind.

The tradition of temple dramas was lost during the centuries but was revived with *Tirukkutralakkuravanchi* by Tirukutasasappa Kavirayar in the early 18th century. This again has more poetic merit than dramatic and tells a conventional story of a girl falling in love with the divine lord of Tirukkuttalam when he is on his rounds of the temple. A gypsy maid foretells the happy conclusion of the love between the mortal girl and her divine lover. The gypsy and her husband between them provide an earthy contrast in their love which is exploited with some skill. This was followed by another *kuravanchi* nearly a hundred years later, this time with the King of Thanjavur, Raja Serfoji, as hero. We do not know whether the *Kutralakkuravanchi* was acted at all before Smt. Rukmini Devi of Kalakshetra took it up; but the *Serfojee Kuravanchi* was acted at the Thanjavur temple in an open air dais erected for that very purpose even when the king was alive and thereafter for nearly a hundred and twenty years. The present writer has witnessed a traditional presentation of this *kuravanchi* in the temple setting in the middle years of the twenties. It was more dancing, than acting, to the accompaniment of excellent music though the dance itself at that time was hardly excellent.

The other types of drama current were derived from Sanskrit but there was one type of mono-acting which called for great skill. Telling the episodes of the *Ramayana* or the *Mahabharata* or of the various *Puranas*, the mono-actor dramatically presented with suitable gestures and music, words and change of voice, the dramatic sequence of the story. Kamban's *Ramayanam*, which has many dramatic moments in its long narrative, was dramatised for the convenience of these mono-actors sometime in the 17th century and Arunachalakkaviraayar's *Rama Nataka Keerthanaigal* has been popular down the years.

If we notice one other item of mono-acting, or what can be called musical opera, that of *Nandan Charitram* in the early 19th century by Gopalakrishna Bharathi, we have recorded the pre-drama drama tradition in Tamil. Taking the story of a *harijan* saint who achieved salvation by going to Chidambaram and seeing a vision of the Lord Shiva dancing, Gopalakrishna Bharathi hung about it a devotional tale in musically effective dialogue. In the one hundred and fifty years since

it was written, this *Nandan* has been very popular; it has been a best-seller as a book and has been parodied effectively by talents as far apart as Subramania Bharathti and N.S. Krishnan and acted in prose versions on the stage with some of the music of the original maintained and has been thrice filmed.

This then is the background of drama-no-drama in Tamil to which what has to be called modern Tamil drama had to be shaped, sometime in the first half of the 19th century. What set it off, what wave of imitation, how started, when and by whom, we do not know, because there are no contemporary records available. But by the seventies of the 19th century there were drama companies performing in various large towns, and in Madras, with varying degrees of success and attracting the young as well as the old. Many a respectable family of the early twentieth century could boast of one ancestor or two who ran away from home and joined a drama troupe in this town or that and made a success or failure of his life as the case may be. But dramatic performances as well as the persons connected with them were treated with contempt, often with disrespect, as the scum of society. The drama troupe was credited with every vice known to man—dicing, drinking, womanising—this last in spite of the fact that female participants in the drama came only later, much later.

The earliest of the playwrights of the Tamil stage was a woman, Vembammal, who is credited with three plays of a mythological kind—*Rukmangadha*, *Dhruva* and *Jatayu*. Whether this Vembammal is just a mythical pseudonym of a mere male, there is no way of knowing now, nor do her plays exist as plays, for scripts of those days were fairly nebulous and each troupe developed its own script.

The tour of the Bombay Parsi Company staging various dramas in various important centres of the South in the 6th and 7th decades gave a fillip naturally to Tamil drama and an attempt to come up to the skills shown by the travelling Parsi troupe was the aim of most troupes of Tamilnad. A few of them, round about cultural centres like Kumbakonam and Tirunelveli, succeeded only too well. Tamil drama at that time was a sort of imitation of the Parsi company dramas with a lot of music, ranting, colourfulness and often staging only themes well-known to the audience.

The popularity of these dramas with a certain section of the public was evident—the very young and the very discontented were affected by these romantic presentations which gave vicarious love for adventure, the better life, and to love, itself. Any price was not too much to pay

for the fulfillment of a romantic desire and round about the eighties and the nineties of the last century drama served as the escape literature of a large section of people who found no other region to escape into. Though late in starting, Tamil drama was off to a vigorous start and the strength of this early start, sustained it till the end of the twenties of the present century.

