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KATTAIKKUTTU: AN ART THROUGH TIME



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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the work incorporated in this report entitled “Kattaikkuttu: An Art through Time” submitted by the undersigned Research Team was carried out under my mentorship. Such material as has been obtained from other sources has been duly acknowledged.

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Abstract

This report attempts to understand and analyse the theatre of Kattaikkuttu as a cohesive art form, through the lenses of socio-economic, political and cultural facets. The study focuses on the dynamic nature of Kattaikkuttu, looking closely at the causes and effects of various changes in the art form, its performers, and its audiences. The subject under study was chosen in the hopes of contributing to the revival of marginalized folk art forms through increase in relevant literature. Various sources were reviewed prior to fieldwork which helped paint a clear picture of what to expect on field, while the report makes use of performance ethnography, focused group discussions, semi-structured interviews, observation, and lastly, oral histories. Our findings are primarily based on interactions with individuals on field- founders, staff and students of the Kattaikkuttu Sangam and Gurukulam, and what we witnessed with regard to the theatre. The Sangam is our case study, which is proof of our initial research and validates our thesis that Kattaikkuttu is an art form in transition, and a model for the dynamic rather than static nature of traditional Indian art forms.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Society, an amalgamation of various social groups, cultures, idiosyncrasies, is a catalyst for the evolution of art forms. In a country with diverse cultures and ethnicities, art forms play the role of cross-cultural mediators. Kattaikkuttu, one such art form, brings together communities in the Northern districts of Tamil Nadu where the art form is performed. Kattaikkuttu is a composite dance-theatre art, high in energy and defined by its unique characteristic of being an overnight performance, it borrows narratives from Indian epics like the Mahabharata or religious texts like Puranas. Despite Kattaikkuttu's religious appeal and entertainment value, this folk-art form has been pushed to the margins. A partial cause for this has been its relegation to so-called "unpopular" areas of South India. This report intends on exploring the variables that have affected the rich, yet marginalized art form of Kattaikkuttu as well as its components and development in totality.

1.1 About Kattaikkuttu

Traditionally a male-only performance, the artists adorn makeup and sport grand wooden ornaments. These decorative elements are an integral part of the *Kuttu* or *koothu* (Tamil for performance) and find representation in the name of the art form itself (Kattai, Tamil for wood). As with most traditional performing arts in India, Kattaikkuttu is historically, a caste-based art form performed by members of lower caste communities. Unlike Bharatanatyam, Carnatic music or other performing arts from Tamil Nadu, the lifestyle and religious identities Kattaikkuttu performers are the backbone of the art form. The audience, too, is actively engaged within or through the performance. For instance, when jesters poke fun at members of the audience, they may tip the performer while he is still performing. Additionally, since there is no designated stage-type platform, the audience and the performers occupy a level field. This organic engagement between performer and viewer made us feel as though we were a part of the performance and, by that token, of the art form itself. (de Bruin, 1999).

Another common term that is often used interchangeably with Kattaikkuttu is Terukkuttu. However, the meaning and style of Terukkuttu differs from that of Kattaikkuttu. The English translation of Terukkuttu is ‘street performance’ or ‘street play’. The art of Terukkuttu has fallen out of favour with performers and patrons alike, since the first half of the word, Teru (Tamil for streets) has a negative undertone and trivializes the professionalism of its exponents. In the Indian context, these two terms are often used for politicised street theatre. Kattaikkuttu, however, is anything but a form of social protest (de Bruin 1999, 12)

A Note on the Kattaikkuttu Sangam

We have decided to conduct research on Kattaikkuttu through the Kattaikkuttu Sangam in Kanchipuram, Tamil Nadu, for the purpose of this project. Among the various groups around Kanchipuram that practice the art, the Sangam’s troupe is the most prominent. A collective of over a hundred artistes, the Sangam is the contemporary flag-bearer for the art form as a whole. For most of its history, Kattaikkuttu excluded women, a gender perfectly capable of performing. The Sangam has played a crucial role in including, embracing, teaching and promoting women artists. Along with formal training in the art form, the Sangam runs an institution that provides young performers with a school education.

1.1 Social and historical context

Variation in styles

There are different styles and substyles that exist in the Kattaikkuttu art form. The foremost difference is the division of the art form into the ‘Northern’ and ‘Southern’ styles based on their geographic locations. There are variations in the clothes and ornaments the performers wear, the tunes (selection of Ragas and rhythmic patterns) prevalent and in the pitch used (higher for southern and lower for northern) in the accompanying music (Bruin, 1999).

There are also textual variants used by troupes of the different styles. These are based on the location of the audience with performers adapting to the local scenario. Each substyle has its own stylistic variations based on various factors. For example, the northern style has three main substyles or panis under it which are each represented by a different company (Bruin, 1999). Gender based differences are also present. Male roles are more static and have less rigorous movements with female roles are more prominent in the southern style (Bruin, 1999). An example of this, in the play Draupadi Kuravanchi, the actor playing Draupadi has stage (floor in the koothu context) time of over four hours in the nightlong performance. Traditionally, the men played both male and female roles. With the induction of women however, this has a whole new meaning. How will this transform koothu? Will the women outshine the men? These are aspects that require deeper enquiry.

Performer mobility and the Kattaikkuttu season

The Kattaikkuttu season begins on the third day of the Pongal festival which falls on the third day of the Tamil month Tai (Jan 16-17) and then peaks around July-September. It usually closes on the fifth Saturday of the month Purattaci (mid-September to mid-October). The months in between the end of a season and the start of the next one is when negotiations and enquiries take place.

Leaders of the troupes discuss every performer's share based on their contribution (eg. those playing kattai ornament-adorned roles are paid more than the ones who play regular roles) . If they choose to leave, new performers are approached to occupy vacant places (de Bruin, 1999). Performers can change the companies after the Kattaikkuttu season ends for the year. Typically, the performers switch between 3-4 companies in the area. This brings both familiarity and variations in performance from one year to the next. Movement of performers between the companies and formation and dissolution of various companies is a highlight of contemporary Kattaikkuttu. R. Kumar, Gopinath are some of many artists with multi-company experience.

1.2 History and mission of the Sangam

Toward the end of the 1990s, P. Rajagopal brought together seventeen musicians and actors who were the exponents of Kattaikkuttu. What they formed was the Tamil Natu Kattaikkuttu Kalai Valarcci Munnerra Cankam, an organisation convened to propagate their theatre form (de Bruin, 2000). His Dutch wife — Dr. Hanne M. de Bruin — a Phd. in Kattaikkuttu from the University of Leiden in The Netherlands, was instrumental in setting up this organisation. In the early 2000s, the Sangam started a gurukulam that now has over 50 students of both genders.

The founders aimed to change the notion of Kattaikkuttu as a marginalized performance. They believe that koothu should be out there with arts such as Carnatic music and Bharatanatyam, that hold a higher social standing. The mission of the Kattaikkuttu Sangam is to build a platform for young performers who wish to further their interests in the theatre, along with nurturing various other skills essential outside of theatre as well. The Sangam's endeavour to promote the art and blend it with more renowned forms of art has been successful through their partnership with the celebrated Carnatic musician T.M. Krishna.

The gurukulam that they set up is designed in a way that ensures students do not miss out on necessary education while being trained in Kattaikkuttu. Indeed, the Gurukulam combines CBSE board subjects like English, Tamil, and accounting for Standards 3-12 with movement and music rehearsals each day. The teachers in the Sangam stick to the gurukulam philosophy and maintain a family unit that hosts concerts, workshops and other events. This allows the community to practice, learn and eventually train others in the art form.

1.3 Research Question

Track Socio-cultural, Economic and Political transitions in the Kattaikkuttu art form:

1. Identity:

How have caste and gender contributed to fabricating an identity for the Kattaikkuttu performers?

2. Commercialisation to patronage:

What are the effects of the transition from a patronage-based theatre form into a commercial one?

3. Integration into the mainstream:

What hinders, sustains and catalyses the integration of Kattaikkuttu into the mainstream?

Keeping in mind the focus of our research questions, we aim to fulfil the following objectives during our time at the Sangam —

1. Shed light on individual stories

The relative anonymity of the Kattaikkuttu means that, as compared to other more commercial art forms, there is an absence of individual stories of the performers. By working closely with, and by tracking the impact Kattaikkuttu has had on the lives of the artistes and locals, we hope to fill this void.

2. Intersectional analysis

The gender and caste disparities prevalent in the society have always been important influencers of tradition. With the transitions in Kattaikkuttu, we hope to examine the impact and intersection of these aspects.

3. Cross gender character portrayal

Why is cross gender character portrayal still prevalent in an era where women are being allowed to perform?

4. Differences between local and outstation audiences

Kattaikkuttu is slowly transitioning from a mere religious and spiritual practice to a commercial art form. There has been an expansion of the Kattaikkuttu audience and there exists a difference between local and outstation (rural and urban) audiences.

1.4 Methodology

Kattaikkuttu is a rich and elaborate art form. The approach to studying it therefore required a complex framework of research methodologies. This research was approached qualitatively, using performance ethnography, semi-structured interviews, oral histories, non-participant observation, and focused group discussions.

1. Performance ethnography uses data gathered from the various performances to describe the lives and customs of the performers. Quite simply, performance ethnography sees rehearsals and performances as the site of meaning-making, and opens them up to ethnographic analysis (Alexander, 2005; Finley, 2005; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). The importance of this method is enhanced when the activity performed, which in the case of Kattaikkuttu is curated by the members of a marginalized community. Performance opens up a window for these groups to express their opinions on matters that are otherwise difficult to communicate.

2. Semi-structured interviews allowed us to get a personal perspective of the trainers, current and former performers, students and their parents alike. These interviews led our research in a completely new direction while simultaneously fulfilling our proposed hypothesis. Thus, what

is crucial for our interviewees would be to propose questions that would give the interviewee direction while also allowing them to digress and reveal other aspects that they find relevant.

