

## Challenges to a Folk Theatre in Tamil Nadu\*

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**Abstract:** This article discusses the challenges to *Kaṭṭaiḱḱūttu*, a folk theatre performed in the northern parts of Tamil Nadu, in the context of the changing economic and social circumstances in which the theatre has to operate. The article tries to emphasise the social and cultural significance of this art form. *Kaṭṭaiḱḱūttu* fulfils an important role in providing a powerful cultural medium of expression that is interactive, flexible, democratic, and accommodating, and geared to the entertainment and ritual/religious demands of its rural spectators. The article proves that a folk art form can provide not only a varied labour market but also a platform where local relationships, problems and politics are acted out and – to some extent – commented and reflected upon.

**K***aṭṭaiḱḱūttu* is the theatre of common people in the northern parts of Tamil Nadu. It speaks their language and it is acted out by performers who share similar social and cultural backgrounds with the spectators. The *Kaṭṭaiḱḱūttu* performances primarily utilise scenes from the epic *Mahābhārata* adapted to the local situation. These well-known traditional episodes are sometimes used to highlight current social and political issues as seen by the underdogs. They are a source of information about local and universal problems for people who cannot read or write (too well). Or, as one of my informants put it: “*Kaṭṭaiḱḱūttu* is the university of ordinary men and women.” *Kaṭṭaiḱḱūttu* performances give audiences an opportunity to see their own lives on stage and comment on the proceedings. Even though the *Kaṭṭaiḱḱūttu* certainly has a subversive edge, the performers cannot afford to be radical in the expression of their opinions for fear of antagonising potential patrons and forfeiting future engagements in the present complex, caste-ridden and politicised Tamil village society.

Financially, *Kaṭṭaiḱḱūttu* is supported entirely by village communities and, on a more incidental base, by a single person or family. In spite of (or perhaps thanks to) competition from popular Tamil cinema, rural people prefer to have ‘live’ theatre on the occasion of religious village festivals and during funeral rites of important individuals, which are *Kaṭṭaiḱḱūttu*’s traditional performance venues. Regular *Kaṭṭaiḱḱūttu* does not receive

government sponsorship or other outside funding. This in itself is perhaps the most telling evidence of the vitality of this contemporary theatre genre.

Its link to ritual performance occasions is consciously reinforced by professional *Kaṭṭaikkūttu* performers who emphasise the 'sacred nature' of the theatre to differentiate it from other competitive local popular theatres. This strategy has helped them in the past to secure performance engagements, for instance, at 10-night long *Pāratam* village festivals in honour of Draupadi or Tiraupatiyamman – the central female figure of the *Mahābhārata* epic and an important goddess in Tamil Nadu. However, as I argue below, in the long run the association of *Kaṭṭaikkūttu* with 'folk' religion and 'folk' practices may prove a drawback rather than a support to the continuity of tradition.

### Recent History

In order to place a discussion about challenges to *Kaṭṭaikkūttu* and other popular theatre forms in the region in a wider perspective, I will briefly discuss the theatres that are, or were, popular in my fieldwork area. My fieldwork area comprises Vellore, Tiruvannamalai, Tiruvalluvar and Kancheepuram districts of northern Tamil Nadu. In terms of cultural and ritual praxis, this area links up with the southern districts of Andhra Pradesh rather than with the rest of Tamil Nadu. This discussion covers the period from about 1850 to the present. My description is a reconstruction based on oral accounts and the scant written data available to me. In some respects, it differs considerably from the 'mainstream' historical descriptions of the popular stage, which, almost without exception, have provided an extremely negative picture of popular Tamil theatre and its professional exponents. For instance, 'mainstream' theatre histories have assumed – without presenting the facts that this was really the case – that the popular stage has deteriorated during this period. They tend to blame the deterioration on the lack of education and 'morality' of the exponents of the popular theatres, rather than on the changing economic and social circumstances in which the theatres have to operate.

