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Folk Drama and Folk Entertainments in Tamil Nadu

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Abstract

Tamil Nadu has a rich tradition of folk drama, entertainments, games, and handicrafts rooted in village life, temple festivals, and community culture. From ancient temple dance-dramas and Therukkuthu to folk plays like Nondi Natakam and Pagal Vesham, these art forms educated, entertained, and united society. Folk traditions also include tattooing, kolam, street art, folk games, and songs reflecting daily life and social values. The state is renowned for handicrafts such as silk weaving, pottery, wood carving, metal icons, toys, mats, papier-mâché, and plaster work, which preserve cultural heritage and support rural livelihoods.

Keywords: *Folk Drama, Therukkuthu, Handicrafts, Cultural Heritage, Rural Livelihoods.*

Introduction

Tamil Nadu has a vibrant tradition of folk dramas and entertainments rooted in village life, temple festivals, and community gatherings. From ancient dance-dramas staged in temple theatres to lively street performances and folk games, these art forms evolved to educate, entertain, and unite the masses. Alongside these performances, the region is renowned for its skilled craftsmanship in pottery, weaving, toys, metalwork, and decorative arts.

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Drama

Theatrical plays seem to have begun to be staged from the time of Rajaraja I. Earlier dance-dramas have had incorporations of scenes from the life of Krishna and other legendary stories. Several types of dance-dramas were frequently staged in temples. Each temple had a theatre or at least a stage attached to it, intended for different forms of entertainment. Performances generally took place during religious festivals. They were specifically designed for the masses and their themes were chosen to inculcate among the people loyalty to the sovereign, love for the dramatic art, and attachment to religion.

The Rajaraja Natakam composed during the reign of Rajaraja I is said to be a biographical drama highlighting Rajaraja I's military achievements and the building of the great temple at Thanjavur. Wet land growing paddy was endowed to the actors, and titles conferred on the best among them. The folk drama of today, called Therukkuthu, is presented with music, dance and long-drawn speeches. The musical instruments include the harmonium, the midrange and the flute. The songs are rendered at a high pitch, and are favorite pieces from films. When the audience cries for a repetition, the song is sung again.

The Therukkuthu lasts from about 10 p m. to dawn. Hence the saying: Kuthadi Kilakke Paarppan, Koolikaran Merke Paarppari, meaning that the labourer has to work till the sun sets while the actor has to keep on acting until the sun rises. The Therukkuthu is held in connection with annual festivals or to invoke rain. Sometimes, it is held owing to factions in the village and the rival groups come to a compromise to conduct the festival on a later occasion. The village square or the frontage of the temple is the open theater and a temporary dais is arranged. There is no gate collection and the expenses are met by donations collected within the village. The traditional techniques are sometimes altered by introducing screens, wings and costumes, thus spoiling the simplicity and the sobriety of these dramas.

The important themes are the stories of Valli Thirumanam, Pavalakkodi, Arjun's Penance, Nallathangal, Madurai Veeran, Padmasuran, Kathavarayan, Ramayanam and Harischandra Mayanakandam. Hanschandra's story is not enacted if the duration of the drama festival is just a single day, as it is customary to avoid tragic themes on the concluding day.

Mavli Natakam

Mavli Natakam is a dance-drama associated with the Yedaranyam Temple in Thanjavur district. The tradition of performing it has disappeared since 1938. The dance centres round the story of a big rat which kindled the dying flame at the sanctum of that templeand consequently received the blessings of the Lord.

Nondi Natakam

Nondi Natakam or folk-drama of the lame man is the story of a person who fell prey to prostitute and lost not only his money but also his health. He became lame, as his leg and arm were cutoff as a punishment for theft Later, he became a devotee of Subrahmanya and, though lame, he managed to walk long distances to the Subrahmanya shrines, ercommg physical handicaps inch by inch. Owing to the strength of his devotion and the mercy ofthe Lord, he regained his foot and arm, and this satirical play m cindu metre ends up with his return to normal health and prosperity.

Pagal Vesham

Pagal Vesham or Day Costume is performed by an actorof great merit, an expert in the art of make-up who conceals his identity. In broad daylight, he appears somewhere as a beggar, a schoolmaster or a fortune-teller. His wife accompanies him and usually they enact a quarrel. She taunts him; he threatens her and she weeps. Street-goers try to reconcile them, but the quarrel continues. The husband leaves her for good without paying for her maintenance. The on-lookers are moved to pity. A hat is sent round and a fund is raised to help the poor wife who has been deserted by her cruel husband.

