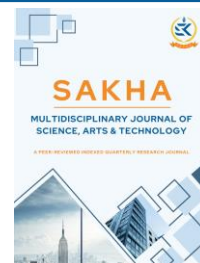




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Therukoothu: Living Folk Theatre and the Spatial Culture of Tamil Villages

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Abstract

Therukoothu, the traditional street theatre of Tamil Nadu, is a major folk performance deeply rooted in village tradition, social organization, and collective cultural memory. Unlike classical theatre traditions that depend on enclosed stages and passive spectatorship, Therukoothu is performed in open public spaces such as village streets, temple courtyards and festival grounds, where performers and audiences share a common cultural and social space. This paper examines stage, space and audience interaction in Therukoothu as cultural traits rather than merely technical or performative elements. It argues that the absence of a fixed stage, the ritual use of everyday village spaces, and the active participation of the audience express key Tamil folk values such as social equality and communal living.

The paper further interprets Therukoothu as a form of spatial democracy, where no rigid boundary exists between performer and spectator. The 360-degree performance arena brings together the sacred, mythological and social worlds. By analysing performances conducted in village streets, temple grounds and shared public spaces, this study demonstrates that the “street” in Therukoothu is not merely a venue but a ritual and cultural landscape. Through oral tradition, shared space and participatory performance, Therukoothu continues to sustain living cultural traditions of Tamil folk society.

Keywords: Therukoothu, Cultural Traits, Public Space, Folk Theatre, Audience Interaction, Tamil Folk Tradition.

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Introduction

Therukoothu, the quintessential street theatre of Tamil Nadu, is one of the most vibrant and enduring folk theatre traditions of Tamil Nadu. It serves as a repository of myths, rituals, and social values of Tamil folk culture. It is a multi-disciplinary art form that brings together Iyal (literature), Isai (music), and Natakam (drama) and is predominantly practiced in the northern districts of Tamil Nadu. The tradition is closely associated with temple festivals dedicated to village deities such as Draupadi Amman, Mariamman, and Ayyanar, where performance and ritual are inseparably linked.

The narratives enacted in Therukoothu are largely drawn from Indian epics, particularly the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, along with Puranic legends and local myths. One of the most significant contexts for Therukoothu is the Mahabharata Festival performed at Draupadi Amman temples. This festival strictly follows traditional ritual and performative conventions and extends over a period of eighteen days. During the initial phase of the festival, discourses on the Mahabharata are delivered in morning. From the eighth day onwards, selected episodes of Therukoothu are enacted each night from 9.00 p.m. until daybreak. The festival is conducted during the Tamil months of Chithirai, Vaikasi, Ani, and Adi (mid-April to mid-August). It begins with Kappukattal and flag hoisting and concludes with the ritual of fire walking, marking the culmination of the sacred narrative cycle. The performances usually continue throughout the night and are preceded by rituals like poojas, processions, and the formal opening of the performance space. The performers prepare themselves through ritual practices, and their costumes and makeup are treated as sacred. In this sense, Therukoothu is not merely a form of entertainment; it is a ritual offering, a religious act and a shared cultural experience closely linked to village life.

Unlike classical dance-drama and theatre traditions that depend on indoor auditoriums, fixed stages, and a clear separation between performers and spectators, Therukoothu is performed in open public spaces such as village streets, temple courtyards, and festival grounds. These everyday spaces are temporary turned into sacred and dramatic spaces during the performance. The open and flexible performance space turns the entire village into an active participant in the dramatic event. Continuous interaction between performers and spectators reinforces the collective and participatory nature of the tradition. While several studies have examined Therukoothu in terms of narrative content, ritual significance, and performance aesthetics, relatively little attention has been given to the

spatial organization of performances and the dynamic relationship between stage, audience, and public space. This paper examines stage, space, and audience interaction in Therukoothu as cultural traits embedded within Tamil folk tradition. It aims to explore how public spaces are utilized in Therukoothu performances and how narratives are spatially organized and symbolically represented within these spaces. It argues that the open performance space and close audience involvement in Therukoothu reflect key Tamil folk values such as collective participation, social equality, sacred space, and the oral transmission of cultural memory.