Production values, if we can talk in terms of a later day, were geared to loudness and lewdness and, perhaps not oversubtle innuendoes. Music was of primary importance and quick changes of scenes, probably inspired by the Parsi Theatre, were the order of the day. A theatre bill advertisement of that day speaks (with the eclat of success) of a hundred and twenty scenes, each different from the other. For the most part all the plays depended on two levels—one serious and the other comic, both running parallel but never meeting or merging. The themes were, for the most part, of the Hindu gods and goddesses, sometimes of Christian miracles, often geared to a sentimental pitch of melodrama.

One play which stands out among a hundred very similar items is a satire entitled *Dumbachary Vilasam* being a sort of a Rake's Progress—the *Dumbachary* being a real person round whom the unsavoury and libellous story was wound with great skill. I think the play had legal consequences which were however surmounted effectively and the text has survived to this day as an example of the skill of a dramatist in weaving fact and fiction together in a highly provocative, though not very dramatic story. The satire is deadly and shows up a person who pretends to be what he is not. The author of this play had the spark of genius in him but his three other plays are humdrum mythologicals; perhaps the brush with the law had been only too effective in silencing the genius of the playwright in Kaasi Viswanatha Mudaliar.

Translations from English, like Shakespeare (mainly his *Taming of the Shrew* and the *Comedy of Errors* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) as well as from Moliere (*The Miser*, *The Doctor in Spite of Himself* and, oddly enough, *Tartuffe*) as well as original plays of no great merit, began appearing round about the eighteen-seventies though most of them seem to have been more or less literary exercises and not plays meant to be staged. An early staging of a Tamil version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is said to have been a success, though the stage version is not available today—the earliest adaptation of the *Dream* being a novel that is still available and is a curious hybrid product, part narrative, part dialogue in stilted unspeakable prose.

Literary attempts at drama also were not wanting in an area which had recently rediscovered its own glorious past and was becoming familiar with European thought and literature through English. Attempts to equip Tamil literature with Shakespearean drama were made by two writers, P. Sundaram Pillai and V.G. Suryanarayana Sastriar. Both persons are still hot favourites of the pedants and the professors of Tamil literature, but as dramatists they are negligible, partly because their writing, both verse and prose, was pedantic and their conceptions of drama were derived more from the closet which was neither on the earth nor in the heavens.

Before the turn of the century there had come into being over a couple of hundred plays, most of them actable and nothing more, a few of them not even fit for acting and one of them of outstanding merit as drama and as a cross-section of reality—*Dumbachary Vilasam*. Most of them were strongly made—they could bear any amount of melodramatic variation and ranting, all of them which were actable lent themselves to be made into musicals and the dialogue was carried on at an adolescent, punning, innuendo level and was extremely popular with a cultivated set of people who went in for that sort of thing.

Before the end of the century, the distinction between the amateur and the professional had come into being. In the last years of the last decade, an actress, Balamani of Kumbakonam, had made her appearance and name on the stage. And in the last years of the century, Sarasalochana Chettiar followed by Sambanda Mudaliar had already begun to talk of the art of the drama and the purification of the Tamil stage. And this was to continue well on into the first four decades of the 20th century, throughout which Sambanda Mudaliar was—from the point of view of reform and purification—ineffectively in contact with the Tamil stage.

Both amateurs and professionals were active on the stage in Tamilnad but the theatre continued much as it had been during the last decades of the 19th century. Powerful themes were available to the producer and actors were the most important persons connected with the theatre, in course of time being supplanted as far as importance was concerned, by a few actresses. Production was not studied very carefully, but left to the individual actor and actress who often made the play; if they could not, the quality of the music, which was quite high in the early years of the century, was expected to carry the drama through. Scripts were available but an actor of genius rarely kept to a script; he could depend on his popularity and on his sense of the topical to tide him over in his *ad libs*.

The amateurs, headed by Sambanda Mudaliar fought for definitive scripts, for the quality of the music when it began to deteriorate and for the status of the actor. But it cannot be said that the professionals profitted by the efforts of the amateurs, though the latter profitted very much by the example—in doing and not doing—set by the professionals. Sambanda Mudaliar wrote play after play, often adapting for the Tamil stage many a proved favourite from the West and often redoing powerful themes from our own mythology, and was generally concerned, in a largely uncritical age, with values of production. Towards the end of his life, he has written a series of reminiscences setting forth his fight with professionals as well as with the general public regarding their prejudices and predilections which, if edited properly, would make an authentic record of drama in the first three decades of the 20th century. Recalling the difficulties he had in staging Shakespeare in Tamil, he rose to his greatest heights as a student of drama and theatre.

