

Therukoothu: The Echoing Tales in the Village Winds

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Abstract:

“Therukoothu” is a unique Genre of the Dramatic Arts born from the creativity of Humble Village artists who adhered with their Cult and Religious traditions. It has deep roots in the Southern Parts of India especially Tamilnadu and is aged more than Two thousand years. They merely purported to bring forth the Essence of Literature in the Epics and Puranas to those of the underprivileged peasants and commoners. It is a Street Play which enacted the Legendary Tales with the help of Skilful Artists, Simple stage setting, Detailed Costumes, Witty and Comic Phrases, Mesmerising Songs and Exuberant Dances with the Accompaniment of Music. Tales from the imperceptible Puranas were catered to the comprehension of common people. It enlightened them in Ascetic aspects, Thought provoking Philosophy, with an additional Joy of soul relishing Entertainment.

Key words: Therukoothu, Street Plays, Commoners, Songs, Music, Dance, Philosophy, Entertainment.

An old rural saying goes like this: “The wind shall bear witness to all that are born from the Heart and cast through the Tounge” The adage is true in all ages. There was the lingering sense of something Sweet, something powerful and sometimes thought provoking and astounding in the air, when an aesthetic act of majestic proportions is performed amidst a mass Gathering. This sense of Awe shall linger even long after the performance. It is said that Literature in all languages had the potential to provoke the five senses of human kind. Every detail of the human life was depicted, personified and explained every minute aspect in its truest form. The Literature was a means to identify the facts from the given truth. It laid down precepts with which humanity became more human and constituted as well as characterised the concept of civilisation in such a form that the beauty in its revelation cannot be turned a blind eye. Literature was a part of the lifetime habits that grew on the literates. As mentioned, Literature was the luxurious vehicle that

only the educated had the liberty to take a ride on. It cannot be said that the common or the under privileged sect of the society had this opportunity to cherish the same.

But long before the people derived pleasure from Volumes of Literature, there was an art that literally passed on what was intended to be. It was an art that was not born out of the creative thinking of Legendary artists of Literature but brewed and found presentation from the humble minds that dwelled in rural residences before a time when even the term of Civilisation didn't take major leaps. This art served as a bridge for the illiterate sects to the grand proportions of Literature. It took the marvels of the great stories to the mass in a medium that captivated their wits and senses. It enacted the text with the support of actual people which had a major impact. The reach of the intended morals, principles and conventions was comparatively effective in this medium. This art is Old enough as observed by scholars to be dated back to almost two thousand years. They were the affordable entertainment for commoners but stood on par with the effects were made from other sophisticated sources. This art was called as the "Therukoothu", which could be translated from Tamil, roughly as 'Theru' meaning the Street and 'Koothu' referring to Dance, or in most preferable context as "The Street Theatre". It is one of the earliest forms of the Open-air theatre.

The History and Origin of this art has been observed to be untraceable as certain records of the art are found in the ancient texts dating back to centuries. It is said that it originated in the Tamil speaking southern parts of India and spread across the borders wherever the Tamil language took them. Remarkable places where the art thrived and still in practice are observed to be in certain districts of Tamilnadu, such as Dharmapuri, Arcot and Chengalpattu. This genre of Drama is noted to be performed in Sri Lanka which was believed by Geologists and Historians to be once a part of the great lands of India before the nature's force took over land by Sea. Though differing in themes and style, the "Sinhala Nadagam" bore striking features of Therukoothu. The impact it made was so infectious that the form was adapted for Catholic Plays in Jaffna by the Jesuit priests in Sri Lanka. It has been noted that there are Eleven types of Therukoothu, in one of the ancient poetic texts of Tamil Literature "Silapadikaram". It has also been noted that a French Theatre group, "Theatre du Soleil" had adapted elements of the Therukoothu and staged plays based on two of the tales from Mahabharata.

Basically, they were performed in the rural areas and sometimes inside the premises of the Temples, particularly during and around the time of summer, when the works at agricultural fields and other related professions of the peasants were taking a break, or during the festival times which again relates with agricultural reverence such as Pongal. It didn't fail to be a major part of the entertainment during other

festivals too. The auspicious months of 'Panguni' and 'Aadi' were eagerly expected by people on account of the Therukoothu performances.