Public Space and Cultural Geography in Tamil Folk Life

The space used in Therukoothu is fundamentally a socio-communal living space. This makes the performance a ritualistic and communal living theatre, where the villagers are fully involved and integrated into the enactment. In traditional Tamil villages, public spaces such as streets, temple courtyards, tanks and open grounds serve as centres of social and religious life. These spaces are not merely physical locations but culturally constructed environments where collective activities like rituals, festivals, storytelling and performance takes place. During Therukoothu performances, these everyday spaces undergo a significant transformation. These streets are decorated with kolams, oil lamps, flags and temporary stages. Such markers signal the beginning of collective ritual activity and prepare the village for performance.

The use of public space for Therukoothu also reflects the communal nature of Tamil folk culture. These spaces are accessible to all members of the village, irrespective of age, gender or social status. The absence of physical barriers between performers and spectators reinforces social cohesion and collective ownership of cultural traditions. The way it uses space also links geography with mythology. Village streets are imagined as places like Hastinapura, Kurukshetra, or forest paths, allowing villagers to experience the epic stories in familiar surroundings.

Performance Sequence and Spatial Organization

Therukoothu performances are held in open village spaces such as temple premises, village streets, and open grounds. Festival performances usually continue for several nights, with each night focusing on a different episode from the Mahabharata. The performance combines viruthams (metrical verses), songs and dialogues, often improvised in simple spoken Tamil.

Before the performance begins, a ritual called Ranga Pooja is performed. The artists first worship at the temple sanctum and then bring a lighted lamp to the make-up room, where instruments and costumes are also ritually honoured. These rituals turn the everyday public space into a sacred area for the performance. This is followed by Melamkattal, the opening of music that announces the start of the play, and Stuti Padalkal, devotional songs praising Ganesha, Saraswati, and Draupadi.

After these preliminary rituals, the play formally begins with the entry of the narrator. Two types of curtains are used: a fixed curtain to hide the make-up area and a hand-held half-curtain for important entrances. The Kattiyakkaran (narrator) appears behind the half-curtain, activates the performance space, and when the curtain is lowered, he prays for divine blessings for the successful completion of the performance, and establishes interaction with the audience. This ritual sequence is repeated each day of the festival. Through these rituals and arrangements, Therukoothu carefully organizes the performance, movement of performers, and audience participation within a shared village space.

Acting Area and Spatial Expansion of Performance

Therukoothu performances are usually held within or near temple premises and do not rely on a fixed or enclosed stage. They make use open village spaces, allowing the performance to blend naturally with everyday life. One of the most distinctive cultural traits of Therukoothu is its symbolic transformation of ordinary village spaces into mythological and sacred landscapes. Rather than using constructed scenery, the tradition relies on ritual action and imagination to assign epic meaning to familiar locations. In this process, the village itself becomes a performative map of the Mahabharata, allowing epic narratives to be experienced as lived and socially shared space. Building on this general use of village spaces, Therukoothu's acting area shows how stage, audience, and environment are carefully organized for each performance. Depending on the story, the acting area changes, turning the entire village into a living theatre.

The main stage, called the Koothu Medai or Sabha, is a temporary square platform, slightly raised from the ground, often facing north or west. Behind it, a simple green room made of palm leaves is separated from the stage by a curtain. Musicians sit on a wooden bench in front of the curtain, while actors use a smaller bench on the stage. Actors usually enter and exit from the left side of the stage.

As Therukoothu is performed in open-air settings, the audience typically sits on three sides of the stage, and performers adjust their movements so everyone can see the action. Sometimes, actors enter the performance space by walking through the audience or directly from the temple, dissolving the boundary between performance and spectators. The stage itself stays mostly empty, highlighting movement, dialogue, and music rather than props.

A distinctive feature of Therukoothu is its use of the village environment as an extended acting area beyond the stage. Certain episodes are performed outside the stage, in streets, open grounds, paddy fields and near irrigation tanks. For instance, in the Bagasura Vatham episode, Bhima travels through village streets in a bullock cart, collecting food from the village households, while Bagasura confronts him publicly. Similarly, the episode of recovering King Virata's cattle is enacted near village water tanks, where real cattle are used, and the fight scenes unfold amidst them. In such performances, animals, villagers and landscape become integral parts of the theatrical action. The final battle scene of Mahabharata war then takes place in front of the temple, with actors performing in circular formations surrounded by villagers.