Irular Dramas

The Irulars are an illiterate or semi-literate agricultural community of the Nilgns. At temple-festivals, they enact epic stories, without screens, using the varandah of a house as the auditorium and hurricane lantern as stage-light. The characters get training undera drama-teacher and rehearse the drama for days together. In the Mahabharatha, the most popular scene is Arjuna's penance, which is sought to be spoilt by a woman. In long and eloquent sexy phrases, her beauty is described, part by part. All the Irulars,. Especially the women like it very much. In Modi, a person conceals an egg within a heap of sand and draws seven lines. The man who tries to unearth it is called 'Modi' and the other man prevents it by whipping him. A buffoon inters- venes and gives comic relief through light songs.

Other Folk Entertainments, Tattooing

Pachai Kuthuthal is tattooing, done by professional gypsies. Arms, hands, foreheads, etc., are chosen to tattoo figures of gods, scorpions, snakes or any other emblem or to write the person's own name. Turmeric and Akathik keerai (leaves of Sesboina grandi flora are powdered together in a grinding stone, spread on a thin cloth and rolled up in the form of a wick. The wick is lighted. Pigmentsare prepared from the soot of lamps mixed with the ashes

of burnt tobacco and the juice of the babul tree (Senkottai-p-pal). Indigois used for blue dots and vermilion for the red ones. The pricking instrument consists of three small sewing needles tied together with a thread.

To perform the tattooing operation, the pattern is selected from bundle of drawings and is first traced on the skin with a blunt stick dipped in the prepared ink which is pricked in with the needles. The part is then washed well with cold water and a cast of ink rubbed over the surface. To allay the pain, a small quantity of coconut oil is applied. Turmeric powder is rubbed in to brighten the colorant to prevent swelling.

Kolam

Alpane or Rangoli is called Kolam in Tamil Nadu. Every girl tries to be fully accomplished in making kolams of geometric patterns and floral decorative motifs The intricate designs are drawn with white powder held between the thumb and the first finger. Kolam is drawn on the floor, at the frontage of the residence every morning. On festival days, whole streets are full of Kolam drawings. Kolam is also drawn on pots, on marriage platforms, etc.

Street Artists

Figures of gods and goddesses are artistically drawn by chalk piece or charcoal on the pavements by handicapped folk and beggars. The proportions of the limbs of each figures and the colourmatchings, as also the vivid details betoken great skill and evoke the attention of the passers-by who stop for several minutest watch the artist at work and help him to make a decent collection.

Folk Games

There are several games played in the villages from time immemorial. Here is a brief note on a few of them:

Silambam: To the people of Tamil Nadu, Silambam conjures up visions of the chivalry and the valour of the bygone days. It is an ancient combative activity, peculiar to this part of India. Besides affording good exercise, it teaches men to defend themselves when attacked by enemies. Each participant takes a strong stick, usually a hard bamboo, and three metres long and swings it at the other, m different ways. The man on the defensive must be able to ward off blows. Silambam is no mere wielding of the stick or the staff. It involves dexterous techniques—footwork, precise use of staff in swings, cuts, thrusts, chops and flourishes. Its

three-fold virtues are thrilling as a spectacle, exciting as a competition and vital as combative measure for self-defence.

Chadukudu is played with two teams A member of the team recites a statement or some sa> mg continuously holding his breath and crossing the central line enters the zone of the opponent. If he touches anyone in the opposite team and is able to leave the zone without being caught, and without losing breath, the person touched is out. On the other hand, if the player is pulled by an opponent and is unable to return to his zone without losing breath, the paler is out the game continues till a whole team is out. It is thus a competition m holding breath for a longer time,

Pachai-k-Kuthu at oil Leap-Frog: In this game one boy stands with bent body and hands touching his feet. He is the Kuthuaior horse. Other boys come running, place their hands on his back, spread their legs sideways and jump over him. The boy who is bending gradually increases the height and the jump is made increasingly difficult, when he attains his full height. If any boy touches the body of the Kuthuai without leaping over him, he will have to be the 'horse' for others.