A story from the ancient legends, religious texts or folk lore were the themes of the Play. Most of them were informative and predominantly didactic. As a divine principle every story from the religious texts upheld the virtues in goodness, such as, Asceticism, Honesty, Benevolence, Chastity, Loyalty and often ended with a note of didacticism and conveyed a moral using the Triumph of the virtuous and steadfast Protagonist or his fall on account of debauchery and unscrupulous deeds. The virtues and dogma written in an Epic or a Poem were usually not accessible to the peasants and commoners but they were occasionally given to them in sermons and religious lectures by some spiritual men who would have studied them in the early religious institutions known as Gurukulam or passed on from their elders as a legacy. They were the known philosophers to the commoners who had this opportunity to listen to their speeches while seated in a shrine, but only during a time of any auspicious occasion or a festival, in observation. "Kathakalatchebam" is another one of such old programmes, which are still preserved and practised. This is a religious discourse to the same kind of gathering, where the stories are narrated by Songs with a generous accompaniment of music provided by artists. It was only by these such practices and art forms the commoners were acquainted to the legends. But Therukoothu brought the same stories to their own localities and much in advantages. A single Picture is considered to be an effective substitute for a thousand words in texts and description. In Therukoothu, the people were transformed from being mere audience to Spectators. Here they were able to see the live picture of a story being performed. This enhanced their vision and increased the levels of perceptions.

In a Therukoothu, the spectators will be struck with the awe of imagery brought by the rich costume and when their focus is engaged, the story unfolds to their wits and transfers details and purpose of the story. Tales from the great epics of Ramayana, Mahabharata, Periya Puranam which were supposed and appealing for comprehension of the elite, come to the perspicuity of the uneducated in a live form of an abridged version. Stories of Chastity, Religious Reverence, Piety and Honour were catered to the commoners in a form that they get an opportunity to learn more from the sacred Literatures and bear knowledge or at least catch a glimpse on the peripheral levels. The spectators had a near experience to what the characters in the story underwent when it was enacted at a close proximity. Particularly, the scenes from Mahabharata where 'Draupadi' was forcefully disrobed in the Hall, taught them the vices and effects of gambling and the climax of the epic showed them the costs of greed and the wages of covetousness. There were similar plots and themes that riveted their attention. Tales from Mahabharata itself provided themes for the plays such as,

Draupadi Kalyanam, Supattirai Kalyanam, Alli Arjuna, Panchali Sapatham, Arjunan Tapam, Krishnan Thoothu, Abhimanyu, Karna Mookshayam, Patinettam Por, Aravan Kalappali. Other major sources offered stories of Deities, Divine Interceptions of God and Legendary incidents like Valli Thirumanam, Incarnation of Narasimman for Pragalathan and much more involving an array of famous legendary characters of Rama, Ravana, Sita, Hanuman, Murugan, Vishnu, Indran and many more. These performances brought home the magic of Legends to Common people.

Therukoothu had numerous advantages over other forms of Sophisticated and folk arts. The stage was literally the open-air grounds that surpassed the limitations of limited audience but facilitated a gathering. The multitudes that arrived to enjoy the show comprised of multiple races, creeds and constitutions. There was not a prerequisite demand for elaborate back drops and rich scenery nor expensive props. As the Play would be staged on the Temple or Common grounds a simple 'Veshti' (Dhoti) can be used as the back screen which is still negligible and sometimes as the temporary curtain, because the performance was what that mattered the most. The additional effects did not require extensive expenditures as it would demand in a theatre. Though they were cost effective, they never spared on the Costumes and Cosmetics which were the main constituent of the effects. It comprised of rich looking decorative materials which were derived from simple sources yet bore marks of extravagance in application. The word "Kattaikkuttu" which is another term for Therukoothu derives the name from the 'kattai': an adornment worn for the event. Their attire and appearance during the performance will bear significant distinctions. A Stiff and wide Frock will skirt the lower part of the torso up to the Knees and gilded wooden pads will be tied around the shoulders, with a huge Crown, implying that the Protagonists were Warriors. Though not expensive, glittering ornaments mainly consisting of shiny dress material and mirror like jewellery were liberally used. Tingling and jingling reverberations will shrill in the atmosphere from ritual musical anklets bearing about or more than fifty tiny bells. All this become part of the costume to bring upon the effect as the artists paced back and forth over the grounds of play.