3. Oral history gives the researcher a first-hand glimpse into the life and experiences of the interviewee. Our research aimed at studying transitions in the art form. It was therefore essential that we knew what the individual artist's/patron's perspective is and oral histories helped us immensely in this regard.

4. Focused group discussions allows the researcher/moderator to stimulate discourse and observe how different individuals of a social group react to a question. Usually, members of a certain social group have similar perceptions of their social environment and adhere to normative beliefs. However, in a discussion, the internalised influence of socio-cultural factors gives the opportunity of reinforcing the perceptions modelled by a social group through a lively dialogue between individuals that activates emotions, memories and experiences that yields richer information as compared to interviews. In the case of our research, opinions on an art form so closely intertwined with the lives of the locals is bound to generate actual feelings and may encourage participants to support, disagree and comment on various aspects of Kattaikkuttu we aim to study.

The discussion guide for focused group discussions reflects the research objectives and gaps of the study while also keeping the moderation of discussion flexible enough for participants to spontaneously raise issues not included in the guide as unexpected feelings and issues may contribute to the value of the discussion. (Folch-Lyon & Trost, 1981)

For this methodology, perspectives of the performers, students, especially that of the female students was invaluable. These opinions helped study issues such as intersectional identity and perception of Kattaikkuttu through the eyes of the performers.

5. Through non-participant observational research, we collected primary data of the Sangam ecosystem, the cultural practices and events. This was accomplished by using scan sampling to observe the current state and activities of a group and the interactions between the group members.

These methods have helped us touch upon the various aspects of the art form. The different methods have aided our understanding of different aspects of the art form individually, as well as in relation to one another.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

A traditionally ritualistic and raw form of physical theatre, the folk theatre of Kattaikkuttu is intricately woven with the lives of the communities that perform and patronize it. It has bearing on the socio-cultural, economic, and political spheres of the northern districts in Tamil Nadu, where most (if not all) of its practitioners and audiences are situated. Within these regions, and for these participants — the performers and their patrons, the art form serves as a vital medium in defining their identities through various forms of identification and distancing that occur in performance. For nearly two and a half centuries, it has shaped and been shaped by the social structures in which it is situated. Yet, sources that provide substantial insight pertaining to the art form are rarely found in academic discourse. Clearly Kattaikkuttu has not been adequately explored in the voluminous scholarship on folk forms in India. It has unfortunately been inconspicuous in scholarly narratives.

The existing discourse on Kattaikkuttu has been largely dictated by the ‘urban upper and middle-classes’; intelligentsia, that although offer a very important perspective, remain isolated and out of touch with the rural folk performing art form (De Bruin, 1999). This discrepancy in intellectual representation is crucial to understand, in order to partake in an objective and integrated research endeavour.

The lack of substantial relevant sources proved to be a great challenge in our initial research. We were apprehensive of being exposed to a singular narrative. Dr Hanne De Bruin’s work in the field proved to be a great resource as she acknowledged the predominance of the urban intelligentsia in the Kattaikkuttu discourse and strived to engage the reader with the diverse set of perspectives that are pivotal in its understanding. Her works served as our primary sources to objectively and critically understand the complexities surrounding the art form.

Kattaikkuttu is traditionally a ritualistic, male dominated art form performed by members belonging to lower castes. Thus, it was vital for us to gain a cohesive picture of ritualistic performances, gender and performance and the different aspects of Kattaikkuttu.

2.1 Performance and Ritual

Rituals conducted before and after a particular performance are fundamental in understanding the purpose and process of the art form. In an essay analysing South Indian performance rituals, Farley Richmond (1971) highlights the theme and underlying objectives in the varying rituals that are executed — starting right from the dressing room and continuing till the very end of the performance. Studying a variety of Indian dance forms (Kathakali, Kutiyattam, Bhavi, Yakshagana, Ramlila, Krishnattam and Kattaikkuttu) he identifies the broader themes of ritualistic traditions in performances:

The stories represent the constant win of good over evil and aims to reinforce commonly held societal beliefs. In case of *Ramlila* (performed mainly in North India) and Kattaikkuttu, after long, arduous battles between the good and the evil, the good always emerge victorious, portraying the need to adopt ‘good’ values and discarding of any ‘evil’ characteristics.

The place of performance is always considered sacred or is cleansed of all impurities so as to ensure that no disruptive force may interrupt the holy performance. In *Bhavi*, (performed in Gujarat) the stage manager draws a large circle with Castor oil to inscribe the bounds of the stage and to drive away any lingering evil spirits.

The actors are usually locally selected individuals devoted to their respective gods—giving up their lives so as to spread the word of god. Actors in the *Ramlila* are devotees of the Lord Vishnu, recruited from the local population. They play the same roles until they reach puberty. The actors of *Krishnattam* are drawn from families who agree to commit one of their sons to the temple as an offering to Lord Krishna for granting them a favor.

The spectators are usually expected to be a part of the performances, so as to portray societal inclusion. Before the Kathakali performance, spectators are expected to touch the feet of the actors to show their respect. In Yakshagana, rituals start only after an elaborate session of drumming and dancing. During the performance of Kattaikkuttu, women from the village smear their hair with Duryodhana’s ‘blood’ symbolizing that the wrongs done by Duryodhana have been avenged by Draupadi.

An actor's headdress is given utmost importance- akin to divinity. Kathakali actors offer silent prayers over their headdresses as they are believed to possess special powers which transform the actors into the characters they portray. Similarly, in Kutiyattam, the headdresses are said to be endowed with magical powers and when angered by a spectator's rude remark, *Kutiyattam* actors remove the headdress signifying the abrupt end of the performance following which numerous purification ceremonies have to be performed by the priests. Kattaikkuttu performers wear the *Kattai* which represents power, heroic qualities and royalty.

The rituals usually start and end with a small prayer to the deity. In the case of *Kathakali*, *Bhavi* and *Krishnattam*, actors begin their performance day with a silent prayer for success in their dressing room.

Indian folk traditions are closely linked to ritualistic practices. In Kattaikkuttu, religion has a central role as the performances are done to honour certain deities, through stories that have religious basis. The different themes discussed shed light on the symbolic meanings associated with different ritualistic practices. These dance-drama folk traditions are not performed with an intention to entertain, but rather, to gain spiritual upliftment, and thus the dimension of rituals in the performance is significant.



Image 1: Invoking blessings before the start of a koothu performance

2.2 Gender and Performance

Sex is a biological categorization based primarily on reproductive potential while gender is attributed to actions, beliefs, and social choices of an individual. Gender performativity is performance of a repetitive act, which is associated with roles that are pronounced to be suitable for masculine or feminine beings by social norms. By succumbing to these social norms, gender no longer remains a choice but is forced upon individuals.

A parallel can be drawn between performativity of gender and performance of theatre. The gender of an actor is a constructed identity, which the performers and the audience are conditioned to accept owing to the performative characteristic of gender (Swaminathan, 1998).

Inclusion of women began after the occasion of the Eighth Annual Kattaikkuttu Festival in 1997 which was based on the mythological story of Mahabharata. P. Rajagopal, the principal and teacher of the Kattaikkuttu Gurukulam in Kanchipuram, and the writer and director of the performance involved 12 women artists in the play. This was the first-time men and women shared the Kattaikkuttu stage. This performance made the audience and the performers realize that art transcends gender (Swaminathan, 1998).

Art is a culmination of training, guidance, skills, commitment, and understanding which is not gender specific according to P. Rajagopal. Seeing women perform in full *kattai vesham* (heroic embellishment, typically portrayed by physically strong men) on stage for the very first time, the audience was overwhelmed (Swaminathan, 1998). The attention-grabbing twist of playing interchangeable gender characters made the audience enjoy the performances even more. In addition to that, gender swapping stimulated humour in the performance which was particularly appreciated by the audience.



Image 2: Finally gender inclusive

Through the performance, the audience and other individuals associated with this art form fathomed the notion of traditions and how they grow and evolve over time. Traditions cannot be crystalized; they need to be dynamic as to be in sync with people’s ever-changing ideologies, beliefs and adaptations.

2.3 Aspects of Kattaikkuttu

Kattaikkuttu has its roots in the mythological snippets of heroic stories including the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. It was contrived long before independence and is deeply rooted in the cultural and religious traditions existing in that period. Kattaikkuttu has grown into a commercial art form that is performed by both genders today. The shift from a barter system as a means of remuneration (a meal or harvest) of performances to “cash for crops” system with the coming of the British led to the commercialization of the form (De Bruin, 1999).

Kattaikkuttu is an amalgamation of dance, drama, and music. It uses songs, dialogues, dance and singing to narrate its stories. The music is created by the students themselves through

singing and three instruments, namely the harmonium, *mridangam*, and the *mukavinai*. The theatre revolves around a common theme of self-sacrifice on the battleground, but what differentiates Kattaikkuttu from other theatre forms is the comic element introduced through clowns (De Bruin, 1999). The underlying purpose of the inclusion of clowns is the alleviation of a serious atmosphere that the common theme creates. Additionally, the drama resonates with commoners owing to their inclusion in the narrative (De Bruin, 1999).

Role of Supernatural

A substantial amount of importance is given to evoking supernatural, sacred powers in an attempt to ensure the well-being of the community. Sometimes these performers may make *Pali* (Tamil for animal sacrifices) to arouse demonic powers. Kattaikkuttu performers specialise in dealing with demonic energy, and in many cases while playing a demonic character the performer may enter a stage of “possession” which could lead to consequences that permanently affect the actor (De Bruin, 1999). The practice of evoking a supernatural power is negated by the Brahmins. Brahmins believe that the access to “sacred” beings can only be done by a priest, thus placing god outside society, whereas it’s the complete opposite when it comes to non-Brahmin culture (De Bruin, 1999).

It is due to this significant difference that the Brahmins reject the art of Kattaikkuttu completely by calling it “unrefined”, “premodern”, “obsolete” and instead promote other commercial forms of performances like Bharatanatyam, and Carnatic music. This hints at the focus of economic capital on these commercial art forms instead of Kattaikkuttu.