Therukoothu also employs symbolic spatial constructions to represent mythological settings. Vertical Space in 'Arjuna Tapas' (Arjuna's Penance) is the most technical use of space. A tall 60-foot palm tree or wooden structure is erected which represents the Himalayas. The actor playing Arjuna must climb this pole while singing and performing. This shifts the audience's gaze from the horizontal street to the vertical space. In some episodes, large ritual images play a central role. A towering clay image of Aravan is created, before which a sacrificial ritual is performed. In the final war scene, the transformation of an open space adjacent to the temple into the Kurukshetra war field represents one of the most powerful examples of symbolic spatial redefinition in Therukoothu. A striking feature of this space is the creation of a massive mud figurine of Duryodhana, often extending up to 100 feet in length in a marked space called Padukalam. The battle between Bhima and Duryodhana concludes here, where Bhima symbolically strikes the thigh of the image, and Draupadi completes her vow Draupadi climbs the image to smear blood on her hair.

In the Draupadi Vastrapahranam episode, Therukoothu utilizes a vertical Spatial Hierarchy through three distinct physical levels that create a "cinematic" composition without the need for modern stage set. At the High Level, Lord Krishna appears on the thatched roof of the green-room, occupying the highest point of the performance area. The Middle Level features Draupadi positioned on a bench (Visuppalakai), elevating her above the ground and centering

her as the focus of the assembly. On the Ground Level, the villain Dursasana remains on the stage floor, representing the earthly realm of action. This simultaneous arrangement allows the audience to see the problem (Dursasana), the victim (Draupadi), and the solution (Krishna) all at once, proving how the simple use of a bench and a roof can tell a complex story purely through spatial levels.

Through these practices, Therukoothu transforms ordinary village spaces into sacred and dramatic zones. The acting area is not merely a physical stage but it is a culturally shaped space, formed by ritual, community involvement, and imagination. This flexible use of space is a unique feature of Therukoothu, blending theatre, ritual, and village life. Through these techniques, Therukoothu transforms ordinary village spaces into multi-dimensional performance environments, blending horizontal and vertical space, audience participation, ritual, and dramatic enactment. The use of streets, open grounds, elevated platforms, and symbolic images demonstrates the creative and adaptive use of village space, making Therukoothu both a communal and immersive theatrical tradition.

Audience and Participatory Space in Therukoothu

In Therukoothu, the boundary between stage and audience is almost non-existent. Performances unfold within the same space occupied by spectators, merging “stage” and “seat” into a shared arena. This reflects a core cultural trait of Tamil folk tradition, where theatre is a communal act rather than a spectacle for detached observers. The audience forms an integral spatial and cultural component of the event, surrounding the Manai in circular or semi-circular arrangements and engaging visually, verbally, and emotionally. By dissolving the conventional “fourth wall,” the performance remains open, responsive, and dialogic throughout its duration.

During Therukoothu performances, the audience usually sits on three sides of the stage. There is no fixed seating arrangement or strict rule about how the performance should be watched. Spectators may sit on the ground, lie down and rest, or watch from nearby house verandas, terraces, bullock carts, or even from bicycles parked around the performance area. Since the performance continues throughout the night for nearly ten days villagers bring mats to sit and sleep on. This flexible way of watching is a key characteristic of Indian folk theatre traditions.

In Therukoothu, the audience is not a passive group of spectators but an active part of the performance. Their reactions such as cheering, laughing, questioning, or expressing emotions

directly influence the pace and flow of the play. Performers often respond to these reactions, adjusting their dialogue, movement, and timing, which makes each performance unique.

The relationship between performers and audience is highly informal and interactive. Even audience members who are asleep during play are symbolically included in the performance. In some war episodes, sleeping spectators are humorously and symbolically treated as the dead bodies on the Kurukshetra battlefield. Actors often move through the crowd, and villagers create pathways, making the audience an active part of the performance.

