



Tradition and Innovation

The Shifting Boundaries of a Popular South Indian Theatre

This report describes a unique theatrical event produced by the members of the Tamil Nadu Kattaikkuttu Kalai Valarcci Munnerra Sangam and performed in three rural towns of Tamil Nadu in March 1998. It appeared earlier in a slightly different version as a newspaper article in The Hindu of 31 May 1998.

By Mina Swaminathan

The Tamil Nadu Kattaikkuttu Kalai Valarcci Munnerra Sangam is a grassroots association, which promotes the interests of professional Kattaikkuttu actors and musicians in Tamil Nadu in South India. It was established in Kanchipuram in 1990 by a group of seventeen performers. At present it has over two hundred members. Its main activities include (1) training in the Kattaikkuttu theatre of (working) children and young people in the rural parts of northern Tamil Nadu, (2) the organization of an annual Kattaikkuttu Festival, and (3) the production of innovative plays on themes which are relevant to the local society. Kattaikkuttu (also known as Kuttu and Terukkuttu) is a theatre traditionally performed by professional male actors and musicians in the northern parts of Tamil Nadu. It is characterized by an epic story repertoire, featuring especially the Mahabharata, and a heroic style of acting.

The special performance of the Mahabharata by a group of Kattaikkuttu performers on the occasion of the Eighth Annual Kattaikkuttu Festival was memorable for the number of firsts - the number of barriers broken and the chance to observe a living tradition in the process of growing by innovation. To begin with: this was the first (and only) time in living memory that an effort was made to stage the entire Mahabharata in a single night. For P. Rajagopal, writer and director of the play, this was a special Golden Jubilee offering, a tribute from Kuttu artists to India's fiftieth year of Independence. This nine-hour show - no Peter Brook copy - has to be seen in the context of the Kattaikkuttu tradition. Theatrical companies performing in this tradition normally take ten or more nights to perform the Mahabharata, and even then only certain major events are presented in detail, some are summarized, and others left out. Even ten nights of eight-hour performances, it is felt, is not enough to do justice to the mighty epic. What was unique here was the attempt to compress the entire repertoire of Kuttu, with all its richness and subtlety, into a one-night show, to recapture the grandeur of the epic's sweep without sacrificing the characteristics of the form.

Another first: it was the first time in the world of professional Kuttu companies that such a large group of artists played together - fifty performers (not including the musicians and supporting cast) from nearly twenty Kuttu companies, some playing multiple roles, necessitating an extra large acting space and several dressing rooms. Not merely a logistic and organizational feat, which it surely was, even to get together all the artists, each with a rigorous calendar of engagements; but even more so, the co-operation and team work needed to bring about a harmonious and well integrated performance among so many talented but highly individualistic performers.

And most unique of all: it was the first time that both men and women played together on a Kattaikkuttu stage! It is well known that this traditional theatre is an all-male form; the first performance by women artists was put together by Rajagopal himself in 1997, when an all-women cast of twelve performers drawn from another theatrical genre and trained in Kattaikkuttu staged Vilvalaippu or Draupadi's Wedding. That was daring enough, and drew gasps of astonishment not only for the sight of women performing Kuttu, in full kattai vesham (heroic, usually male role characterized by the characteristic ornamentation and demanding great physical stamina), but even more for their immensely polished and brilliant performance. (Some said they were even better than the regular male performers!)

Mind-boggling

But this time, just to make it more complex, bewildering, and delightful, both men and women played both men's and women's roles! It was gender bending at its most subversive, hilarious, and pointed, standing every cliché on its head, making the audience chortle with glee at times and freeze with emotion at others. The play begins with two Kattiyakkarans (clowns-cum-heralds), one female and the other male, and is carried along by them - their earthy humour and ribald jokes become all the more saucy when the audience knows, for example, that 'she' is playing a 'he' playing at being a 'she'. The heroine of the play, Draupadi, is finely portrayed by an excellent male player; so also are some other female parts considered important in the Kuttu form - Ponnuruvi, the wife of Karna, Hidimbi and Mohini. A variety of other smaller female parts were also played, as usual, by skilled male actors.