### Genres

The principal forms of popular theatre in northern Tamil Nadu are *Kaṭṭaikkūttu*, *Nāṭakam* (or 'Drama') and, until its recent disappearance from the rural stage, performances by the rural Devadasis. The majority of the traditional *Kaṭṭaikkūttu* performers in the fieldwork area belong to low-caste, non-agricultural families, whose male members have been involved in the tradition for three or four generations. But the theatre appears to have always been open to individuals of different caste backgrounds, too. While *Kaṭṭaikkūttu* is, with a recent exception, an all-male theatre and men predominantly act the *Nāṭakam*, with a few professional companies employing a woman performer as a crowd-puller, the Devadasi tradition was in the hands of rural Devadasis. These Devadasis were girls and women

of mixed caste descent who were dedicated to the local village goddesses, and they were professionally engaged in ritual dance performances (*sadirkkacheri*) and theatre.<sup>1</sup>

### **Nāṭakam**

Nāṭakam represents one of the novel hybrid theatres that emerged in India during the second half of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century. Being a 'secular' and commercial theatre genre, not linked to ritual, social and economic relations governing village communities, it was open to individuals and groups from different caste and religious backgrounds. I use the term 'hybrid' to refer to the fact that these theatres combined, in varying degrees of synthesis, ingredients from different theatre genres in their performance styles and repertoires. For instance, hybrid theatres used elements and performance structures of indigenous expressive genres in combination with performance conventions and proscenium stage techniques gleaned from the melodramatic Western, Victorian stage. Theatres such as the Nāṭakam were the principal means of popular multi-media entertainment until the advent of cinema with sound track in the 1930s. Their display of 'novelty', the 'exotic' and the 'fashionable' and their mobility made these hybrid theatres early harbingers of modernity.<sup>2</sup>

### **Kaṭṭaikūttu**

The Kaṭṭaikūttu performances, like the dance performances by rural Devadasis, were the prerogative of a limited number of lineages, whose members held locality-specific rights-cum-obligations to perform on particular occasions. Performance rights formed part of a larger complex that distributed occupational, ritual and cultural rights among the different agricultural and service castes of a village. These rights entitled the performers to social and ritual respect as well as income in kind – in the case of dramatic and ritual specialists a fixed share of the agricultural produce (*ari* or *vilakku*) – and, at a later stage, a token amount of money (*kaṭṭalai* or *kaṭṭalu*). These 'honours' publicly stated and confirmed the social position of the recipients in the village hierarchy.

The transformation of the rural economy into a cash economy and the relaxation of the caste system led to the erosion of these local systems of division of occupational and ritual labour and its accompanying patronage, which until then had provided an economic basis for rural traditional theatre forms such as Kaṭṭaikūttu. The traditional token remuneration was no longer sufficient to engage a whole company of performers. It forced exponents of these 'pre-modern' theatre genres to start negotiating remuneration in cash for their performances and to look for new performance venues. While popular theatres thus became 'commercial' by the force of circumstances, the social pressure obliging performers to perform on those dates and occasions when they used to perform earlier remained in force for a much

longer period of time. The changing perceptions on the side of the performers about the necessity to hang on to performance rights and to fulfil performance obligations, in combination with changing perceptions of caste and changing audience demands as a result of the introduction of general suffrage and social reform movements, led to disputes between performers, traditional patrons and others. These disputes tended to be expressed in terms of '(lack of) respect' for 'traditional' relationships. These circumstances played an important role in the decision by traditional performers to abandon, for instance, the practice of Terukkūttu and to focus only on all-night Kaṭṭaikkūttu performances. Terukkūttu, acted out as part of the procession of the deity, was an integral part of the system of rights-cum-obligations to perform, and, consequently, identified the position of the performers as belonging to a particular caste in their own locality. Terukkūttu is not to be confused with all-night Kaṭṭaikkūttu performances.<sup>3</sup>

### Rural Devadasis

The rural Devadasis were a case apart. They were economically independent women who through their alliances with their patrons defied the caste system and the idealised picture of the Hindu domestic woman. The incompatibility of their profession and life-style with the values proclaimed by modern society disqualified Devadasis from full social acceptance. The changing public perception of the Devadasi custom was closely connected to social reform and revival movements that were supported by different political forces operating at the regional and national levels. (Srinivasan 1985; Ananthi 1991). Through a process of stigmatisation, the Devadasis were effectively cut off from their own tradition. This resulted in their economic and ritual disempowerment and, subsequently, in the disappearance of their persona and performances from the rural stage during the early 1970s, long after the Devadasi Act had come into force in 1947. Some of the ritual tasks of the Devadasis appear to have been taken over by contemporary women performers employed in *Nāṭakam* companies. As they come from nomadic backgrounds, they cannot lay claims to social and economic rights in a village. For them the *Nāṭakam* theatre appears to offer a possibility to enter into proper society and to acquire, through marriage, a caste identity and a permanent address, if not for themselves than at least for their children.