A agnation is for a 'rider', who is carried by another, to holda ball and bowl it into a pit If he misses his chance, he has to get down and become 'the horse'.

Kiuthattu this is a form of cricket played with two bats, a round stick and a small peg four inches long, chiseled at both ends The peg is placed down, then lifted by the longer stick and hit ; it will fly some distance before dropping down. Another person will stand on the spot and, aiming at the peg, hit it. A competitor who catches the flying peg makes the other boy out. There is an element of risk in this game, as the peg may hit the eyes.

Nila-puclu or Moonlight play Two parties try to catch each other, the members of one team being allowed to be caught only while entering into the moon-light and the other only m the shadow' children A square is marked on the ground and two teams of five or six are formed One team stands on one side and a member of the other hops with one leg and tries to catch those who are with the enclosure and try to evade him If he lets down the bent leg, he will be 'out' On the hand, if he stands on one leg for a longtime, the platers inside the square will throw sand on his leg to tire him

Other games various other games keep the rural folk engaged in their off-seasons and in the afternoons. These include Thayam (a game like chess played with pieces on a board), Pallangnzlu, played with tamarind or other seeds put into 14 small pits on plank, 'hide and seek' or (blind man's buff), Thiri bommakke, Othaya rettaiya (tossing up and catching a ball or

a fruit at odd and even count), Kitti (played with two sets of sticks), kite-flying (in the dry season), making paper-boats and letting them sail m the streets on rainy days, seenadi (a form of wrestling), Varmaniam (a competition for effective control of nerves), etc.

Folk-songs in Games

In some of the games, folk-songs are sung, e.g , a person will say 'Kombarai, Kombara (they have horns). The children repeat it. Then the elder says: 'Madum Kombarai, Aadum Kombarai ' and so on, listing the horned animals. Children repeat it. In between, he will say that elephant is a horned animal or that a man has horns. The children who repeat these wrong statements without thinking are deemed to be 'out'.

Folk Arts

Folk arts and crafts are best represented in Kanchipuram silk sarees, produced mainly by the Saurashta and Mudaliar communities. From the raw cotton stage up to the time of getting the finished product, the entire process weaving the raw yarn to a country stand of two bamboo pieces, winding it to a cone made of bamboo sticks, twisting the yarn into skeins, de-gumming for the removal of yellow gum and other dirt, and aluppiduthal or warping—is done bymanual labour, as a handicraft industry and all the members of the family—men, women, boys and girls—are employed on it. The main raw eternals are pure mulberry silk yarn and gold lace thread. The methods of weaving adopted are traditional, but there is a continuous change of designs.

Several folk arts have been developed and the ordinary people of Tamil Nadu are justly proud of their skill and talent. These include manufacture of dolls, the making of the world-famous bronze pieces, the inlaying of silver on brass and copper the art-plates of Thanjavur and chiseling out beautiful images and floral decorations on these plates, making a variety of orca-mental lamps, manufacture of temple banners, etc., weaving of artistic mats and bewitching carpets. South Indian plaster technique in use in Chettinad represents great masonry skill; it does not develop cracks; walls are reflecting mirrors and they need no white-washing at all.

Pottery

The art of pottery of Tamil Nadu has been enshrined in folklore. Black and red pottery of Manamadurai and the glazed pottery of Karigiri are noted for beauty of shape and colour. They have won appreciation at international exhibitions. The deft fingers of the potter can produce myriads of beautiful pieces on the wheel. But figures are largely cast in moulds; some

are fired, while others are painted in the raw. Figures of Iyyanar, the deity which keeps watch over the village and can be seen as large painted idols at the entrance, are a rage with foreigners. Midget sizes m terracotta are produced to cater to such foreign demands. However, clay has its own disadvantages. It is fragile and cannot be packed and sent over long distances. The packing itself has to be carefully done and is very expensive.