Kattai Ornaments

The local handcrafted Kattai ornaments worn by the performers are the defining element of the theatre form. These ornaments are characteristic to each region, and have a role to play in the sphere of culture and dramatization. Despite the light weight of these ornaments, the performers require great amounts of stamina to wear many such ornamental pieces

(depending on their character in the story) throughout the performance. All the ornaments are greatly revered by every performer for the qualities they possess, and similar kinds are used in various other regions.



Image 3: Heavy Kattai ornaments

2.4 Kattaikkuttu and Caste

Caste serves as a crucial element that aids understanding of the complexities arising from the relation between multifarious dramatic forms and the social and ritualistic organization of a community or village (De Bruin, 1999).

Caste has evolved into newer dimensions owing to the commercialization of mutually dependent relations, mainly patrons and performers. The issue of caste, over time, has moved to the realm of politics which lends to it yet another dimension. Even in Kattaikkuttu, caste has been a prominent feature with three main castes- *Vannars*, *Pantarams*, and the *Vanniyars*. Many other castes participate in the art form, namely Harijans (also known as Paraiyars), Kuravars, and dwellers of northwestern hills of Tamil Nadu. While Kattaikkuttu is a permeable

form that houses a mélange of social groups, the Harijans and Brahmins have independent companies (De Bruin, 1999).

Caste is deeply entrenched in the practices and the very identity of the art form. Labelled on many occasions as a “lower-caste” performance, Kattaikkuttu has been inaccurately depicted as bound or restricted to caste. Through the years, with greater importance being given to the caste of the performer rather than the actual performance, one can trace a deterioration in the narrative surrounding the art form as well as the quality of the performance.

2.5 The Kattaikkuttu Sangam

The Kattaikkuttu Sangam established in 1990 and the *gurukulam* established in 2002 by P. Rajagopal and Dr. Hanne De Bruin in Kanchipuram, were instrumental in the involvement of women in the art form. The *gurukulam* serves as a residential, educational institution for young performers from socio-economically deprived groups who wish to further their interests in theatre. It provides formal training in music, dance, as well as generic theoretical subjects, and students also learn the art of applying make-up for it is one of the key elements of characterization. A nine-and-a-half-hour regime of, alternatively, studying and practice is followed throughout the week, and the young souls’ dedication only grows with passing time.



Image 4: The Kattaikkuttu Sangam

2.6 Naming of the Art Form

Dr Hanne De Bruin proposes inception of the *Cankam* (or Sangam) to be a turning point in the history of the archaic theatre form of Tamil Nadu. The *Cankam* brought with it a change in the traditional name “*Terukkuttu*” to “*Kattaikkuttu*” thus creating a socio-political stir. The debate surrounding the names is championed by two groups- representatives of the *Cankam* and members of the intelligentsia.

Tamil researchers and the representatives of the urban arts establishment are severely critical of the coinage of the new term. They serve as the supporters of the conventional name of “*Terukkuttu*” (De Bruin, 1999). “*Teru*” translated to street and “*Kuttu*” means theatre. The intelligentsia/ the literati recognize the name “*Terukkuttu*” as associated with the traditional, ritualistic nature of the art form. Giving importance to the geographical location of the performance, i.e. the street/proximity to the temple, they claim to capture the essence of the performance.

On the other hand, the *Cankam*, although officially recognizes the traditional name, strongly felt the need to change the name of the theatre form for various reasons. In the course of time, “*Teru*” became synonymous to “poverty and an implication of disrespect” (De Bruin, 1999), for the symbolic importance of the space for performance was overlooked and instead was interpreted as any mediocre platform for showcasing the art.

“*Kattaikkuttu*”, although referred to as the ‘new’ name in most discourses, has existed in parallel to the conventional, more urban nomenclature of *Terukkuttu*. *Kattaikkuttu* is derived from “*Kattai*” which refers to the special ornaments worn by actors during their performance, representing power and heroism. The initiative of the *Cankam* to change the name was an attempt to associate the art form with these qualities and style, which will be touched upon in the following chapters, rather than the ones associated with *Teru* (De Bruin, 1999).

The intelligentsia viewed this as an attempt to undermine the authority of the traditional upper-class patrons of theatre. However, the *Cankam*’s perspective on the conventional name

was that it was derogatory. Restricting the identity of the performance to the streets undermined the legitimacy of the troupe.

The introduction of the term “Kattaikkuttu” into the narrative has been made due to the interplay between the work of researchers as well as the aspirations of the performers. The term has been readily accepted by members of the villages as well as the performers because it denotes the importance of the Kattai ornaments as well as the style of performance associated with them. Performers belonging to these lineages did not appreciate the term Terukkuttu as it had translated to social discrimination and oppression, they thus welcomed the change of name with open arms.

The debate about this theatres’ name shows the apparent split within this evidently rural field, dominated by the educated elite. The name of this theatre is ultimately determined by the power dynamics at play in the field.

2.7 Transitions in the Tradition

Tracing the evolution of Kattaikkuttu from an organic part of ritualistic social practice in villages into a semi-autonomous theatre:

Mamul to Negotiated Performance

In earlier days, the leader of the company or a group of relatives possessed the ‘*Mamul*’ (hereditary) rights to perform on particular occasions. The performers that were hired usually belonged to an inferior status and thus to accept whatever fees was offered by their patrons. Any attempt to negotiate was looked at as an “improper demand” and could result in severe repercussions (De Bruin, 1999).

But in today’s day, sponsors approach different companies based on their quality of performance and together they negotiate to come up with mutual agreements regarding the work and remunerations. In a space of negotiations, performers can obtain a higher fee and the troop selected would be based on the preference of the villagers rather than caste based

identities. *Mamul* rights may, however, be a factor but they are certainly not the primary ones anymore. Moreover, by 1990, their influence reduced to just two locations (De Bruin, 1999).

With the emergence of factors such as universal franchise there has been an expansion of village economies, which immediately translated to and altered the power structures in the community, while previously occupational, ritualistic and dramatic rights would take precedence. Moreover, in the olden days, upon fulfilling tasks associated with these rights, one would receive ranked honours that determined social positions (De Bruin, 1999). Performing and organizing a performance were both tasks for different social groups and were conducted to gain the appropriate privileges. The changes in the social system however, has led to a gradual erosion of traditional rights and obligations.

Increasing Commercialization & Professionalization

With the social changes, the unequal statuses (where performers were inferior to the sponsors), are gradually equalizing. The ability to negotiate has eradicated their dependence upon the *Mamul* patrons. Commercialization has led to changes in the internal organization as well, for example- practice of giving performers an 'advance payment' at the beginning of the season. Commercialization is reflected and stimulated by the increased performance rates and the growing demand of performance as well as the ability of villagers to spend more money on the performances.

The practice of negotiated performances has unintentionally resulted in a more professional attitude of the performers (De Bruin, 1999). Those paying the negotiated sums of money expect a certain standard from the performance and are more critical of the quality. They endorse not the *Mamul* company out of obligation but a company of their choice. As a result, the performers take greater care to fulfil the expectations of both the sponsors as well as the audience. With the fading of the *Mamul* system, performers depend solely on the remunerations they receive from acting, making it their full-time profession, thus they pay greater attention to the quality of their performance.

Increased professionalism is reflected in the unique style developed that emphasizes on the heroic nature of theatre. Professionalism has also resulted in a re-attachment to the sacred

performance context as an attempt to survive in the face of new competition. By emphasizing on the potential of Kattaikkuttu to mediate special powers they monopolize the sacral performance context.

Increased Competition

The market for performances has expanded along with the number of companies. Most of the new groups emerge from splitting from previously existing ones. The Vanniyar community has started almost all new groups in the Cheyyar Taluk region (north of Tamil Nadu). One can identify their endeavour to gain upward social and economic mobility, i.e., gaining greater rank and powers by conducting the ‘sacred’ performances. The emergence of the Vanniyar caste has been a cause of tension as it generated greater and one may argue, unfair competition as they receive caste based backing in villages (eg.: particular roles reserved to be played by Vanniyar performers).

The socio-economic changes are great not just in number but also in their intensity. For instance, earlier companies were restricted in their geographical regions but now due to public transport and new opportunities, there is a greater reach. Also, competition extends not just to drama companies but to newcomers in the game such as the Vanniyars.

But Kattaikkuttu, with its inherent nature of flexibility has adapted and improved by adopting from other theatre forms, the division of a play into scenes. It has incorporated cinema songs and “filmy behaviour”, all while identifying itself as a heroic, sacral theatre that is distinctly contrasting to its competitors.

2.8 Gaps in Literature

Although there is scarce literature, one must recognize that a large portion of this has been put forth by the urban elite or the upper-middle section of society. The problem here is not that it comes across through these scholars, but it is in fact that it reflects their tainted notions that the theatre form is diminishing.

In her book, De Bruin highlights views of some academicians who feel the survival of Kattaikkuttu has not been possible with popular Tamil films emerging as its competition and hence the tradition must be fading. Some also say that it is outdated and suitable only for uneducated audiences in villages with no scope of expansion (de Bruin, 1999)

As a result of this miscommunication/opinions the scope of research becomes extremely limited, and has been evident in our search for literature on the art form. However, proponents of this art form argue otherwise, emphasizing on the flexibility of Kattaikkuttu which it has in making adjustments to the shift in popular theatre. Evidently this surfaces as a major concern for us as researchers of Kattaikkuttu and so undoubtedly, finding out the reality of these opinions was one of our primary missions.

Furthermore, considering the significance of caste in the lives of the performers, it is astonishing how the available literature has exceedingly little to no mention of the caste/s that is/are involved. What is interesting is that all the available work identifies the performers as those of 'lower caste'. This, in turn, supports the first problem that we have recognized — literature only by the upper-class academics using expressions that reflect their ideas. This level of ignorance of the very identity of the performers is alarming. Although popular work ignores the significance of caste groups, researchers working within this community have explicitly identified the Vannars, Pantarams, Barbers, Harijans, and the Devadasi community.