The women were just as good at the impersonation game. Donning the kattai which typically signifies a heroic warrior part, a woman actor (the word 'actress' sounds wrong in this context) gave a splendid rendering of the lustful and loud-voiced Kichaka - the bouncing gait, the stride, the chest-thumping boasts alternating with pathetic wheedling and pleading - a rendering of Kichaka which perhaps few men could have excelled, and yet somehow she managed subtly to subvert his lust and turn him into a pitiful figure. Arjuna, in his various aspects, was played by four people at different phases of the story, by a man or woman as required.

But it was in the comedy scenes that gender switching provided its most hilarious moments. In pairs like the gypsy couple (Kuravan and Kuratti) and the hunter couple (Vetan and Vetatti) genders were invariably reversed - the man playing the wife, the woman the husband. A bevy of seven beauties dancing the kummi turned out, on inspection, to consist of three woman and four men, all sinuously graceful; the Kuttu version of the striptease, in which the performer wears five or seven saris one on top of the other, and skilfully removes them one by one in a dazzling sleight of hand, was enacted by a well-known male actor. And so it went, from one mind-boggling act to the next, till one did not know who was who. And the culmination of that mad, wild whirligig of seemingly artless gender fun and frolic, concealing a well-orchestrated series of well-crafted performances, was the realization of what art is all about - art is the outcome of skill, practice, training, devotion, understanding, what you will - but not gender. That art transcends gender was the lesson, and the audience loved learning it.

Living tradition

Innovation and tradition: from that magical night came yet another painlessly learnt lesson - of how traditions are and how they grow and renovate themselves. For these many 'firsts' were all the inventions of one man, a very traditional Kuttu performer and (teacher) belonging to a very traditional art form and heir to a very particular family tradition, of which he is justifiably proud. And he is and innovator? Yes, that is why - because it's by such innovations from within, daring in their time, but soon accepted if they are found artistically satisfying and acceptable to the audience, that traditions grow, adapt and change; by such small increments and accretions do traditions evolve, responding to the ever-changing needs of the people. And this may be even more true of the folk art forms than of the so-called classical forms.

Those who like to believe that the 'folk arts' are 'pure' forms crystallized at a certain period and frozen in that perfection for ever after, like museum pieces, for our delectation, and who raise alarms from time to time about their impending death, are only deluding themselves. Folk art forms are constantly evolving, because they are, have to be, always in tune with people's tastes and needs. And who knows what they were like two hundred years ago? Living performers can testify that the Kuttu of today is not what it was fifty years ago. One can constantly observe the relics and survivors of particular historical periods - the songs of the freedom movement, as well as contemporary film songs; the synthetic saris of the Sixties as well as the T-shirts of the Nineties; the heraldic cries (in English) of the British 'kutcherris' as well as those of the ancient Tamil kings; striped pyjamas-suits, tinsel crowns, cricket caps, cane under-skirts, and wooden ornaments, happily co-existing, cheek by jowl. Only the self-styled 'conservationists' are uncomfortable at the sight of these anachronisms and contradictions - the bearers of the living tradition know that they are the signs of life and growth, of evolution and adaptation. In art as in biology, a static form is a dead form - and by that token, Kuttu is alive and well. Long live Kuttu!

The Mahabharata production has been recorded on video. Copies are available from: Tamil Nadu Kattaikkuttu Kalai Valarcci Munnerra Sangam, 31, Selva Vinayakar Koil Street, Vedaśala Nagar, Sevilimedu Post, Kanchipuram-631 502, India, tel. +91 4112 24 517/26 525. Mina Swaminathan is one of the advisors to the Tamil Nadu Kattaikkuttu Kalai Valarcci Munnerra Sangam.

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