The diction was musical by preference predominantly taken over by Songs that substituted a major part of the dialogues. This was a unique feature of Therukoothu. The play will start and end with Songs. There shall be a separate choir seated by the sides to render support during the Prologue, Epilogue and the introductions of Characters. But the charm of the art lies in the performance of the artists themselves who will mostly takeover the narration and introduction. The introduction will consist of the 'Virutham'; the initial four-line verses to invoke the muse to bless and grant support towards a successful accomplishment of the venture, whilst an artist in the guise of the Elephant headed Lord 'Ganesan', who is generally called

for the same purpose, will appear from behind the curtain of Veshti. It will be followed by an introduction to the tale and its Title by the stage manager referred as 'Kattiakkaran' who usually appears at the commencement of the play, to offer the spectators to familiarise with the proceedings. He will inquire the Characters as they appear on their identities, purpose and capabilities. Sometimes, the main protagonist will himself do this part and the Kattiakkaran shall offer the Moral of the story at the end too. As it was in the English or any other plays in the world, the Female characters were often played by Male artists themselves who surpassed the acute observations of the error spotting eyes in every minor detail of the feminine mien and bearing of the role with gaiety and cadence, prudently. Other than being didactic, a play will have to be highly entertaining too, which obviously engages the role of a 'Komali': the Clown who will amuse the gathering with his buffoonery and witty dialogues filled with mirth and mostly Sarcasm to the follies of the high and mighty. All the diction will be made of Songs aptly versed and effectively sung with appealing Ragas, observing the nuances required at an open – air theatre for a great gathering, usually with high pitched notes and engaging Masculine tones. Their Histrionics were far beyond commendations as the art of Therukoothu relied more on Songs and facial expressions at its best. The makeup provided an additional aid to their expressions of all human feelings. As much as the Songs amazed the audience, so was the performance of Dances. As the very name suggests: Koothu meaning dance, the plays cannot do without them, as they are an integral part of the Art. All the artists were skilful dancers who danced and paced the ground with short and larger strides depending upon the context of the scene while waving the piece of cloth in both hands in synchronisation with the musical accompaniment. The body language was in absolute concordance with the Role and Music effected by the Rural Folk Dance. The audience were thrilled with all of these combined features. They listened when the artist spoke, swayed in rhythm when the artist sang, laughed their hearts out when he joked, jumped and rejoiced when he danced and they cried when the artist bereaved. In a certain way their senses were taken for a magic ride in the winds of spells casted in the air.

The Artists were like Rockstars of that Era, whose rare arrival was eagerly expected. The Performance was a bliss yearned for and that which came after a long wait. As everything has to undergo the inevitable phase of change, so did the Art of Therukoothu. Over the years the art was taken to be fading into oblivion, on account of the emergence of more innovative and creative genres in Fine arts. The advent of Scientific aspects and state of the art Technologies invaded almost all fields, especially in the fields of Entertainment. Highly equipped Modern Drama theatres took the attention of spectators. The advent of Moving Pictures and establishment of Talkies swept the spectators off their feet. Various other village sports and games were making their way towards spot light. Certain arts like "Bommalaattam" which is Puppetry and "Thol paavai" widely known as Leather Puppetry and some minor arts along with Therukoothu had to bear the

brunt. They had to deal with the lack of attention over the Times. However, some artists who have been engaged in this art for generations in their families carry it as their legacy in the southern parts of Tamilnadu. The Themes of the plays have also made some transformations by stepping out of the shadows of Epics and Puranas and they have taken more Contemporary Social issues and conduct regular Awareness programmes with the same devices. As a mark of respect and tribute to the Art and artists, Scenes of Therukoothu were included in many Tamil Movies. One for such reference is the performance of the Actor 'Kamal Haasan' in the Movie "Anbe Sivam", where a street paly is performed emphasising the Communist principles against an Autocratic Businessman.

In a way of telling the Therukoothu has been a unique genre of the plays in its own right. They brought the commoners close to many aspects that would have remained inaccessible or hard to comprehend. During an era when formal Education was a luxury, Therukoothu indirectly brought them oral education. It brought them in light with the explanation and clarifications of the deities as well as their deeds and specifications of divine principles meant to be observed and followed. Therukoothu brought them entertainment in terms of mirth and laughter. It was entertainment at almost free of cost, excepting to their wilful contributions towards the production funds. Apart from arousing their senses with light hearted comedy it also made people to ponder over the facts in society. The Clown made sure of that with his witty and sarcastic dialogues that incited people into Reasoning things of Men and Matters. In doing so Therukoothu was subtle form of a device that initiated and executed Social Reformation. It served greatly as a bridge for the underprivileged to make a journey into the unknown and vast proportions of Literature. By bringing all such necessary aspects to people, Therukoothu was an art that indirectly served the people. As food and nourishment is required to retain the existence of lives, the Human Spirit needs to be nourished with all the above-mentioned factors and aspects, lest they either become mundane as mechanical or resort to the other extreme of becoming a Beast ridden by animal instincts. Therukoothu, helped them to retain what was necessary to human existence called as Humanity. As long as Therukoothu is in existence, there will be Magic in the winds speaking Volumes of Tales.