

## The Growth of Drama in Tamil Nadu

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I have come from the southern end of Bharat, as the representative of Tamil Nadu, which is noted for its immemorial culture, and my task here is to describe to you how the dramatic art has been fostered there.

At the outset, I convey to you the heartiest greetings and good wishes of the playwrights, actors and actresses of Tamil Nadu. You are aware that the literary heritage of the Tamils dates back several thousands of years, and that there are very few languages in the world which are as unique and as full of ancient glory as ours.

Our ancestors had developed the three branches of Tamil literature, namely, prose and poetry and drama. Accordingly, they had devised the technique for each art. So the growth of the Tamil language was bound up with the growth of its dramatic literature. And the Tamils must be given credit for their realization of the fact that drama as an art was essentially related to and based on life, and hence the singular greatness of the Tamil drama. Even as early as two thousand years ago, there were works on the dramatic art like *Muruval*, *Jayantham*, *Seyitriyam* and *Guna Nool*.

In a celebrated Tamil classic like *Silappathikaram*, whose historical value cannot be disputed, there are detailed references to contemporary techniques in stage-acting and theatre-construction. One of the famous commentators of *Silppathikaram*, Adiyarku Nalar, makes mention of two important books on the art of Tamil drama, namely *Bharatam* and *Agathyam*, which were authoritative texts for Tamil dramatists and playwrights and which, in the course of time, were lost beyond recovery. It must also be noted that when the Lemuria Continent in South Asia was overwhelmed by the sea, many of the Tamil works, particularly those dealing with researches in the history and growth of Tamil dramas sponsored by the great Pandya Kings of yore in their academies disappeared in the general destruction.

Further, it has been brought to our notice by Adiyarku Nallar that guides to Tamil drama like *Bharata Senapatheeyam*, *Mathivanar Nataka Tamil Nool* existed in his own time. Of course, they were more technical than literary. Again it has to be borne in mind that the Tamil dramas written in ancient times were intended only to be seen and enjoyed on the stage, they were not to be read as works of literature.

There are historical records in the form of inscriptions on stones to prove that Chola Emperors like Raja Raja Cholan and Rajendiran patronized the Tamil dramatic art, and playwrights and actors were given cultivable lands for their living. In the historic temple at Tanjore, the Tamil drama, *Raja Raja Vijayam*, depicting the victories of Raja Raja Cholan was enacted. Besides, dramas were enacted in all towns and villages, particularly in theatres

erected in open fields for the purpose. The theatre commanded place of pride even in king's palaces. To this day, the dramatic tradition is still fostered in remote villages. Amateur actors in villages organize 'street dramas'—dramas played in open streets without scenes and settings but in appropriate costumes on festive occasions either during day or night.

Speaking of extant Tamil dramatic compositions, I should say they belong to the last three hundred years. They are all in verse form, not in prose. Even the Tamil dramas of old were purely poetic dramas. For example, Ramayanam, Mahabharatham, *Harischandra* appeared as poetic dramas.

Only in the last century Tamil dramas in prose began to appear. This marked a new era in the evolution of the modern Tamil drama. The cause for the rise of Tamil prose drama was the translation and adaptation into Tamil of the English plays of Shakespeare and the Sanskrit dramas of Kalidasa and Bhavabhuti by eminent Tamil writers. But many of them, it appears, were not put on the stage. During this period actors and actresses, who put on board Tamil dramas, composed and improvised their own dialogues in prose according to the best of their ability, while retaining the songs written by others.

The year 1891 witnessed another important change in the history of Tamil theatre. Shri Shankaradoss Swamigal made his debut in the world of drama. He renovated and refurbished old Tamil dramas, composed new ones for the stage, and what was more like Shakespeare, he played several important roles in his own dramas. He wrote forty plays in all. He adapted into Tamil the plays of Shakespeare, particularly *Romeo and Juliet* and *Cymbeline*. He died in 1922 at the age of 52. His contributions to the Tamil dramatic art will ever be remembered and cherished.

Contemporaneous with Shri Shankaradoss were other celebrated Tamil playwrights like Shri Appavoo Pillay who wrote a drama on King Harischandra, Shri Siva Shanmugam Pillay who dramatized the Ramayanam, Shri Muthuswamy Kaviraya who wrote *Krishnalila*, and Shri Veeraswamy Vaddiyar who adapted the Mahabharatham for the stage. There were other lesser artists, who in their own way developed the dramatic art, namely Shri Santhana Krishna Naidu, Shri Sankaralinga Kavirayar and Shri Bhaskaradoss.