Considering the life of performers and their level of involvement with Kattaikkuttu it is natural for one to assume that the life stories of individual performers would be easily accessible. However, contradictory to this, there is a severe lack of personal and individual life stories of the performers or any other stakeholders. It is ironical how such individual viewpoints have not been given significant space in literature. Thus, to gain a personal perspective on this theatre form, we will focus on such stakeholders.

Another crucial aspect of focus is, change in the dynamics of the Kattaikkuttu system, especially the troupes at the Sangam now that they travel extensively with the onset of commercialization. Alongside this, we aim to gather information on possible interactions with other troupes and any sort of disparities that they face, be it in terms of caste discrimination, pay, etc.

A holistic view of the gaps identified would firstly point towards the lack of attention that Kattaikkuttu has been given on academic platforms (De Bruin,1999). In addition to this, there is a trend of single narrative being offered i.e. works of only the urban elite. Furthermore, fundamental dimensions, like caste, of Kattaikkuttu have been excluded from majority of research. Considering these aspects, our aim would be to understand the obstacles that are hindering this elaborate art form from becoming a part of extensive scholarly conversations.

Chapter 3

Kattaikkuttu Sangam (Gurukulam) as a Case-Study for the Art Form

3.1 Why the Kattaikkuttu Sangam as our field of research?

Kattaikkuttu — commonly referred to as *Koothu* — is a beautiful art form, one that combines dance, drama, and music. One would think that combining these three in a way Kattaikkuttu has is a sure shot way to popularity. Yet, even in Tamil Nadu — its state of origin — most people outside of its core area are unaware of Kattaikkuttu’s existence, i.e. it is very regional. In our own research, lack of information about Kattaikkuttu compared to more mainstream performance forms added an air of mystery, stirring our curiosity.

The word Sangam means “coming together,” an apt name for an institution such as this, one that facilitates the collaboration of artists under one roof. Together, they perform plays, train young students in their trade and ensure that this art form lives on. The combined efforts of these talented artistes have helped spread the art form to places it has never seen before. The Sangam is thus a space that keeps up with the traditions but also enables modernization according to today’s contemporary audiences. How does this school conform to tradition while simultaneously modernising the art? Why is this art form not up there with Carnatic music and Bharatanatyam? What is the future of this art form? Is there any truth behind the claims that the art form is dying, like the 2018 article in the Covai Post stating: to an art form that is struggling to stay alive in the memories of generations, present and future, this could well be the beginning of the end? These are some of the questions which we wished to seek answers to, and the Sangam is the most appropriate place to gather this knowledge.

3.2 History of the institution

The end of British rule initiated great change in India. In the context of this research, the effect of India's liberation is clearly seen in rural Tamil society, and the ecosystem of the Kattaikkuttu art form. The legal abolition of the caste system, introduction of the universal adult franchise, and so on, have changed traditional power structures in the villages (de Bruin, 1999). The village economies have, in the 70 plus years since Independence, seen both onset and the growth of commercialisation. These factors have forever changed how *Koothu* is performed.

One such development that has greatly influenced the art form is the Kattaikkuttu Gurukulam. To understand how it is done, it is essential to hear the story of Rajagopal, the Sangam and Gurukulam's founder and director.

Kattaikkuttu being his hereditary occupation, Rajagopal started performing the art at the age of 3. At age 10, he discontinued school to join his father's company as a full-time performer. Pushed into playing male and female roles, roles of a clown, the role of king, and so on by his father, Rajagopal demonstrated his talent as an actor, and soon developed into a fine performer. Along with his father, he was soon playing the lead roles in plays from the Kattaikkuttu repertoire.

In 1970, Rajagopal's father fell seriously ill and soon passed away. At the age of 18, Rajagopal assumed control of the company, the *Perungattur Ponnuchami Nadaka Mandram*. The company comprised mostly of his relatives with a few outsiders, and Rajagopal took a different approach to the company and Kattaikkuttu. He allowed women to perform *Koothu*, a practice that was traditionally strictly forbidden for women. Similarly, in 1971, Rajagopal refused to perform at a village where the patrons were unwilling to pay the market rate of remuneration (de Bruin 1999, 144). Though this led to heated exchanges with the organisers, with them stating that his father or grandfather would've gone ahead and performed, Rajagopal refused to yield. These early incidents in his career as troupe leader and manager demonstrated his awareness of both changing times, and also keen insight into how to cope with those changing times.

In asking for a higher price, Rajagopal was significantly bucking tradition, which implicated performers within a caste hierarchy and ritual context. Performances were allotted

to companies based on *Mamul* rights, and the companies that held these rights performed on various occasions in the villages, being invited because of their status as *Mamuli* troupes. Thus, traditionally, *Koothu* performers depended heavily on their patrons, and served various ritualistic purposes and ends of ceremonies needed by the patrons. Because *koothu* performers were part of the ritual-religious circuit, the norm was to accept whatever remuneration their patrons gave them. Furthermore, like many such performance traditions in India, the performers themselves belonged to lower castes. So even though they played high-born epic characters on stage, their off-stage life was embedded in a system of relations that did not work in their favor. This status as a performance caste too, meant that negotiation for a higher remuneration was difficult and unlikely. Any attempt to negotiate could be met with a revocation of their *mamul* rights or cause harm to their physical well-being (de Bruin, 1999).

In the current age however, *mamul* rights have almost completely been abolished, a change that can be attributed to the onset of equality — however slow it may be — in our society. In its place are sponsored performances — a practice where patrons and artists decide on the conditions and terms of remuneration. Often, patrons are whole villages, which are ready to spend a lot more money than they previously used to on performances under the *mamuli*-ritualistic system. Only a few companies have managed to deliver high standards that are expected. Naturally, the *Perungattur Ponnuchami Nadaka Mandram*, led by Rajagopal, was (and is) one such company.

In the early 80s, the emergency had just ended and the crowds that gathered were treated to better performances. This resulted in the performances catching the attention of people traditionally not associated with the art form. *Kattaikkuttu* was traditionally most prominent in the north and north-eastern districts of Tamil Nadu. These include the Kanchipuram (most prominent), Thiruvannamalai, Thiruvallur and Vellore districts. Exponents of this art form, though few in number, were also found in the Thanjavur district and what is presently the union territory of Pondicherry (Puducherry). However, Rajagopal soon saw requests coming from outside these areas. First it was Madras, then Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka followed. It wasn't long before people caught a wind of it abroad.

In 1982, Rajagopal was invited to tour Italy in its entirety, a request he gladly accepted. Accompanying his *Kattaikkuttu* troupe were a group of *Yakshagana* artistes from Karnataka. On this trip, he learnt that there was a school in Karnataka dedicated to propagating the *Yakshagana* art form. This seed to start a school dedicated to *Koothu* was planted in his head. In 1987, he met Dr. Hanne de Bruin, a Dutch PhD. scholar studying *koothu* whom he eventually

married. She encouraged his dream to start a school and in 1989, Rajagopal opened a school dedicated to *Koothu* in his village. The classes were conducted in the patio of his ancestral home. However, it was always Rajagopal's intention to have a school that is separate from him, one that would serve as a flag bearer for the artform. Running it in his own house did not help this cause and the lessons were soon discontinued. These early forays, gradually led to the foundation of the Kattaikkuttu Gurukulam.

However, there was still one crucial step towards the establishment of this school/*gurukulam*. This was the founding of the *Tamil Natu Kattaikkuttu Kalai Valarcci Munnerra Cankam* (Association for the Growth and Development of the Art of Kattaikkuttu in Tamil Nadu), commonly known as the Kattaikkuttu Sangam. Dr. de Bruin and Rajagopal were instrumental in setting up this organisation which consisted of seventeen performers from the Kanchipuram area. It was a grassroots organisation that aimed at performing the following two functions:

1. Promotion of Kattaikkuttu as a Theatre Form

As Richard Frasca (1984, ii-iii) describes, Kattaikkuttu, in the eyes of the urban Tamil literati and government sponsors, was dead. This is the notion and mindset that the Sangam wished to change. The Sangam has since functioned, at least partially, as a tool to show people that that art form is anything but dead. Multiple festivals are organised and both short and long plays are staged by the Sangam to promote the art form.

Present day

Over the past 28 years, the Sangam has significantly revolutionized the art form. It has struck a balance, carefully navigating a path between the preservation of traditional *Koothu*, while simultaneously allowing it to evolve and cater to its 21st century audiences and their milieu. For example, at the end of the all-night Abhimanyu performance, Rajagopal sings a new composition he has written about ending cycles of violence, which explicitly adapts the story of the Mahabharata to address contemporary concerns. He has also incorporated issues such as climate change into his *koothu* performances.

2. Furthering the Interests of Professional Performers

Though the abolition of the *mamul* system increased the earnings of performers, this, however, did not equalize the social hierarchy between performers and patrons. The disparity between the two, though diminishing still existed. It became essential for the artists to unite and protect their rights. They came together to form the Sangam. The Sangam operates at the

informal sector level and at the interface between the rural society and the bureaucratic state, demanding support, advantages and privileges to which these performers have a complete right. This collective would help lobby the interest of these individual performers while simultaneously promoting the art form. In 1998, it consisted of 184 members who all became a part voluntarily on an individual basis instead of companies. As a representative of the Sangam, Rajagopal went to multiple villages, teaching the art form that he loved so much. In 1997, he taught a group of 15 women the art form and got them to perform the play Draupadi's wedding. These are a few of the many formative steps towards the establishment of the school.

In 2002, Rajagopal's dream of starting a *Gurukulam* came true. In the first year, 18 boys and 3 girls enrolled in the Gurukulam. What makes the *Gurukulam* unique is that formal education and performance training are given equal importance. Since its inception, the institution has gone from strength to strength. The number of students waiting to enrol exceeds the number of students in the institution. The next section talks about the key to this success.