In the Bhagasura Vatham episode, Bhima travels through the village on a bullock cart, collecting food from households, while villagers follow the performance by walking alongside, watching from their houses, or standing along the streets. There is no clear division between actor and spectator during this sequence. When the action reaches the temple, the performance space becomes circular, with the audience surrounding the actors at different levels. The food collected during the procession is later distributed to village artisans, reinforcing the ritual and social dimensions of the performance.

In the episode depicting the recovery of King Virata's cattle, the performance takes place near the village irrigation tank, where real cattle are assembled. Actors and villagers mingle, making it difficult to distinguish between performers and spectators. The episode unfolds as a collective action, with villagers actively participating in driving the cattle back to the village. This episode clearly demonstrates how community participation is essential part of the performance.

Audience involvement also takes ritual forms rooted in local belief systems. During Arjuna Tapasu, Arjuna performs penance on a tall palm tree or elevated platform. The audience gathers around the tree, witnessing the scene from below. During this sequence, Arjuna throws lemons to the crowd. These lemons are believed to be sacred, and childless women collect them with the hope of fertility. If their wish is fulfilled, they return the following year to hang a cradle on the same tree as a votive offering. Such practices reveal the deep integration of ritual faith and theatrical action.

In the final war between Bhima and Duryodhana, the acting area is marked by a rectangular boundary made of thread, and a large ritual figure of Duryodhana is created at the centre. Four audience members are chosen to sit at the corners of this space, symbolically representing Duryodhana's dead relatives. The audience gathers on all four sides of the arena, closely watching the action. After Duryodhana is defeated, villagers enter the performance space to collect turmeric and kumkum from the ritual image. This act allows the audience to

take part in both the ritual and the performance, marking the end of the dramatic sequence. After the festival is over, the figure of Duryodhana is dismantled. The making and later destruction of this image involves the participation of the community, further linking the performance with village social life. Through these practices, Therukoothu transforms the audience from passive observers into active participants.

The Kattiyakkaran (clown narrator) plays a key role in shaping audience participation in Therukoothu. Unlike other characters who remain within the epic story, the Kattiyakkaran moves freely between the performance space and the audience. He mediates between the epic narrative and the everyday social world. Through humour, improvisation and direct engagement with the audience, he explains epic events, interprets mythological episodes, and connects them with contemporary social issues, thereby bridging ritual performance and lived experience.

Connection to Tamil Cultural Traits

The way Therukoothu uses space shows important Tamil cultural values and social practices. One key trait is communal living where performances take place in open, shared areas without tickets or restrictions, allowing all villagers to participate equally, regardless of age, gender, or social status. This open use of space shows that the community values shared cultural experiences and togetherness over private or commercial entertainment.

Another important cultural trait is the idea of sacred geography. Therukoothu is performed on bare earth, near temples, village tanks, fields, and other areas connected to agriculture. Many performances are part of rituals seeking rain, fertility, and good harvests. By performing on natural land instead of enclosed stages, the tradition shows that land is sacred and life-giving. The earth itself becomes part of the performance and the ritual.

These uses of space are not random; they are deeply rooted in Tamil ways of life. Through shared participation and respect for the land, Therukoothu turns village spaces into a living cultural landscape where theatre, ritual, and daily life come together.

Conclusion

Therukoothu represents a living performance tradition in which stage, space, and audience are inseparably interwoven with the cultural life of Tamil villages. This study has demonstrated that the spatial organisation of Therukoothu is not merely a practical

arrangement for performance but a deeply embedded cultural trait that reflects collective values, ritual beliefs, and social relationships within Tamil folk society. By utilising open public spaces such as village streets, temple courtyards, tanks, and fields, Therukoothu transforms everyday environments into sacred and dramatic landscapes, blurring the boundaries between ritual, theatre, and daily life. Audience involvement through movement, ritual participation, and emotional engagement removes strict divisions between actor and spectator. This study also highlights how Therukoothu embodies key Tamil cultural traits such as communal living, sacred geography, respect for land, and the continuity of oral tradition. Even in a changing social environment, Therukoothu continues to function as an important medium for sustaining cultural memory and community identity.

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