During the last century, hundreds of Tamil dramatic companies came into existence and then disappeared. These companies were responsible for the introduction of the modern Tamil theatre as such, replacing thereby contrivances and other crude equipment used formerly in street-dramas. The pioneer in this field was Nawab Govindaswamy Rao of Tanjore. There were others who followed his example like the proprietors of Shri Kalyanarama Iyer Company, Shri Ramudu Iyer Company, Shri Ravana Govindaswamy Naidu Company, Shri Valli Vaidyanathan Iyer Company, Shri Alli Parameswara Iyer Company, Shri K.S. Ananthanarayana Iyer's Arya Gana Sabha, Shri P.S. Vel Nayar's Shunmugananda Sabha which produced the celebrated actress K.B. Sundarambal, Shri Kanniah Company which produced the star-actor S.G. Kittappa, Shri Manamohana Arangaswamy Nayudu Company, Shri G.S. Munuswamy Naidu Company, Shri Sami Nayudu Company and Shri Vellore Narayanaswamy Pillay Company. All these companies did their very best to promote play-

acting on the Tamil stage. There were lady artists too, who competed with men in organizing the Tamil theatre. We must remember with gratitude the good work done by Shrimati Balamani Company, Shrimati Balambal Company, Shrimati Rajambal Company and Shrimati Aranganayaki Company. For all the dramatic companies cited above, the guide and mentor was the late Shri Sankaradoss.

Amateur dramatic associations also originated in the year 1891. The great Tamil actor and playwright Shri Pammal Sambanda Mudaliar established the Suguna Vilasa Sabha in Madras, chiefly to encourage the histrionic art among amateurs. Similar organizations with the same aims and objects sprang up. They were the Kumbakonam Vani Vilas Sabha, Shri F.G. Natesa Iyer's Rasikaranjini Sabha, and the Tanjore Sudharsana Sabha. Shri Pammal Sambanda Mudaliar, who was one of the Presidency Magistrates, was interested keenly in the growth and expansion of Tamil drama and stage acting. He did not turn professional but helped to raise the status and the dignity of the art which was largely practised by the professionals. Shri Pammal Sambanda Mudaliar wrote about eight plays, which were partly adaptations of Shakespeare's and Kalidasa's plays and partly his own creations. Both amateurs and professionals stage his dramas to this day. One of his own works, *Manohara*, has held the stage for the past sixty years and bids fair to become immortal. Under his guidance and inspiration, the late Shri S. Satyamurti Iyer, Sir R.K. Shanmugam Chettiar and Sir C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer, the present Vice-Chancellor of the Banaras University, often played roles in his dramas on the amateur stage of the Suguna Vilas Sabha. Both Shri Pammal Sambanda Mudaliar and Shri Sankaradoss Swamigal will go down in the history of Tamil drama, the former as the father of Tamil drama and the latter as the first instructor and writer of Tamil plays.

Another important phase appeared in the development of Tamil drama in the year 1916. The dramatic companies run by grown up actors and actresses declined in stage discipline and morality. Naturally, Shri Sankaradoss Swamigal founded a company consisting of boy-actors mostly. The Thathuvameenalosani Sabha, Balameenaranjini Sangeetha Sabha, Original Boy's Company and Shri Bala Shunmugananda Sabha performed the dramas of Shri Sankaradoss Swamigal and Shri Sambanda Mudaliar.

I became a disciple of Shri Sankaradoss Swamigal in 1918, when I was five years old. For the past thirty-eight years, I have been connected with the stage. Compelled by circumstances, now and then I have acted in the films. But I am serving the world of art essentially as a stage-actor, editor, producer and director of a dramatic troupe.

When I started my stage-career, the profession of acting was considered most disreputable. People avoided social contact with actors and actresses and they were segregated. It was thought that those who performed as actors had no means of earning a decent livelihood. But today a revolution has taken place in the life of actors. The actor is acclaimed as an artist, titles are showered on him and the dramatic art is regarded as indispensable to the cultural progress and happiness of society. So this great improvement in the social position of the actor has brought a person like me, who had suffered all the indignities of the

profession, incalculable happiness.