The disappearance of the traditional systems of performance rights-cum-obligations had far-reaching consequences. In the case of Kaṭṭaikkūttu it led to:

- (1) The commercialisation of the tradition: the remuneration, venue, date, conditions and quality of a performance became the subject of negotiation between the performers and patrons of a performance;
- (2) The opening up of the tradition to newcomers of different castes to the extent that most contemporary Kaṭṭaikkūttu performers now have

- no predecessors who were involved in the theatre; and as a result;
- (3) An increased competition between *Kaṭṭaikkūttu* theatre companies, and between these companies and their local competitors, the *Nāṭakam* companies; beyond the local level, both *Kaṭṭaikkūttu* and *Nāṭakam* face competition from the commercial Tamil film; and
  - (4) A degree of professionalisation as the result of the falling away of the traditional patronage system in which occupational and ritual rights-cum-obligations prevented competition.

### Present Situation: Dead or Alive?

Aside from the common perception that contemporary *Kaṭṭaikkūttu* (re)presents a 'degraded' or 'deteriorated' residue of once flourishing tradition, another frequently heard comment is that people believe this theatre to be on the verge of dying out. The idea that *Kaṭṭaikkūttu* is almost extinct has taken firm root, in particular among the urban-based middle classes and the arts establishment. Representatives of these groups have – in all probability – never seen an all-night *Kaṭṭaikkūttu* acted out in a local context and would not be able to locate professional companies other than the two or three which so far have received 'official' patronage. The venues and dates for *Kaṭṭaikkūttu* are not published in the cultural agenda of *The Hindu* or the monthly Chennai guides to cultural events. They are local knowledge – of interest to rural people who have supported *Kaṭṭaikkūttu* as their own cultural expression. It is these local audiences, who have built up an appreciation for the theatre through frequent exposure to *Kaṭṭaikkūttu* performances. For, complex theatre traditions such as *Kaṭṭaikkūttu*, which carry the label of 'folk', require a similar degree of exposure as 'high culture' art forms termed 'classical', in order to understand them, develop a 'taste' for them and to appreciate their nuances.

The 'knowledge' of representatives of the arts establishment of *Kaṭṭaikkūttu* appears to be based primarily on incidental performances of *Kaṭṭaikkūttu* during cultural festivals, in addition to publications about the genre in the popular press. These performances are condensed and often formalised versions of all-night *Kaṭṭaikkūttus*. Usually these performances are bereft of slapstick, humour and racy jokes. For, they take place outside the local village context for non-traditional audiences about whose 'educated' and 'refined' tastes the rural performers harbour unexpressed, vague ideas. More often than not there will be an amplification that does not particularly suit the high pitch in which *Kaṭṭaikkūttu*, as an open-air theatre, is performed and that, therefore, does not contribute to the audibility and appreciation of the form.

The idea of degradation or deterioration of *Kaṭṭaikkūttu* extends to the popular Tamil stage in general. Its 'truth value' and causes will have to be assessed with greater sensitivity taking into account the changes that have occurred in the social, economic and cultural texture of villages

and the precarious social and economic position of the performers, in order to arrive at the formulation of a more reliable and nuanced opinion about the vitality and status of popular theatres. The stereotyped image of folk forms appears to have been re-enforced by the emergence of a modern Tamil theatre movement whose intellectual exponents proudly call themselves 'amateurs' so as to demarcate their 'unselfish' involvement in the theatre from that of their professional folk counterparts who played for financial gain. (de Bruin 2001: 57).

As others and I have argued, the construction of cultural forms as the degraded remnants of a theatrical past of greater authenticity and purity, and the threat to their existence – real and perceived – carries political overtones. It provides the arts establishment with an opportunity to 'rescue' the tradition from the hands of its illiterate exponents in order to restore it to its previous glorious state. This rhetoric is a powerful instrument by which to legitimise, for example, practices of biased patronage as well as other forms of appropriation of the theatre by members of the urban elite. (de Bruin 2000: 106-7; Clifford 1986: 112-4). The idea of salvage feeds also into the desire of creating cultural icons that unproblematically (re)present India's hoary spiritual and cultural heritage by confirming its status and cultural identity among other nation-states in an increasingly globalising world.