Women created problems in a drama troupe which the leader was hardly equipped to deal with and during a certain stage, boys' troupes were popular throughout Tamilnad. Many of these boys trained in these troupes attained stardom in the films, later. And in a mikeless age, throwing the voice both in singing and in speech, to reach out to a couple of thousand audience as well as the absence of the mike centring action on the stage made for the dramatists' artistic excellence. Many character actors gained a large vogue by sheer histrionic talent, unaided by any direction or production. A few men did women's roles to such perfection that they endeared themselves to an audience that was perfectly clear in its mind about what kind of acting it wanted from such actors portraying women.

From what I have so far said, it should be clear that I would consider the first three decades of the 20th century as the period in which the high watermark of what we can call Tamil drama was achieved. In retrospect, it might look not so splendid an era. But it had strength in its dramatic themes, and even if it did rant, it did rant to some purpose; it had quality in its music; it insisted on acting skill in its actors; and above all, it inspired amateur groups to better and better effort which, however, did not come about.

One particular combination of producer and actor which falls within this period will have to be singled out for special mention in any history of Tamil drama. This was the combination of Cuniah and S. G. Kittappa which dominated the Tamil dramatic scene for a decade in the twenties. Kittappa died young—I do not remember whether he was past

thirty at the time of his death. But as singer, and actor with a sense of the apt and the appropriate, as a loved one of the populace, no greater personality has appeared in the Tamil theatre.

Cunniah was a gifted producer who gave Kittappa his freedom to be what he was and who worked miracles with that, then recent comer to the Tamil stage—electricity. The quick change of many complicated scenes, the colourful wonders of often garish but delightful, to-the-innocent, lighting and the perfect timing of Cunniah's productions do not fade away in retrospect even today. Cunniah's productions were more tableaux than drama; as for instance his *Dasaavathaaram* in which scene after scene and *avathar* after *avathar* of Mahavishnu was shown set in the marvels of a strange world of sea and heaven and earth and was a quick changing series of tableaux which satisfied a largely innocent people into devout wonder. I can remember a garland of vari-coloured electric bulbs round the neck of Sri Krishna which came on into dazzling light leaving the audience gasping with wonder and awe when Sri Krishna began to intone in good Karnatak music the beginning of the *Gita* in a play that is almost impossible even today—the *Bhagavat Gita*.

Even before his death, Kittappa was rumoured to have quarrelled with his producer and when the combination broke up, they neither of them rose to their previous heights. And by the time that Kittappa was rumoured to be dying of overmuch alcohol in his system, the Tamil drama was already running down an incline—an incline that still seems to be operative today.

It was not as if the Cunniah-Kittappa combination was without the usual faults of Tamil drama. There was the absence of a definite script; there was the importance of the music which was out of all proportion to the actual need of it in the play; there was the star value of the hero who was an indispensable person, and equally temperamental as the heroine; there was the theme worn with usage and decked out with all the cliches; there was the production co-ordinated not to all the actors and actresses but to the hero and the heroine, much to the detriment of the other persons acting; and there was above all, an uncritical audience which did not have a tradition of appreciating really worthwhile plays.

After the thirties, in these past thirty years, the role of the uncritical audience has been on the increase especially with reference to drama, conditioned by the rise of lowbrow and proud-of-being-lowbrow journals and the rise of the films. Acting talent was slowly taken away from the stage and it did not prosper under the conditions prevailing in the film world. What few dramas were being enacted became pale imitations of

second-rate cheap films. Even the quality of stage music began to deteriorate because of a new interest in Karnatak music which was more effective as a separate and wholly musical impact. Only those not being able to sing in the necessary concerts being attracted to the films or the stage.

The renaissance of Karnatak music and a revival of interest in the art of pure music led to the organisation of *sabhas* with fixed memberships from among the middle class, and for a time it looked as if the play and the theatre would go under in this deluge of good music. But later, by the end of the thirties, the *sabhas*, being unable to command a regular supply of good music, began to patronise plays and theatre troupes, both amateur and professional. In nearly twenty-five years, the *sabha* approach to entertainment of an evening has entrenched itself in the consciousness of the middle-class audience, which, while it was familiar with good music, was not familiar with good drama. It mistook any entertainment on the stage as worthwhile and often compared even a tolerably good drama with a bad film and began to find it wanting. So that under the patronage of the *sabhas*, the film stars were vicariously called on to act in plays and those who acted in plays to large audiences, hoped for cinema chances sooner or later. Bad art flourished and is flourishing under the guise of the popular.