I remember vividly the days when the stage was lighted only by torches, again the days, when gas-lights and petromax lights illuminated the theatre. Now I am staging plays in the blinding glare of spotlights and footlights. I cannot help marvelling at these changes. Those days, scenes were punctuated with songs. The actors quarrelled through songs, made love through songs and their peals of laughter were also reflected in songs. Prose was a rarity. Even the stealthy rogue, who trod the stage like a cat, appropriately burst out with songs. There were at least a hundred songs in every drama, the entertainment began at 10 p.m. and lasted till daybreak.

Now it is all different. Songs are few, the duration of the drama is three and a half hours. There is an attempt to reduce it to two and a half hours. The theme too has changed. Formerly stories from our Puranas and *ithihasas*, besides traveller's tales, formed the subject of drama. But since 1922, dramas on social themes have gained in popularity. Topics like child-marriage, incompatibility in marriage, the dowry system, corrupt religious practices, which have figured in the social reform novels of Shri T.R. Rangaraju and Shri Vaduvur Doraiswamy Iyengar, have been dramatized for the stage by writers like Shri M. Kandaswamy Mudaliar and were performed with success especially by the Boys' Company.

In this connection, I have to mention with pride the fact that the Tamil Theatre made a significant contribution to the movement for national liberation. Though Tamil dramas like *The Triumph of Khaddar*, *Patriotism*, and *The National Flag* were discountenanced by the British, yet they succeeded in kindling the flame of patriotism. The author of the two Tamil plays *The Triumph of Khaddar* and *The National Flag*, which roused the feelings of the south at the time of the Nagpur Flag Satyagraha, was the patriot Shri T.P. Krishnaswamy Pavalar. Besides, he wrote other patriotic plays like *Bombay Mail* and *Punjab Kesari*. To mention a few more plays of this type, we have the *Hero of Banapuram* by Shri V. Swaminatha Sarma, *Inbasakaram* by Shri C.A. Iyamuthu and *Kaviyin Kanavu* by Shri S.D. Sundaram.

With the advent of the talkies, it was believed that the Tamil stage would become extinct. To my mind, the cinema has given a fillip to stage-acting and has helped to improve the stagecraft too. And actors in the Tamil cinema today were sometime ago members of the Boys' Company. But for the experienced stage-actors, the cinema would not be a flourishing concern now. The future of the cinema is bound to the stage.

One could say, a renaissance occurred in Tamil drama in 1935. A spate of dramas appeared which were based on social reform themes as had been dealt with in novels written in other languages. The most popular of these dramas were *The Daughter of a Gumastha* by Shri T.K. Muthuswamy and *Man* by Shri Adimulam Somasundaram.

Several modern Tamil playwrights enjoy an unrivalled popularity. Their dramas have secured for them a special place in the hearts of the people. For instance, Shri K.S. Krishnamurthi's *Andaman Kaithi*, Shri P. Neelakantan's *Mulil Roja* and *We Two*, Shri C.N. Annadurai's *Servant Maid* and *One Night*, Shri S.V. Sahastranamam's *Mad Man*, Shri R. Venkatachalam's *Girl and Wife*, Shri Narana Duraikannan's *Uriviam*, Shri N.

Somasundaram's *Inspector*, Shri Chinnaraju's *Tears of Blood*, Shri S. D. Sundaram's *Kalvanin Kathali* based on Shri Kali Krishnamurthi's story, and Shri N.S. Krishnan's productions namely, *Lost Love*, *Fifty and Sixty* and *Man and Beast*.

A new movement also arose to correct the unhealthy influences of Western education. As a means of religious revival, two Tamil dramas proved most effective and timely. These were Shri Ethiraju's *Avvaiyar* and Shri Sulamangalam Bhagavata's *Siva Lila*, which ran for hundreds of weeks. In the wake of the religious dramas came the Tamil historical dramas. The first historical play was based on the life of the south Indian patriot, Veera Pandya Katta Bomman, who resisted the tyranny of the East India Company. This was written by Shri R. Venkatachalam and titled *Muthal Muzhakkam*. He wrote another equally popular historical play called *Himayathil Nam*. Shri K.A.P. Viswanatham has written a play of considerable educative value, *Tamil Selvam*. Perhaps, the most popular historical drama that holds the stage at the moment with astonishing box-office success is Shri Aru Ramanathan's *Raja Raja Cholan*.