The idea of tradition 'being under threat' exists not only among the urban elite, but also among contemporary *Kaṭṭaikkūttu* performers. They also tend to compare the present situation with that of their predecessors, stating that things have changed for the worse (as they are supposed to do in *Kali Yuga*). While this may be a psychological mechanism to cope with modernity and undesirable changes or changes that came too fast, the present status of *Kaṭṭaikkūttu* and of the popular Tamil stage in general requires introspection on the side of the performers as well as on the side of the arts establishment, if these popular forms are to survive in a respected and economically viable manner.

## Statistics

We do not possess accurate figures about the number of people professionally engaged in *Kaṭṭaikkūttu*, i.e., of those for whom the theatre is the main source of income. Nobody knows how many *Kaṭṭaikkūttu* companies are there in Tamil Nadu and southern Andhra Pradesh, how many engagements these companies receive during a year and what would be the average income of a professional *Kaṭṭaikkūttu* performer. Neither do we possess figures about an earlier situation with which the present situation could be compared. Consequently, it is not so easy to get an overall picture of the state-of-affairs of *Kaṭṭaikkūttu*, or for that matter, of the popular Tamil stage, in particular when one takes into account that genres, performance, and organisational practices differ considerably from region to region.

However, I have a fairly accurate idea about the state of affairs in my own fieldwork area. A well-managed company built around one or two popular lead performers attracts, depending on the seasonally fluctuating financial resources of a village, 100 to 150 performances a year. The *Kaṭṭaikkūttu* Sangam's repertory company established in 2001 played 121 performances, while the average rate for an all-night performance by this group of 15 performers was Rs. 3,238 (Rs. 215 rupees/person or an income of Rs. 26,000 a year minus bus fare and costume expenses). It has become standard practice in many companies in the Kancheepuram and Tiruvannamalai districts that performers be given an 'advance' when engaged by the 'owner' of a company for the coming *Kaṭṭaikkūttu* season. The practice of asking for an advance – a euphemistic term for a 'loan' against an exorbitant interest rate – started perhaps 10-15 years ago in imitation of *Nāṭakam* companies, where it has been popular for some time.

The absence of reliable statistics, in combination with opinions about folk theatre that are not based on exposure to the actual forms, is indicative of the rural-urban gap. This gap is expressed not only in terms of 'taste' and appreciation but also in terms of, for instance, anonymity versus accredited authorship or performership and in the relaxation of the courtesy to ask permission to take photographs or video-footage of 'folk performances' and acknowledging folk performers when their photographs are published vide *The Oxford Illustrated History of Theatre* 1997, which acknowledges the performers and director of a modern play on page 463, but not of an equally contemporary performance of Ankiya Nat where the performer is described as 'a youthful actor' portraying Krishna on page 459. See also the essay that appeared in British newspaper *The Independent* on 11 July 2001 identifying *Kaṭṭaikkūttu* as a 'street Kathakali performance' and featuring prominently a photograph of the annual theatre festival organised by the *Kaṭṭaikkūttu* Sangam (indeed in the public space of a street) without any acknowledgement of the performers or organisers).

## Challenges

### Do We Need *Kaṭṭaikkūttu*?

Before addressing the challenges to *Kaṭṭaikkūttu* or, for that matter, popular theatre, we should ask ourselves the question whether and what *Kaṭṭaikkūttu* has to offer to contemporary society. Should we insist on keeping it alive? I think that *Kaṭṭaikkūttu* fulfils an important role in providing a powerful cultural medium of expression—interactive, flexible, democratic and accommodating—that is geared to the entertainment and ritual/religious demands of its rural spectators. The theatre is still fully owned by its local audiences who patronise and sponsor it, although the growing influence of financiers from outside the theatre provides a serious risk to the (economic) independence of individual performers and the profession as a whole, and to the vitality of the tradition. *Kaṭṭaikkūttu* helps to confirm cultural practices

and values, which are socially and psychologically important to maintain local cohesion, self-assurance, pride in one's own culture, and personal and group identities, in particular during a time of rapid change. However, some of these practices and values score low when measured in terms of 'modernity' and some of them are in direct conflict with more Brahminical values that are attributed a higher status in modern society.