3.3 Theatre education: What it is and why it's beneficial?

Books, tests, uniformity, discipline, grades, are some of the words that one would associate with conventional school or university education. Though considered normal in the current social scenario, this method does more harm than good. The conventional system stimulates the educators to regard all children as having the same abilities.

Alternate education aims at changing this. The Gurukulam is the first to institutionalize the Kattaikkuttu art form. It is the only place that combines Kattaikkuttu training alongside mainstream education, a combination called "theatre education." Conventional education makes personalisation extremely difficult, which leaves little opportunity for students of different learning capabilities and levels. Theatre education on the contrary employs a more individualistic approach. Dr.de Bruin is of the view that "Scientists believe that they can find one theory that explains the world, which they cannot do" (personal interview). Multiple ways/possibilities for doing things are essential. This is the Sangam's philosophy.

Theatre or alternate education in general, if done right, is a better method of educating. Dr. Hanne's supports this argument with the example of an artistically inclined student. This student's skills may forever stay buried if given formal education. By giving equal importance to the arts, theatre education helps the child discover and polish these skills. Performances also give children an outlet for their energy — we witnessed students doing *koothu* steps and twirls outside of their formal training between classes, after dinner, and before breakfast.

A crucial part of our growth and development is to be given the opportunity to learn from experiences. *Koothu* has a very critical audience that provides regular feedback. A bad performance could lead to the audience leaving within no time. The immediate feedback characteristic of this art form's performances checks off this requirement beautifully.

In addition to these, theatre serves as a significant means of livelihood in the region. Here the Sangam plays a critical role by motivating the students to indulge in other vocational courses such as tailoring, costume making, weaving, masonry, electrical work and specifically basic education, along with *koothu*. Within the sphere of Kattaikkuttu itself, there are several possibilities as a performer and musician, which the students can enrol themselves in. These skills in turn enhance their cognitive development and performance at school subjects. The Sangam furthers this process by implementing a dual curriculum, giving equal importance to theatre and formal education, since the primary reason behind student's interest in such variety of skills is mostly rooted in their need for financial support to complete higher education.

Taking these arguments into consideration, it would be accurate to say that theatre inspires a well-rounded individual, regardless of the student becoming a performer. It also claims to have the ability of generating a sense of professionalism and discipline from a young stage if one enrolls into the culture of theatre education. However, this idea conflicts with the largely accepted ideas of education administrators in the nation. Their notions of theatre as an extracurricular activity, hinders the process of teaching theatre as an independent full-fledged course. The only response to this label, Hanne clarifies, is to realize that it is impossible to perform an extra-curricular activity with such professionalism. Nevertheless, the Sangam operates on the belief that theatre is education, and it is better than formal education.



Image 5: Alternate Education

3.4 Parents' view on theatre education

The Kattaikkuttu *Gurukulam* has promised the responsibility of imparting formal education along with Koothu training. Parents are keen to send their children to the school and the number of students waiting to enrol has crossed the century mark. Although not all parents prioritize koothu training, the discipline it inculcates in their children is something all of them appreciate. The primary motivating factor towards enrolment remains rooted in the formal education amongst many other things that the school provides. The guarantee of a wholesome life at the Sangam through nutrition, safety and a secured future all mean that the list of students waiting to enrol is only going to get longer.

3.5 How the Sangam initiates Social Change

The Sangam has taken up the responsibility of the well-being of the children in addition to their formal education and koothu training. As a result, parents have developed a sense of trust in terms of the Sangam's determination towards assuring the overall growth of the students. This level of faith allows the parents to leave their children here and carry on with their work schedules tension free. This aspect is more beneficiary to younger parents and mothers handling alcoholic husbands.

On certain occasions when a larger number of parents are able to take out time, the Sangam organizes parent teacher discussions. These broadly address social issues regarding gender roles, intra-family relationships, etc. This initiative has had a great response in terms of the number of parents showing up. However trivial this task may seem, it is crucial to understand that the students usually belong to the economically weaker sections of our society. This makes it significantly difficult for the parents to come to the school. The reason? It often means the loss of half a day's wage. In addition to this, the chance of the parents being educated enough to understand the discussion, is most often very low. This means that they either have extremely high or extremely low expectations. Undoubtedly, their definition of good education is shaped by these backgrounds, leading to them prioritizing education over theatre. And it is often the job of the facilitators and other parents to explain and clarify the connection between

the theatre education and their regular education. As for the children, the Sangam has always come off as a family, bound by love and respect for one another. Taking the path of a performer has financial benefits too, which support the children in pursuing their education. However, the praise that acting earns them is what keeps them going. As a result of putting out good performances more villages hire them, and so parents are eager to send their children to the Sangam.



Image 6: Parent-teacher interaction at the Sangam

Caste has been significantly present in the narrative of Kattaikkuttu. And has been, knowingly or unknowingly, the root cause of discrimination among performers since the very beginning. However, the Sangam has played a crucial role in inculcating a sense of unity among their students. Some of the very basic steps taken to do this begin from lodging and boarding together to eating and studying together. If caste is often enforced through various restrictions on food and diet, distinguished through the way people move through space, let alone other forms of interpersonal distance, having students live and eat together is a large step for the Sangam's efforts to be inclusive. If caste is a learned phenomenon, the same way infants have to learn disgust towards their own feces, then the Sangam is actively engaged in unlearning the distinctions of caste. And for some younger students who enter the Sangam at an early age,

they never have to experience casteism's pernicious and punishing elements within the gurukulam itself.

Similarly, as with many performance traditions, women have been traditionally excluded from Kattaikkuttu. At least a few contemporary troupes still enforce this prohibition within their works. The Sangam's initiative to include female performers has been game changing. With the inclusion of women, the dynamics of the performance has undergone substantial change. These changes will be addressed in the subsequent chapters. The Kattaikkuttu Sangam is 10 steps taken in the direction of women's empowerment, inclusion and chance at equal opportunity.

Every phenomenon is a result of its time, it cannot but be understood as being at least a product of its historical circumstances. However, the level of spiritual and religious connect in society a few decades ago was much higher than it is today. This is where the adaptation of the performance and its shift to portrayal of contemporary issues has been a key factor in spreading awareness. Several performances are now backed by a contemporary message that may be prevalent and needs to be addressed at a local or national level.

3.6 Financing the Institution

The Gurukulam offers rural children and young people access to professional training in Kattaikkuttu theatre, quality education and comprehensive care. These children come from marginalised, economically disadvantaged communities and are provided with a safe environment to flourish irrespective of their social background.

The institution has 50 resident students, full time teachers, wardens, cooks and other support staff that ensure its smooth functioning. While this seems large, the Gurukulam has the barest minimum of staff necessary to keep its operation afloat, and has to constantly manage funds. Indeed, fundraising and having sufficient funding for the following year is an important and ever-present concern. The students of the Gurukulam pay a nominal fee of Rs. 8000 per year for accommodation and food, while education and performing arts training is free. But 50 paying students is not nearly enough to cover operational expenses. In fact, the 4 lakhs gained from fees only covers 4.5% of the entire operating budget of 90 lakh per annum. Therefore, the Sangam relies heavily on external funding to cover salaries of teachers, infrastructure

maintenance costs, transportation and production costs for performances including make-up, sets, costumes and other miscellaneous expenses.

Dr. Hanne M. de Bruin, Program Director of the Sangam, mentions that it gets increasingly difficult to get funding and this requires years of planning in advance. Most of the non-governmental organisations receive external financing from third parties such as Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Initiatives, foreign aid and government sources. Unfortunately, non-governmental organisations and other civil society organisations are often undervalued to output producing entities as if the Sangam were a business or a factory. The social aspect of these organisations is ignored with donors looking merely at the numbers.

In the case of the Sangam, funding becomes a huge challenge due to the small scale of this grassroots organisation, currently with 50 students. Dr. de Bruin emphasizes that in India, there are insufficient grant giving organisations and that the CSR initiatives of companies generally support government programs or bigger organisations which they think are more credible. Currently, the organisation has multiple external donors including the Tata Trust, a Swiss Organisation and a large number of individual donors who support and provide financial aid to particular students of the school. An important issue that complicates the process of receiving donations — despite the Sangam being certified to accept foreign donations, PayPal accounts cannot be set up as the donation transaction requires the details of the donor. To work around these difficulties and to support a few of their activities, the Sangam is in the process of setting up a corpus fund.

In such a situation, the impact of every rupee saved is felt. With the aim of minimizing basic expenditure and increasing efficiency in allocation of financial resources, the school started an organic garden to reduce food expenses and installed solar panels to lower their electricity bills. They also make conscious efforts to teach children about the finances of the school so as to create responsible young individuals that are careful of the resources they use.

Additionally, beyond taking a corporate, formal approach, the Sangam also conducts fundraisers using their unique position as theatre artists, ones that more often than not portray epic plots from the Ramayana and Mahabharata. One such initiative that capitalizes on theatrical magic is called “Karna’s Eyes”, referring to the renowned archer-warrior from Mahabharata. What Karna is most famous for though, is his generosity. This fundraiser aims to unite the both alumni and current volunteers to organise fundraising events with the help of

their friends, family and acquaintances in their respective cities. The mask travels to different cities, both in India and abroad. The participants of the fundraiser all have to get a picture clicked wearing the mask. In doing so, they symbolically look at the world through Karna's eyes, eyes that always looked at 'giving.' Thus, using the name of the most charitable character in the Mahabharata, it very cleverly hopes to invoke generosity in those embodying the character, and participating in the campaign.