There are historical plays produced and staged by amateurs like Shri V.C. Gopalrathan's *Raja Bhakti*, Shri Devan's *Thuppariyum Sambu*, *Kalyani* and *Maithili*, Shri Naradar Srinivasa Rao's *Sarala*, Shri Kalki R. Krishnamurthi's *Sivakamiyin Sabatham*, *Parthipan Kanavu* and *Mohini Theevu*.

Though the cinema has not seriously interfered with the growth of the theatrical art, yet it has produced one adverse effect. There is a tendency now to convert all theatres into cinema houses. And dramatic troupes find it very difficult to secure theatres for their performances. There is only one producer in the Tamil dramatic world, who is successfully braving this difficulty, and that is Nawab Rajamanikkam who runs the Boys' Company. His religious dramas like *Ramayanam*, *Dasavatharam*, *Kumara Vijayam*, *Sabari Malai Ayyappan*, *Sakti Lila*, *Jesus Christ* and *Ramadoss* are continuing to draw huge audiences.

I and others interested in the advancement of the Tamil theatre organized the first dramatists' conference in 1944 and conveyed to the Government the grievances of actors and the crying needs of the stage. This was stressed again and again in the next three conferences as well. One grave injury that was sought to be done to the dramatic art was the imposition of the Entertainment Tax. All our appeals for the exemption of theatre from this tax were of no avail. Consequently, in 1950 we started the Nataka Academy, which was composed of both amateurs and professionals. In view of the paucity of built-up theatres, the Academy organized open-air drama festivals which were attended in thousands by the people. At last in 1951, the Government of Madras exempted dramas from the Entertainment Tax. Now open-air theatres can accommodate an audience of ten thousand at a time. The open-air theatre has become an essential adjunct to every exhibition conducted under municipal or other auspices.

We have also brought into existence the South Indian Actors' Association. It is now three years old, and is striving to establish a fellowship among all actors, popularise the theatrical art, and make its own contribution to the art of the cinema. We are also publishing

the monthly journal, *The Voice of the Actor*.

Before I conclude this short history of the Tamil stage, I would like to record the debt Tamil Nadu owes to Prof V.G. Suryanarayana Sastry, who published a valuable treatise on the art and composition of drama called *Nataka Iyal*. A place of honour must also be given to Prof Sundararama Pillay, who wrote the poetic drama, *Manonmaniyam* in Tamil.

Now let me submit a few suggestions to the Union Government, who are so keenly interested in the promotion and growth of the dramatic art in general. After the dawn of freedom, our artists have the honour and privilege of visiting foreign countries, where they are spreading the fame of Bharat. And artists from other countries visit us regularly. But the Government should take steps to establish contacts between artists of one province and another. This is urgently required. Cultural delegations should be exchanged between States. Much of the harm resulting from linguistic divisions would be alleviated in this manner.

Secondly, we are of the opinion that all duties connected with the promotion of the several fine arts will have to be undertaken by the State Natak and Sangeeta Academy and the Central Nataka and Sangeeta Academy can act only as a supervisory body. The Central Academy cannot continue to distribute prizes, medals, certificates and scholarships to artists from all parts of this vast country of ours. For, they find it difficult to go to Delhi every time. This could be done by the State Academy which will also ensure that only the deserving among the artists get help and recognition.

Thirdly, the allotment of funds for cultural programmes may be made the sole responsibility of the State Academy. It is easier to approach the State Academy for redress of grievances than the Academy at the Centre. Further, the State Academy could convene once a year a conference of artists for taking stock of the progress made, and plan for the future. The State Academy should send an elected representative to the central Academy to enable him to place the views of the people of the State before the authorities. The State Academy should conduct the National Art Festival within the State. Private associations should not be allowed to conduct this festival.

Fourthly, we have read in the papers that it is proposed to build a national theatre at Delhi costing about seventy-five lakhs. Instead of spending all the amount on one theatre at Delhi, it would be wise to spend five lakhs in each State and thus provide a national theatre in the capital of every State. This would be a sound economic policy too. We could improve these theatres later on.

Before I conclude I would like to point out that art and language are inseparable. We can develop any art only through our mother tongue. This should not be taken for linguistic fanaticism. Of course, we are interested in the unity of the country and are prepared to make any sacrifice to that end. Therefore, we plead that we should be given every facility, every encouragement to build up the Tamil theatre. And we solemnly promise that as artists we shall do every thing in our power to safeguard and cultivate the great national virtues and the culture of Bharat.