*Kaṭṭaikkūttu* performances provide a platform where local relationships, problems and politics are acted out and – to some extent – commented and reflected upon. They have the potential to elicit debate between spectators and between performers and spectators, while the risk of 'holding the stage' and imposing ideas and messages upon audiences is low. In addition, the theatre provides insights into universal dilemmas and states-of-mind, in particular, to those who have little or no access to written and electronic media. *Kaṭṭaikkūttu* can be and has been used for extension activities, but the willingness of local audiences to pay for novel plays, which do not link up with the ritual contexts within which *Kaṭṭaikkūttu* is normally performed, is low. Lastly, *Kaṭṭaikkūttu* provides local employment, also to people who are 'gendered' differently. Its existence helps to protect a varied labour market – something that becomes important in particular when whole areas are taken over by a single profession, such as silk weaving, imposing economic dependency and encouraging child labour.

### **Indebtedness and Lack of Quality**

One of the major challenges that *Kaṭṭaikkūttu* performers will have to address is the 'advance' system and, as a result thereof, the dwindling quality of their performances. Started as a practice to financially bridge the theatre's lean season and to finance new costumes and ornaments, the amounts of cash that are now being paid as 'advance' easily transcend the annual income of a leading *Kaṭṭaikkūttu* performer. This has resulted in quite a few professional performers becoming indebted to their financiers. As a consequence, they have lost the possibility to change the companies at the end of the season – a normal practice that helped to keep up the quality of a company and its performances. In a few cases, the financiers have decided to join the theatre themselves, acting smaller or larger roles without having undergone much of a training, in order to be able to better and more quickly recover the interest on the loans they have provided.

Instead of receiving money from someone outside the tradition, some leading performers put up money themselves to finance their own company. While in this manner the money at least stays within the professional group, it leads to the exploitation of performers of lesser status and capacity. They are the 'hangers-on' in a company centred around one single lead performer and three or four co-financiers who share the exorbitant interest while the other performers receive a minimum 'share' of the performance remuneration from which they have to repay the 'advance' and the interest. Both

arrangements are disadvantageous for the quality of contemporary *Kaṭṭai* performances: companies are formed on the basis of the amount of 'advance' offered and their ability to repay debts, while the quality of performers is judged only where it concerns one or two leading performers who have to carry the company against the lowest financial input. Performers who have staked their money in a company will be worried about its recovery and may, for that reason, take on engagements they would otherwise not enter into.

In a conscious move to break the advance system, the Sangam started its own repertory company in 2001. One of the principal conditions of the repertory company is that its performers do not receive 'advance money'. In return for the use of costumes and ornaments, financed by a partial loan from the Department of Culture, New Delhi, the company donates two of its total of 20 shares of the remuneration it receives for its regular performances to the Sangam. During the 2001-2002 season, the company, which counted 15 members, contributed a little more than Rs. 30,000 to the Sangam. This year, the Sangam's company has run into trouble as it has not been able to attract leading performers willing to abstain from receiving an 'advance'—either because these actors are unable to repay their debts or because they have decided to finance their own companies. At least one leading performer of male *kaṭṭai* roles and one leading performer of female roles are essential to guarantee the quality of a company's performances. Though a group of 15 performers has come together to constitute the Sangam's rep, securing well-paying engagements without the intervention of a 'broker' and competing with better-formed or better-brokered companies may prove a difficulty during the current season.

## Caste

Another threat that looms over the theatre is the caste factor. The increasing influence of caste as a pragmatic instrument to negotiate (or extract) 'rights' and 'advantages', in combination with the renewed social acceptability of caste as a part of Tamil Nadu's political stage, has had its impact on the *Kaṭṭai* scene, too. The majority of the non-traditional performers in the core area of my fieldwork area are *Vaṇṇiyars*. Their dominance in the profession has created a market for caste-based performance engagements: companies led by *Vaṇṇiyar* performers receive invitations to perform in villages with a large *Vaṇṇiyar* population. Occasionally, audience demands have been registered that particular roles in the *Kaṭṭai* repertoire should or could be performed only by a *Vaṇṇiyar*. One of the reasons why the *Vaṇṇiyars*, who are a dominant caste, have been attracted to *Kaṭṭai* is that the theatre, in particular its *Mahābhārata* repertoire, is a means to confirm this caste's claim to a *Kṣatriya* status – a claim which has not been recognised by the census and which remains disputed. Some new companies now appear to have been constituted on a caste basis. They receive their

engagements through professional brokers with the result that patrons no longer have a say, or no longer are interested in having a say, in the quality of the performance because, anyway, it is 'their own' people who perform. This is not to say that the situation is hopeless -- there are many *Kaṭṭaikkūttu rasikars* or fans who still prefer quality above caste. But will there be sufficient successors to the tradition who can guarantee this quality? This brings us to a third challenge and to the interface between the local and the regional (urban) level.