3.7 Sangam as a troupe and difference from other troupes

50 years ago, due to the absence of efficient networks of public transport, the possibilities of reach of the art form were much more limited. This resulted in the troupes having a well-defined and mutually exclusive area of operation. The troupes had separate geographical locations due to the rights and obligations to perform in specific villages and had their own network of traditional patrons. This gave rise to monopoly in specific areas and the competition was relatively less in comparison to the present time. Currently, the number of *koothu* companies have been increasing rapidly. This can be attributed to the shift away from the *mamuli* system which has opened up the art form to non-traditional performers. This along with the ease of transportation to different geographical areas of operation has resulted in increased competition. While some companies have struggled to survive, others have thrived in this new ecosystem. One company that has done exceedingly well is the the Kattaikkuttu Young Professionals Company (KYPC). It has emerged as the most reputed *koothu* company in the region due to its ability to evolve with the art form and cater to the needs of the local and the urban audience. It is a part of the umbrella organisation, the Kattaikkuttu Sangam, that promotes and the art form and makes it relevant in the current social context. This is done through the integration of academic education and professional theatre arts training.

One of the key differences between the Sangam as a troupe and other Kattaikkuttu troupes is the inclusion of women in the art form. The Sangam was the first to play a proactive role in taking the initiative of training girls to become *koothu* performers in an art form traditionally performed by men. Rajagopal, who is now the Executive Director of the Sangam, recalls all characters, including the female ones being played by men. There was a complete absence of women *koothu* companies before the Sangam was founded in 1990. Even in present day, a lot of female characters are played by male performers in companies all over Tamil Nadu. There are multiple reasons for this happening. Some of them are that the stakeholders in

the art form believed that women were incapable of performing an art form as physically demanding as *koothu*, the men were not willing to teach their trade, there was ritualistic prohibition and so on. This topic will be addressed in detail in the subsequent chapters.

However, Rajagopal strongly believed that professional Kattaikkuttu training should be equally accessible to both men and women. He said that women are capable of doing anything including performing, if only there's someone to train them professionally, without bias. With the vision to train women to become *koothu* performers, the Sangam actively advocates opening up this art form to girls and women. Most other companies do not believe in giving a platform to women to express their talent. At present, inclusion of women is only in their company and some of the female graduates from the Gurukulam have continued to perform in other Kuttu companies.

One of the objectives of the Sangam is to create young talented new generation of *koothu* performers. To further this, they often experiment and explore different themes, creating innovative plays in the process. For instance, in the excerpt from the play "Disrobing of Draupadi," other companies usually have just one clown, but the Sangam often exceeds this number, often including up to five clowns. Other than serving as a test for the audience's reaction, this experiment also promotes acting versatility. It gives young performers, especially girls, the opportunity to explore more characters.

Another important aspect that differentiates this organisation from other companies is the quality of the performances. R. Kumar, who performs both for the Sangam and for another *koothu* company believes that the quality of performance of the Sangam is better. This can be attributed to the high level of professionalism they maintain in Kattaikkuttu training. Rajagopal emphasises on the importance of the senior artists training the juniors. This situation in other companies is a stark contrast. Senior performers refuse to train or disclose their secrets in the fear that the younger performers may outshine and put them out of business.

S. Gopinath, another performer with multi-company experience believes that the large number of performers in the Sangam troupe play a vital role in the success of its performances. In other companies, the lack of performer strength means that compromises have to be made in the quality of the plays. To elaborate, this deficit could result in some characters being excluded, performers having to play multiple roles and so on, all of which hinder a high-quality

performance. However, the Sangam believes that the art form is bigger than any individual artist.

Chapter 4

Socio-Cultural Transitions and Transformations

4.1 Caste and Kattaikkuttu

The Tamil society has never been devoid of the issue of caste, which has seeped into almost every sphere, including folk art, despite being rarely explicitly discussed. Thus, Kattaikkuttu artists must also negotiate their caste status as performers of this changing but traditional art form. This can be owed to occupational functions and characteristics of the castes that engage in this theatre form. There are three dominant *koothu* performing castes. The *Vannar*, *Pantaram* and *Vanniyar*. While the first two are service castes, hereditarily involved in traditions of theatre and music, the last one is an agrarian caste whose reasons for involvement in this theatre form are uncertain. The *Vanniyars* now form the majority of Kattaikkuttu performers in the north as well as south of Tamil Nadu.

The theatre form of Kattaikkuttu has evolved from the theatre of Terukkuttu, and the engagement of the two service castes in Kattaikkuttu stemmed from their obligatory participation in Terukkuttu. A detailed study of the castes will shed light on the evolution of Kattaikkuttu which, as a result, will clearly outline the differences between the two forms.

4.1.1 Vannars

Ritual performances have been a form of service rendered by castes such as the Vannar and Pantaram. This service was owed to the local goddesses of Tamil Nadu as well as the society in general. Primarily washermen, barber and garland makers, the Vannars caste have additional indispensable roles to play in society. Their services are of utmost importance during festivals and other such special events. The sacrifices to the goddesses are made by Vannars and the images of the goddesses during festive processions are carried by them. Another responsibility is the offering of food to demons in the form of blood stained rice. At temples of these local goddesses, some Vannars sporadically serve as priests. They are active during occasions such as birth, the onset of the first menstrual cycle, and at the time of death. As a

community, the Vannars are more inclined towards their ritualistic occupations. These ceremonial responsibilities and performance privileges of individuals belonging to this community are conveyed as inherited privileges and onus. These rights are specific to certain localities and pertain to definite occasions, which are referred to as the *Mamul system*.

Cohesively, the onus of their ritualistic occupation and their inherited rights fall under the Jajmani system. This system promotes communication between higher caste landowners and the lower service castes. What has been established is an economic barter system where the lower castes receive grains in exchange for their performances. Members of almost all service castes are compelled to maintain ritual and economic ties with their patrons owing to the Jajmani system. These ties are unfortunately devoid of a core organizational structure and political patronage. Additionally, a few ancestries of these service castes are affiliated with a variety of arts forms, mainly in the realm of music and drama. They play wind instruments, for example the Mukavinai, praise goddesses by means of songs (*Ammanai Varnittal*), and practice the two theatre forms of Terukkuttu and Kattaikkuttu. Practice of Terukkuttu and performance on the occasion of village goddess festivals (*Mariyyamman Jattirai*) is a Mamul inherited by the Vannars, but professional practitioners are apprehensive about the derogatory image Terukkuttu fabricates of Kattaikkuttu as a professional art form, in addition to not receiving any remuneration. As Terukkuttu performers started engaging in Kattaikkuttu, they became unwilling to expose their prior association with Terukkuttu. Terukkuttu performances entail depiction of snippets from bigger acts or stories carried out by indigenous groups or so called professional performers, while taking part in the festive procession along a street or “teru”. Songs are sung spontaneously by actors as they dance. Kattaikkuttu on the other hand is a developed enactment by professional performers in an indicated location for performances. Off stage enactments are viewed as a transitional stage, presented as a simplistically dramatized version of a story that highlights the ritualistic elements of the same. Kattaikkuttu, considered an on-stage performance with the prominent theme of heroic excerpts of the Mahabharata, is believed to have thrived from off stage performance. Off stage enactments focus on certain fragments of the Mahabharata through a primitive style narrative.

Role of Vannars during Mariyamman Jattirais (festival of goddess Mariyamman)

The encumbrance of the most prominent ritualistic tasks is on the Vannars along with their duty of theatrical performances, the reason being their assertion to a superior relation with goddess Mariamman. Mariamman was corresponded with Renuka, the wife of sage Jamadagni (De Bruin 1999, 67), and a Vannar was the first to help her in need when she fled from her

kingdom¹. For this reason, the shelters of individuals of the Vannar caste are regarded as the goddess' "tayvitu" or mother's house (De Bruin, 1999). The preparations for the commencement of the festival during the Tamil months of Ati and Avani, which relates to mid-July to mid-September (De bruin, 1999), take place at the house of a Vannar. A pitcher (known as Karakam) adorned with flowers represents the goddess. It is then carried out by the individual in charge who performs a kind of pantomime (known as vilas) as a mark of respect for the goddess. Vilas are distinctive Kattaikkuttu songs of the northern style. Additionally, it is necessary that songs specific to Terukkuttu acts sung during processions along the street include Tarkkams, which refer to songs in the form of dialogues, between important male and female Kattaikkuttu characters such as Karna and his wife Ponnurvi (or Kicaka) and Draupadi (De Bruin, 1999). This facilitates the portrayal of apposite sentiments by means of gestures, facial expressions (pavanai), songs and dance on the second day of the festival. The Kattaikkuttu performers belong to the same company as that of the Terukkuttu performers, and perform on the third day during which an animal sacrifice (pali) is made to appease the goddess. On the fourth day, as the festival comes to an end, the Karakam of the goddess is taken beyond the confines of the village and is submerged in water. During the journey of the goddess out of the village, it is the duty of the Vannars to verbally abuse the goddess (known as Ammanai Ecutal), or say erotic dialogues in the form of songs to her in order to fend the evil eye and other ominous powers, which also offsets the endangerment she poses, and foils her return to the village and conveyance of disease and adversity. Other services castes also have roles to play during this festival; Castes like Barbers, Pantarams and ¹Harijans have a variety of duties—they provide flowers and flower garlands, carry the sword of the goddess, and play the Parai drum as a band. In all, the role of a Vannar during this festival revolves around the goddess and ritual performances of Terukkuttu in the form of an offering, and hence the Vannars receive two shares (pankus) of the sacrificed animal plus its head out of a total of seven shares.

4.1.2 Pantarams

Also recognized by the name Tampiran, members of the Pantaram caste originate from a variety of other castes. The two synonymous names Pantaram and Tampiran hint at the dynamic societal status and religious prominence within the Tamil community of the group so

¹ Renuka was cursed by her husband for the lapse in her chastity when she saw a beautiful *gandharva* fly across the sky. Her husband ordered his sons to cut off her head but Renuka fled and hid in the house of a Vannar.

formed. The name Pantaram translates to- a caste as well as a heterogeneous group of individuals belonging to other castes, for example Velalars and Vanniyars. This community can be divided into two broad groups- high status Pantarams and low status Pantarams. Usually, the authorities of sacred organizations (also known as Matams) were Pantarams (high status), and were greatly revered by the Brahmins. While this group was educated in Tamil music and literature, the lower status Pantarams were Kattaikkuttu performers. Making flower garlands is the primary occupation of the members of this lower social stratum, which are then used for the *Mariyyamman Jattirai* and during other rituals and in temples. Though not Brahmin, some Pantarams occasionally served as priests in temples of local goddesses and engaging in the act of Ammanai Varnittal during processions. Art forms like *Kaicilampattam*, which / were other performance occupations that some members of the community were involved in.