Though this is generally what can be called a hopeless situation, signs of revolt were not wanting. The ideological play, as such, was taken up by the Dravida Kazhakam and Dravida Munnetra Kazhakam and they produced plays with an intensity of reformist passion that spelled some hope for Tamil drama. But both the D.K. and the D.M.K. fell victims to the lure of the cinema, though they did and do venture into theatre with some effect. One should mention in this group a retelling of the *Ramayana* which was promptly suppressed by the Government, and *Rattak-Kanneer* which stands out among many plays of a similar nature.

One other oasis of hope in Tamil drama was the will-to-experiment of a troupe headed by Sahasranaman, but his will-to-experiment petered out after the first few attempts. His early adaptations of Galsworthy and Tagore were notable as plays and promised much, though he had to substitute Bharata Natyam to music to please the populace. But in his later attempts, the tendency to play safe was all-too-evident even though in his *Paanchaali Sabatham* there is a strict element of the intellectual, but one feels that Sahasranaman would not have attempted it except for its being Bharathi. In the series of original plays he had done for him by Thi Janakiraman and Azhagiriswamy, he has been unlucky in having

found writers who were ill equipped to write dramas ; the former overdoes the dialogue and is generally unemphatic in his themes ; the latter has attempted a drama of what is epic material and has failed miserably. Another writer, B.S. Ramiah, who is known for his adaption of the much-adapted *Inspector of Gogol* and other plays like *Therotti Mahan*, overwrites in a melodramatic manner. Sahasranaman himself is too much of a film star and his plays suffer from projecting himself without projecting the other members of the cast.

Sambanda Mudaliar throughout the forties and fifties had been working for the uplift of the status of the amateurs in drama as he had all his life been doing. The renaissance in Tamil which started with journalistic writing in the early thirties spread to the short story and longer fiction, and in the forties to literary criticism and in the fifties to new verse, hardly touched the drama though a few writers like the late Pudumaippittan and the late Ku Pa Rajagopalan and the living Naa Pichamurthy and Chidambarasubramanian and the present writer of this article wrote plays, but none of them have been staged except by amateurs and, in the one case of Pudumaippittan, with some success.

The *sabha*-created audience was the ideal audience for a dramatist like "Cho" whose success in recent years on the Tamil stage is phenomenal. He collects a string of gags and hangs a more-or-less farcical story on them ; all his points are taken by a none-too-intelligent audience. Balachander and various others have had mild successes with their plays with one set, divided sets and mystery plays. The ambition of most of these groups, when they do not come originally from the films is to achieve entry into films which "Cho" has recently done. In all their productions, the production values are as near zero as possible ; their colour-schemes in scenes hardly match ; their lighting casts more shadows that are intriguing ; their actions and gestures are not co-ordinated ; only the innuendoes of dialogue, mostly of an adolescent kind, sustain their plays. The Tamil nostalgia for earlier, more spacious days, sometimes produces startlingly original plays which astound by their costumes, lack of time-sense and by their inept handling of history.

It is the will-to-experiment that is notoriously lacking in Tamil drama today. If "Cho" succeeds, many minor "Chos" are born over-night and override the scene—and the idea of success is still geared, in the eyes of every one connected with the stage—the playwright as well as the actor, the leading lady as well as the page boy, the producer as well as the props man—on the films. The uncritical audiences which perhaps deserve

no better plays than they now get, generally militate against whatever will to experiment can be mustered in the Tamil world of theatre. Even the Delhi or Bombay Tamils seem to prefer the plays of "Cho" or Shanmugham out of a false sense of linguistic pride to the really better plays that one can get sometimes in Bengali or in Marathi. Much has to be done in Tamil drama, but when it will be done is yet to be seen.

Ka Naa Subramanyam born 1912, is a distinguished Tamil writer and critic. Author of several works among which are "Daiva jananam", "Adanrangu" collections of short stories, "Sarmavin Uyir", "Ezhu Per", "Samuha Chitram", all novels; "Nallavar" drama and poetry. His extensive knowledge of contemporary Western culture and literature has greatly influenced his writing. He contributes extensively to English and Tamil journals.