### **Training and Transmission**

*Kaṭṭaikkūttu* faces a breakdown in transmission of the tradition. Because of unattractive financial prospects, the low social status of the profession of actor (not to speak of that of actress), and the lack of official recognition of the theatre, traditional performers have discouraged their children from becoming *Kaṭṭaikkūttu* performers. This has resulted in the absence of qualified teachers who know the ins and outs of the theatre and who can train a new generation of performers. Of the teachers available, some refuse to transmit the tradition because they are disappointed with the current developments taking place in the theatre, in particular the growing influence of caste and the lack of training of some of the contemporary performers. They are also vexed by government policies of awarding honours and pensions without a proper selection process, ignoring local expertise and the precarious position of the 'real' artists. They seem disappointed because of their lack of access to the bureaucracy, which they themselves are reluctant to approach for fear of disrespect and rejection.

### **Religion**

Another development, which now appears to find its full reflection in rural society, is the ambivalent attitude of the urban elite towards what I will call here 'folk' or 'village' religion. As we have seen above, religious village festivals provide the most important context for *Kaṭṭaikkūttu* performances. These performances are seen as 'sacrifices' in which the performers take upon themselves the dangerous task of acting out sacral, heroic struggles involving life and death.

The central focus of village religion is the goddess who is pivotal to the welfare and well being of the village. Village festivals in honour of the goddess are closely linked to the agricultural cycle. Agrarian village rituals display a preference for the deliberate evocation and representation of sacred power in temporary forms and at well-defined moments only. They are carried out by non-Brahmin specialists, who represent a number of different castes within the village and who may use their bodies to mediate power. They often involve blood sacrifices and are aimed at stimulating maximum fertility, prosperity, and the general welfare of the village through the physical representation of the goddess in her manifold forms and moods. The lustful goddess, the ultimate source of fertility, descends into the village to be

propitiated, worshipped and sexually enticed by all her (male) dependants, who often see themselves as close kin of the deity. These non-Brahmin village rituals, and the 'folk' performances that are part of them, are directed at the invocation and representation of sacred power as a live, embodied and sexually loaded presence. They have acquired a negative connotation under the impact of modernisation-cum-Brahminisation or Sanskritisation, which sees them as anti-modern and irrational, the domain of the illiterate and uneducated, and as the subjects of potential transformation into the direction of the more prestigious Brahmin paradigm (vide the article in *Dinamani* of 22 January 2003 about the Tamil Nadu government's proposed ban on the practice of exorcism of 'devils' or *peys*). This paradigm, which at times tends to be equated with normative Hinduism, favours the representation of the deity in a more permanent form, ensuring greater accessibility to sacred power. In terms of worship, the fixing of the deity in a physical, anthropomorphic form and its incarceration in a shrine requires a constant monitoring and brokering of this power through elaborate ritual attention paid by a single group of initiated ritual specialists, the Brahmins. It also requires the sublimation or transformation of the dangerous aspects into a more containable form by attempting to delete organic aspects involving dangerous sexuality, violence and death. As a result, the conceptualisation of sacred power as an organic force represented by the sexually active goddess and her representatives, in the form of ritual performers, has been marginalised in favour of a more male-oriented, ritualistic and ascetic Brahministic view.

With the dwindling of agrarian acreage and the increased difficulty of availing of ritual specialists whose position and willingness to carry out their tasks began to disappear with the falling apart of the local systems of rights and obligations, the propitiation of the goddess has become problematic. With the lack of ritual specialists who can propitiate the deity, many village goddesses are now being elevated to the state of 'proper' (more Brahminised) Hindu goddesses so as to contain their dangerous powers. This means that they are placed in temples and that they require more frequent ritual attention. Existing village temples have received advice from Hindu authorities, such as the Sankaracharya of Kancheepuram, about the 'right' manner in which rituals should be conducted. With authority and acceptability shifting away from the hands of villagers to the representatives of Brahminic Hinduism, and with an increasing feeling among the village population that they can no longer display their cultural practices without feeling ashamed about their 'backwardness', one wonders what will happen to the position of *Kaṭṭaiḱkūttu* performers as ritual specialists and to the position of *Kaṭṭaiḱkūttu* as a way to express and find pride in local culture.