A subclass of the latter group of Pantarams was that of vagabonds who sang famous Tamil hymns and also assisted pilgrims through their visits to Saivite temples (temples of Lord Shiva) in the districts of Tiruvannamalai, Tiruttani, and Palani (De Bruin, 1999). Parallels can be drawn between the Vannars and Pantarams with respect to the type of services they render, hereditary inheritance of *mamuls*, underlying reasons for involvement and specialization of a few lineages in this theatre form which has given the society some famous scriptwriters, songwriters and teachers of Kattaikkuttu.

4.1.3 Vanniyars

Performers belonging to the Vanniyar Caste serve to be a majority of the Kattaikkuttu exponents. Traditionally, the Vanniyars were known to be agricultural labourers and petty landowners. They possessed a relatively low socio-economic status in the rural societies of Tamil Nadu. There is ambiguity regarding which caste group they fall under, as the Vanniyars pursue the Kshatriya status while they are regarded by most as Shudras.

Historically, the Vanniyars have been involved in soldierly activities. It is speculated that they served as warriors from the Pallava time onwards (De Bruin, 1999). These historical activities help the community to claim their self-image as heroic, royal warriors.

In 1871, the official census rejected the Vanniyar's claim to a Kshatriya status and classified them as Shudra. The community is till date fighting a 150-year-old court case to refute the census report and claim the Kshatriya status.

Considering the Vanniyar community with respect to Kattaikkuttu, we can trace several reasons for the group's involvement in the art form. The most obvious possibility is the *mamul* aspects of theatre that lend Kattaikkuttu performers the perception heroism, strength, royalty and grandeur. The Vanniyar caste, which seeks to associate itself with these very qualities, may want to involve itself into Kattaikkuttu to borrow such a status. According to Vanniyar traditions, their legendary origins can be traced to a Sage's sacrificial fire which they relate to Draupadi's miraculous 'fire birth' (De Bruin, 1999).

Kattaikkuttu as an art form revolves around stories and themes of the Mahabharata and since the Vanniyars hold strong connections with the Draupadi Cult, members of the caste may have been inspired to take up the art form. Often, they refer to themselves as 'Agni Kulam Kshatriya' -Fire Race Kshatriya. Hence identifying themselves with the royal, hero warriors of Mahabharata. (De Bruin, 1999)

We can understand the involvement of Vanniyars into the art form on the basis of three broad reasons:

1. The caste's political emancipation: The Vanniyas have politicised the theatre, using it to mobilise crowds and help fight the 150-year-old court case that would give them a Kshatriya identity. Moreover, they have a large vote bank and their own political party.
2. Expansion of the Draupadi Cult which is closely connected to the Vanniyars.
3. The Kattaikkuttu profession becoming more appealing to novices due to a modest rise in the socio-economic position of the performers.

Though the reasons behind their participation in the art form is understood, it is unclear when and in what capacity this inception took place. Can we categorise the Vanniyars as traditional, hereditary performers or is their involvement in the art form a recent phenomenon? A non Vanniyar informant of the Cheyyar Taluk region states that only in the past 20 years has the formation of Vanniyar dominated troupes been observed.

4.1.4 Other Castes in Kattaikkuttu

According to Fresca (1984), three other communities, the Paraiyars/Harijans, Kuravars and people living in the hilly terrains of north-western Tamil Nadu, are involved in the performance of Kattaikkuttu.

Harijans: Although segregated from the rest of the village, the Harijans often form their own theatre companies and perform exclusively in their own settlements (ćeris).

Non Harijan Communities: Non Harijan Communities perform at both, the main village as well as the Harijan ćeris. However, they typically refuse to partake in the traditional evening meal in the ćeris, which serves as a component of the remuneration for the performance. However, in recent days, people of the ćeris prefer to watch Drama or Natakam performances and hence patronage for Kattaikkuttu has reduced drastically.

Kuravars: The Kuravars are a community of semi-nomadic who engage in jobs like bird catching, basket making and fortune telling. Though they often put up Kattaikkuttu performance, evidence of their involvement is flimsy.

Hill Areas of North-western Tamil Nadu: According to the research conducted by Fresca, people from the Javadi hills annually perform the Kattaikkuttu. Amateur artists, they perform on the festival of Draupadi, although it is difficult to procure the date and location of their performances.

Kattaikkuttu is a permeable system of performance. Several other social communities partake in the art form. Barbers (who often perform as musicians), Kuttatijati's or the Devadasi Community, Tacaris (a mendicant, low caste of Vaishnavites), Canars (toddy-drawers), Velalar Mutaliyars, etc. With the exception of Harijan performers, there is fluidity for different castes to enter Non Harijan Companies.

Thus, traditionally, caste has played a vital role in shaping the art form of Kattaikkuttu. It was key in dictating by who, when, where and how a performance was to be conducted. The importance of caste in Kattaikkuttu extends beyond the logistical technicalities.

Dr Hanne De Bruin very beautifully summarises the significance of caste in such a socio-ritualistic setting:

“During times of heightened ritual tension like a festival of a goddess, the service castes are indispensable to handle the dangerous, ambivalent deity in her aroused and impure state. One means of appropriating the goddess is to offer her dramatic performances which are enacted by members of the lower castes who in their capacity of ritual specialists are able to control the highly eruptive powers of the goddess.” (de Bruin, 1999)

4.1.5 Caste and the Sangam

At the Kattaikkuttu Gurukulam, caste does not hold relevance in any sphere of interaction. The administration has made it a point to ensure that the issue of caste never seeps into any conversation and neither is anyone asked about it. Any individuals stepping foot into the Sangam is expected to abandon all caste based prejudices and discriminatory practices. According to Rajagopal, there exist only two ‘castes’ at the Sangam and those are the two genders. Considering how, historically, caste has been central to Kattaikkuttu, such a perspective is revolutionary.

The founders of the institution view caste to be a system that divides society into hierarchies that claim no substantial meaning behind the segregation. They consider it to be a platform of inequality; and in art, there is no place for inequality. Through Kattaikkuttu they aspire to transcend the caste barriers that had previously dictated all aspects of the art form. Traditionally, the aforementioned castes claimed it their ritualistic right as well as obligation to perform the art form, but with the shifting focus towards the quality of the performance rather than the caste of the performer, the need to bring caste into the conversation surrounding Kattaikkuttu is slowly fading.

The Sangam offers a platform that eliminates the centrality of caste. The education imparted takes special care to ease caste based differences among children and teaches them what value to attach to caste-identities. However, such endeavors are not easy to execute. In the initial days of the Sangam, there were several issues in converting such a philosophy into actual practice. One such instance was the issue regarding engraving of names onto the plates; since all the students and the teachers eat their food together, many were reluctant to eat from plates that were possibly used by children belonging to lower castes. They had demanded that their names be engraved onto the plates so that there is no sharing of the utensils. They can hence avoid ‘getting polluted’ after eating from the same plate as a child belonging to a lower caste. The founders took strict and swift action by refusing to adhere to any such demands (de Bruin, personal interview). They initiated change by example and would sit together with everyone during meals and use the same plates as the rest. Indeed, the students and staff share

rotating kitchen duties cooking, serving, and cleaning. The impact of being in a space which actively worked against caste prejudices regarding food was immediately felt by all our group members.

But even after 15 years of its existence, the Sangam continues to recurrently face issues due to caste. Problems relating to the subject arise in one way or another and often in situations that are unavoidable or unchangeable. Though the Sangam never asks for the caste of the teachers and staff they employ, the government does. In the official paperwork that they fill out annually, caste of the staff is a mandatory field. If they attempt to send it without stating the caste of those employed, i.e. by leaving the space blank, the paperwork is returned right back to them. Thus, in some ways, the government mandates the influence of caste to continue (de Bruin, personal interview).

For the children, experiencing an environment devoid of caste based interactions is novel to say the least. In the villages and homes that they come from, caste plays a vital role in shaping the social, economic and political life. Thus, at the Sangam it is often the youngest children who bring with them strong notions and biases related to caste. Through the educational curriculum and value system imbibed in the children, they learn to rise above such exploitation and discriminatory beliefs or practices. Their focus is shifted towards their art and performance and the role of caste slowly fades from their life.

There exist a number of castes in the Sangam and the children belonging to their variety of social groups live and learn together. They make friends with children belonging to other communities, a phenomenon that is rare to non-existent in such rural settings. Children of the school who belong to different castes remain friends even after they graduate, which would otherwise never have happened. The Sangam enables them to look beyond social segregations. Upon leaving the school, when they re-enter society riddled with caste based rules and restrictions, life for the children does become a little complicated (de Bruin, personal interview). Thus, the Sangam place a crucial role in transforming Kattaikkuttu from being a practice entrenched and limited to caste based practices to one that is defined by the quality of the art. It is a catalyst in reducing the importance of caste in rural Tamil society.

4.2 Gender & Kattaikkuttu

4.2.1 Why women weren't allowed to perform

“A lot of people have asked me: “are girls incapable of dancing?’ And my answer to that has been that if they are taught to dance then it is well within their capabilities. If there are people to teach them, then they can dance” (Rajagopal, 2018).

Gender happens to be one of the most dominant variables influencing human growth and development in the Indian society. Apart from institutions such as religion, race, age and ethnicity, gender is a vital dimension of social stratification, putting women at a level of disadvantage. Historically, being deemed as the weaker sex, women have been ignored from the public eye of society. While they were encouraged to sing and dance in a private setting, the same in a public setting was considered to be an outright scandal.

