

It has been a long and strenuous journey for women to get on the stage, and even to be a part of the audience. Tamil theatre history is no exception to this universal phenomenon. 'Voicing Silence', focussing on gender perspectives, is recording the voices of professional women actresses. Pavalakkodi or Kudumba Vazhaku is a play, to be performed in Chennai, which juxtaposes the 'off' and 'on' lives of these women. A. MANGAI writes about the fascination that the stage holds for the actresses.

# Off-stage comes on stage

Natakam" - Swamigal founded "Boys' Companies", a unique feature of Tamil drama and even Pammal, who performed in urban centres with a middle class, literate audience in mind, could not imagine getting women to perform female roles. Of course we do hear of Balamani Ammal of Kumbakonam who with her sister, ran an all-women drama troupe and her popularity was immense, yet there is not even a trace of her existence in that small town today. It must have been from the early Twenties that Isai Natakam - "special drama" as it is popularly known - became an integral part of the nationalist movement and gained momentum. We also learn about a few women who came into this genre at that time. Today, the population ratio is 1:4 in the drama associations where women and men register themselves as actors in the southern districts of Tamil Nadu.

The northern region - Thondal Mandalam - has another history altogether. Theru-k-koothu is a thriving form in this region. Isai Natakam, which the artists of this region refer to as "drama" must have been equally popular in this part of the country till about three decades ago. Today it is almost extinct and a new genre called "novel" - plays based on social or royal themes with a formulaic narrative - has come to stay.

P. Rajagopal, an exponent of Theru-k-koothu chose 12 women from this genre and trained them in an all-female performance of *Vilvalappu*, in *koothu* style, in 1996. Being a traditional artist himself, his experiment was received with some respect by the *koothu* community. From then on, he has always made it a point to incorporate at least a few of these women in his performances. Mahabharata in *koothu* style in 1998, with a mixed cast, and Ramayana in their own style in 1999.

**Reaching out to women artists:** For "Voicing Silence" to reach out to these women was part of its focus on gendered perspectives in theatre. Attempting to be a catalyst between women's consciousness and women's expression, "Voicing Silence" has, from 1993, produced



livelihood. Without any great claims to art or creativity, they perform 200 nights in a year for an abominably low fee. The plight of these artists in general, and the women in particular, needs emphasis and the double values of a society priding itself on its patronage of art and culture need to be exposed. The position of women here is even more complex.

Entering a territory not considered "respectable" itself lies heavy on these women. The stigma attached to drama as a profession is a burden they live with; added to it are the demands made on them by representing female roles on stage. Lynda Hart in her introduction to the book *Acting Out* says that the task at hand ".... is to free the female body from its over determination as a body saturated with sex, site of pleasure for (an) other,

subjected and devoid of subjectivity". Consciously or unconsciously, one has to contend with and encounter the modes of representation which have been established by a history of so many centuries.

**Recording their voices:** "Voicing Silence", for the first time in Tamil stage history, is recording the voices of professional women actors (actresses). *Pavalakkodi* or *Kudumba Vazhaku* is a play which juxtaposes the "off" and "on" stage lives of these women, who used to perform Swamigal's plays till about the early Seventies. During the Emergency, when MISA rule was implemented, these artists were required to get police certificates that they were not into "record dances". This policing of moral values affected their profession drastically and as M....., the oldest in the group, says "It

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has been almost two decades since we did these plays. Now we do other stories - of *lamindars*, rich men, princes and queens, stories of rape, revenge and tragedy.

Dr K. A. Gunasekaran who has scripted and directed this play, shares an earlier experience he had in interpreting "Harischandra", a play by Swamigal. The lead actor who was rehearsing as Harischandra, walked out of the play offended by the Kattiyakarl's (female narrator) - question as to why he sold off his wife for the sake of keeping up his word. "In this play, sheer juxtaposition of 'off' and 'on' stage life, poses questions - contemporary ones - in the audience's minds," he says. "Metaphorically, it is the 'off' stage life which is enacted on a raised platform at the back of the stage," he adds.

The play at hand evolved out of a two-day workshop with these women. They exhibited their skills in performance by showing excerpts from "Nalayini", "Harischandra", "Pavalakkodi" and other such plays. The amazing memory they exhibited in performing these excerpts was a discovery even for themselves. At the end of the day, one of them commented, "If we remember these plays so well, why not we form our own company and do these plays again?" The other aspect of the workshop was their own lives - personal and professional. Stories of how they came into this profession right from childhood, how no one ever taught them anything and how they had to learn by observation, the problems they faced on stage and off stage, how marriages were decided on the basis of convenience, how polygamy was a crucial issue for them and how pregnancies became a check mate in relationships or a threat to their careers... the list was long and never-ending. Still - the stage has a magic. S..... says, "Till my last breath, I want to hear the harmonium and drums".

**Larger than life:** The passion, almost madness, the stage holds for these women, though not expressed in so many words, rings through their bodies. The moment they stand up to act, they enlarge manifold and assume unimaginable proportions.

On stage, performance gives them a fluidity not possible in real life: off stage, life threatens them with fixities seemingly impossible to penetrate. This is the life they have been living all their lives and might continue to live.

But for once, it is being performed in public so that it can be laid open for debate. "On" and "off" stage lives are merged into one and the safety of painted backdrops torn apart. The truth is naked, and has to be seen.

## THEATRE

plays with a gender focus and organised workshops to provide a common platform for women and men in theatre to share their concerns, with an emphasis on gender. Realising that in the process of getting institutionalised as a discipline, focussing on experiments in form and content and becoming a ground for contesting ideologies, theatre was losing sight of the practitioners of these forms, Voicing Silence organised a workshop of professional women stage artists of Tamil Nadu in 1997. This Kulavai 1997 brought to light the contribution of women to theatre, and also highlighted the lives of these artists for whom art is a means of

EVER so many histories of drama have been written over the ages all over the world, yet these histories rarely record the space of women who have been part of them. Right from Greek times, when women were not permitted in the audience, or the verdict of "Arthasastra", which codified the fine to be collected as punishment for women who had broken the rules and attended a performance, female viewing has been prohibited from the theatre area. It has been a long and strenuous journey... for women to get on to the stage, even for women to be a sizeable audience - population, or to look at the stage with a "female gaze". Tamil stage history is no exception to this universal phenomenon. Except in Bharata Natyam - a cleansed version of *sadhir* - and in other ritualistic ceremonies, dancing women/women in the public sphere have not been 'respected'. Most traditional forms are still performed with an all male cast. The Eighties saw the experiment of many forms transgressing their boundaries of region, caste, ritual space and gender, thanks to the efforts of various theatre groups and art-in-education projects. It is still a big question whether women can "occupy" the space ordained by tradition in these performances. Can *Tappattam*, *Deverattam* and *Theru-k-koothu* be performed by women in temple rituals or as professions? We have to wait and see...

**A contested space.** In Tamil drama, two major genres emerged at the close of the last century: Pammal Sambanda Mudaliyar's "Parsi theatre" and Sankaradas Swamigal's "Isai