### **Interlinked Solutions**

The *Kaṭṭaiḱkūttu* Sangam ([www.kattaikkuttu.org](http://www.kattaikkuttu.org)) is a grassroots level organisation that serves the economic and cultural interests of professional *Kaṭṭaiḱkūttu* performers and that promotes *Kaṭṭaiḱkūttu* as a theatre in its

own right. Based on its assessment of the ground reality, the Sangam has tried to unite professional, rural actors, actresses (including exponents of the *Nāṭakam* genre) and musicians with the objective of creating a framework within which they can discuss their professional needs, and to provide an interface between the unorganised sector of the rural performing arts and the bureaucracy. Because of divided loyalties and differences in background, training and experience, this is an ongoing process.

The Sangam strives to counteract attempts of appropriation of the *Kaṭṭaikkūttu* theatre by more powerful agents. It wants to keep *Kaṭṭaikkūttu* in the hands of its contemporary exponents who should have the liberty to utilise *Kaṭṭaikkūttu* as an instrument to strengthen local culture and varied local cultural practices, thus providing a counter-weight to a dominant (global) perception of cultural expressions, religion and society.

In order to confront some of the challenges discussed above, the Sangam has identified the following interlinked domains of action:

- **Providing quality artistic training and basic formal education** so as to raise the status and perspective of the performers and to transmit the *Kaṭṭaikkūttu* theatre in detail to a future generation of performers, creating simultaneously a new reservoir of theatre and music teachers. Many *Kaṭṭaikkūttu* performers feel their lack of education to be one of the major restrictions to their upward mobility and official recognition. Quality artistic training and formal education, stimulating independent, critical thinking and analysis, will open up the worldview of future performers and will help them to place local issues into a wider context. In turn, this should stimulate them to use theatre as a medium to address issues of local and global concern in their performances and to communicate them to local audiences who have been excluded from processes of writing and information technology. The Sangam believes that popular theatre can be an interactive mediator between urban and rural, and between local and global demands, tastes and expectations.

To further this ideal, the *Kaṭṭaikkūttu* youth theatre school was established in October 2001. The school provides artistic training in *Kaṭṭaikkūttu* acting and music to a group of 21 students. It also offers these 8-14 year-old boys and girls the opportunity to combine their artistic training with basic formal education. In addition, the Sangam provides specialised theatre training to its members on an incidental basis and runs a programme of evening schools in villages where rural children and young people can familiarise themselves with the theatre.

- **Improving the quality of performances** and creating alternative performance venues as part of an interactive process between *Kaṭṭaikkūttu* performers and their audiences. In addition to

maintaining its link with rural audiences and safeguarding their financial support to the theatre, the Sangam wants to look beyond *Kaṭṭaikkūttu*'s regular performance contexts and to create appreciation of the form among non-traditional audiences, among other things to generate additional funds. Hereto it has condensed and adapted existing plays to non-traditional, regional, national and international contexts. Furthermore, the creation of novel productions – ideally sufficiently flexible in form and content to be tailored to fit traditional and non-traditional contexts – can boost support for and interest in the theatre among traditional and non-traditional audiences.

Maintaining contact with regular *Kaṭṭaikkūttu* audiences and knowing their tastes and expectations, in combination with acquiring knowledge of the tastes of middle-class audiences and the urban intelligentsia (for which a degree of formal education appears to be a pre-requisite) will be pivotal to the success of developing and performing these new plays and securing new performance venues.

- **Breaking the advance system** - so far the Sangam has operated on a basis of consensus. To tackle the advance system and bring back quality to the performances, the policy of consensus may have to be abandoned in favour of a more assertive strategy, which aims at introspection and conscious change of theatrical practices at the risk of losing Sangam members.
- **Lobbying** to find greater recognition for the theatre at the level of the government and the non-governmental arts establishment.
- **Lowering the barriers to pluralistic, artistic collaboration.** Working together with representatives of other art forms will help open up the perspective of performers and will create greater (inter) national and (inter) cultural understanding, co-operation and exchange.

## Notes

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1. See also *Indian Folklife* Vol. 2, Issue 2, October-December 2002, pp. 18-23.
2. de Bruin 2001, "Introduction."
3. See, de Bruin 1999.

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