Papier-mâché

Hence the trend now with the craftsman is to turn to papier-mâché. Wherever big sized articles are to be produced, paper is used. It is the same mould work. Papier-mâché gives clear features to the pieces and can be painted in realistic hues. They can also be made to look like granite or metal pieces. Further, being light, transport and packing do not present problems. In fact, papier-mâché has been taken to diverse fields of production. The 'Alsatian' is atypical example of a piece which is so real and true that the live dog in the street starts barking at the pieces kept in the show windows! What attracts the buyer is the colour of the dog, its drooping red tongue, rolling eyes with the realistic eyebrows. There are similar beautiful pieces like the dancing girl, Krishna the charioteer (Geethopadesam), wedding of Goddess Meenakshi, etc., which excel in elegance.

For top class chiseled clean features, plaster of paris is the best. The immaculate white 'Meera' is a marvel in plaster. Shiva Parvathi is another model which is popular. Plaster has the smoothness and clarity which are difficult to get in clay and papier-mâché.

Wooden Toys

The range of toys m wood that now flood the shop counters will beat anybody's imagination. A good many of them are the result of turning work done on tiny lathes. The wood used is soft and supple. Innovations like addition of springs and other devices have made the toys life-like and animated. Wooden toys include artistic pieces which teach children numbers, shapes, colours, diagrams and geometrical quiz.

Nothing can compare with the cloth-dolls in their exquisite display of character of men and women. The core of the clothdo! is, of paper. The face which is the most important item, making for credibility, is a highly specialized job These are cast m moulds and then worked by hand, to give a flash of life to the doll. The body is also of paper. The doll is dressed with pieces of cloth typical fashion. All the patterns of coiffure that exist can be understood only if a ion of well-dressed heads is kept on a table. In fact, the enchantment in a cloth-doll will be the face, the hair-do, the dress and the gait. If anyone desires to take the replicas of people in a

country, the cloth-doll medium is the best Fixing them inside glass boxes will add charm to the pieces and prevent them from getting untidy.

Wood-Carving

Wood-carving is yet another item of handicraft, well developed in Tamil Nadu. The art work done on the massive doors of temples will bear eloquent testimony to the ability of the craftsman in carving very intricate and complicated designs. In later days, this skill found encouragement in Chettinad when the community got their dwellings embellished this way.

There are other exquisite pieces of handicraft like pith-work, shell-work, horn-work, all with their individualistic beauty and charm. The number of craftsmen that live on such crafts is quite large. They are changing their production to modern trends and are attempting to combine utility and art. The festivals that are celebrated by the common people keep these handicrafts going. The Government has also been taking keen interest in their preservation.

Ornately-carved wooden doors and ceiling beams can be found all over Tamil Nadu, in temples as also in some private residences. Simple and elegantly styled black-wood tables, with legs in theorem of elephant heads, with extended trunks are also famous in Tamil Nadu. Temple-cars are, of course, famous for their elegance and artistry.

Another world-famous art of Tamil Nadu is represented by the Pattamadai mats, the weft being of Korai grass and the warp of silk or cotton of 80 to 140 counts. The surface is so fine that one can roll the mat in his palm and carry it like a handkerchief.

Metal Ware

Metal ware is still another field m which the craftsmen of Tamil Nadu have excelled, from the famous Kuthuvillaku up to the icons of Nataraj and Ganesh, all have an aesthetic concept entirely unique. The types of lamps associated with the hoary traditions of temple culture will easily run to a hundred. Bronze pieces are something peculiar to Tamil Nadu.

The most exquisite depiction of skill in chiseling is seen in the icons and images of ordinary granite. It is perhaps because of the general availability of this talent that the entire horizon of Tamil Nadu is specked with the rising gopurams of articulate temples. The art and architecture of the temples have kept alive the culture and skill of many thousands of imaginative craftsmen and preserved to posterity the fruits of the native creative genius. Sculpture in temples calls for a deep knowledge of the Shasta’s, nature of different varieties of stone, besides monumental patience.

Other Folk Arts

These include garlands made artistically out of gram, sandalwood, etc. Pith-work also accounts for many artistic products. In decorating artistically the pandals or festival canopies, Thanjavur craftsmen have deservedly made a name for them. In short, Tamil Nadu has a long and unbroken tradition of folk art. It is the duty of all to foster it.

Conclusion

The folk dramas, entertainments, and crafts of Tamil Nadu form an integral part of its cultural identity. They preserve local traditions, showcase artistic excellence, and strengthen community bonds. Safeguarding these age-old practices is essential to ensure their continuity and to celebrate the living heritage of Tamil Nadu.

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