Kattaikkuttu originally started out as a male only art form. Women were typically excluded from performing Kattaikkuttu for the following reasons:

1. Physically demanding:

It was assumed that women would never be able to assert the same physical strength required to perform as men were able to, owing to the difference in anatomies. Men were said to be naturally blessed with stronger legs and upper body strength which allowed them to perform for longer periods of time, without much exhaustion. Women on the other hand were considered to be frail and weak, only fit enough to take care of the home and their family. (Rajagopal, personal interview)

Women were also considered to be at a disadvantage due to the biological process of menstruation which kept them from performing for a span of four to six days at a stretch every month, breaking the cyclical process of practice. Menstruation, at that time was considered to be a taboo, not to be mentioned in society. This further discouraged the male performers from including women in their exclusive performance.

2. Ritualistic reasons:

Another reason for prohibiting women from Kuttu was the ritualistic aspect. Though women were, at times, considered reincarnations of Goddesses such as Lakshmi, Durga and Kali, they still weren't believed to be worthy enough to be part of the performance. While the dance was initially prohibited for women due to the fact that it was physically taxing, it eventually became a ritual to not include women in such public spectacles. (Rajagopal, personal interview)

3. The teaching process:

“What was stopping women from performing was that people were not willing to teach them, the men didn't want to reveal their professional secrets to the women” (Rajagopal, personal interview).

Women were seen as the weaker sex, incapable of learning an art form as intricate as Kattaikkuttu. The men believed that even if women were exposed to the art form, they wouldn't be able to dedicate as much amount of time to it as the male performers did. Thus, the men weren't willing to impart with their elite knowledge.

4. Social aspect:

“More than not taking them as wives, they prohibit them from practicing once they're married. This is because the men think that when the women perform there are other men looking at them and that is not something they want” (Rajagopal, personal interview).

A woman performing in public settings is regarded as being one without morals- looked down upon by the society as a whole. The reasons for the same being:

- a. Dance and prostitution used to be thought of as one and the same, raising questions regarding the morals of the performers.

- b. Most performances were usually witnessed by an all-male crowd, often drunk and looking at the performer with a certain eye. If a woman was performing or indulged in the performing arts, she was deemed to be unworthy and unfit to be a wife.

“The involvement of girls in Kattaikkuttu may have negative effects on their well-being and their social development” (Meertens,2003; pg. 64)

Therefore, families didn't want their daughters engaging in any form of the performing arts- to ensure their honour in society was kept intact.

5. Cultural aspect:

A women's primary roles have always been that of a homemaker. They were in charge of taking care of the children and all aspects related to the household, which caused their abstinence from engaging in other activities. Thus, it was absurd to expect them to give the commitment required for Kuttu. Indeed, this view is reflected still today in the problems that the Sangam has had retaining female performers of marriageable age, Tamilarasi being the notable exception.

P. Rajagopal, the founder of the Sangam had different views. According to him, gender should not be a barrier for a performer to showcase his/her skills. Traditionally, men would dress up as women to portray women characters However, after the inclusion of women, portrayal of characters through genders changed. This Sangam was the first to incorporate women in this art form. They believed that women are as talented and have the same amount of potential as men to perform and excel in this art form.

4.2.2 Post inclusion of women:

“We feel strongly that performing has nothing to do with gender, to do the opposite gender's role enables you to portray your own gender's role better. Working across the gender is a way to create greater gender parity, it is not only having the female

voice on stage but it's also experimenting with the fact that the role is not necessarily defined by gender, not just by the two genders but the third gender also" (de Bruin, 2018)

With the rural society of Tamil Nadu becoming more progressive, women were slowly integrated into the dance form, with Rajagopal, de Bruin, and the Sangam being instrumental in propagating their inclusion. However, the gender battle is not over yet. While women are performing and an increasing number of young girls are being taught the art of Kattaikkuttu every year, there is still a long way to go.

The primary education which a child receives through the immediate surroundings is pivotal in shaping his/her mindset. This is then carried forward through the various phases of her life. As a result, the issue of gender and caste become prominent for social conditioning; boys think of girls as an inferior group — thus, prefer not to sit or play with them. This acts as an obstacle for the Sangam where one of the main goals is social integration. The people working at the Sangam are putting in all their efforts to ensure that such disparities are eradicated, at least within confines of the Sangam. Though, female performers still face a lot of criticism outside the Sangam. We noticed this in the unusual parent-teacher conferences at the Gurukulam which featured parents sitting in a circle to discuss issues affecting the students. Two groups discussed gender roles in society. While some parents vocally supported the ideals of the Sangam towards gender equality, many did not.

Female performers are often regarded as the opposite of an 'ideal bride'. If they do get married, they are prohibited from performing, as the husband and his family do not want their wives to be seen by other men in that particular manner. Women are also forbidden from performing by her husbands' family as a means to exert male dominance. The women's movements are restricted as a means of exercising power over her.

As Rajagopal explained, "Even the girls who do enrol, are allowed for the reason that along with learning of Kuttu, they are given a formal education. This works when they are young but they are pulled out once they grow older. At which point they aspire for their children to do conventional jobs. Is this because they feel that 8-9 hours of performing is very demanding and their children should not go through that? Or that other men could sexualise these female performers. I feel that it could be a combination of these two reasons, but when we ask them, all they say is that we don't want them to perform and they end the discussion at that." (Rajagopal, 2018)

Villages appreciate female performers and respectfully encourage them when they are performing, but at the same time hold different standards for their own daughters. Families

have become a lot more open to women doing overnight performances but cannot fathom their own daughters performing in front of an audience.

Recently, troupes have started including women as they bring in more money. We noticed in the overnight performance that all tips given went directly to Tamilarasi, the most senior female performer, rather than any men performing or even the company director. Companies are open to hiring women for this but face some amount of backlash from the male performers. They have to invest in accommodating women. For instance, in the dressing room, specific changes have to be made so that the women can be there and also can keep their dignity. Such changes usually aren't received well by the male performers as they feel some amount of competition from the women.

When performing, women have to be twice as good so as to be accepted as performers, otherwise they become exhibits owing to their gender. With drunk men watching, these performances often lead to sexualisation of the women, especially in villages and naturally, no family likes their daughter performing in front of such an audience.

At the Sangam, a lot of the girls are enrolled not because of the centrality of *koothu* with relation to the school but because they also receive a good formal education there. As the girls get older, they are pulled out from the Sangam as their families hope for them to undertake conventional jobs. This may be due to the fact that men could sexualise them. Girls are often pulled out of the school upon puberty even if they want to perform, often this is to marry them off.

The fact remains that it makes a huge difference whether a role is performed by a woman or a man, even if it is exactly the same text. When a woman performs the text, it is interpreted different from when a man performs it. For example, we saw the role of Abhimanyu performed by a female performer and found that the feelings of helplessness were emphasized by her smaller size compared to the male performers who danced in a circle around her. Ultimately, women should have the freedom to interpret their roles in any way they seem fit. Else, it appears like a man playing a woman but still projecting a male's perspective of how women should be.

Draupadi performed by a male vs a female.

There exists a visual variance when a male is subjected to the violence while getting disrobed and when a female is subjected to the same violence as Draupadi. The reception of the audience's reactions is different when Draupadi has a male voice and when she has a female voice. It is observed that when a female enacts Draupadi, the audience is more engaged and can connect better with the character. When a woman is performing as Draupadi on stage and is on the receiving end of the violence, the audience view this as victimizing women characters and when they show her being empowered by winning the game of dice with Duryodhana, they are left with a different image of women.

The characters played by different genders impacts the way the audience views the characters. This plays on the minds of the audience.

Box 1: Cross Gender Role Portrayal

It will take some time for a woman to perform freely, to be able to go on stage and face no backlash. The women also have to fight because it's only when they fight that change will take place.

Following the inclusion of women, the portrayal of characters by different genders did not change. Even though women started performing, interchangeable gender roles are still part of the contemporary art form as P. Rajagopal is of the opinion that gender cannot decide the role of a performer but only his/her talents and suitability to the character can. By including other genders in the art form, he made a fair attempt to experiment with the fact that a role is not necessarily defined by gender. He believes that the stage is in demand of a woman's voice and that working across gender is a way to create greater gender parity.

Many villages and companies consider women as incapable and/or should not be permitted to perform due to ritualistic myths. As stated earlier, in 1997, Rajagopal trained 15 women from different companies to enact the play "Draupadi's wedding". Through this play, he attempted to display the capabilities and capacities of women. He wanted to bust their myths and prove them wrong. Rajagopal was criticized by many for doing so. However, he continued to train and recruit women in his Sangam (Rajagopal, personal interview).

Initially, when Rajagopal initiated the inclusion of women, he faced numerous struggles. The parents were questioning the idea of enrolling their girls to the Sangam. They weren't sure if their daughters were competent enough to perform. And in instances where they did enrol their daughters to the Sangam, it was only because the Sangam was providing them with formal education, nutrition and a roof over their heads along with Kattaikkuttu training; parents viewed the training in the art form as a co-curricular activity.

They enrolled their children in the school as this was a method to make their daughters excel in English and Tamil, and advance their communication skills as performing Kuttu helped children acquire a great communication skill set.

If we look back at the early years of the school, we notice that girls were pulled out of the art form when they hit puberty. If the girls were very lucky, this happened after they graduated school. However, after being persistent, Rajagopal and Hanne managed to push the stage of pulling out girls till their marriage.

Getting them to perform after marriage however has proven to be impossible. Men in the village would not want to marry female performers; even men who themselves were performers are not able to tolerate the idea of their wives being performers. Hence, girls are typically made to give up on the art form once they attained the "marriageable age". Despite all these factors, women have come a long way. Talking candidly about the future, Hanne and Rajagopal believe that they will be able to change the mindset of the people. They hope that women will be allowed to make their own decision of being part of the theatre world as performers. They are certain that in the upcoming years, being a *koothu* performer will be a workable career option for women.

4.3 Performance

4.3.1 Kattaikkuttu: A Ritualistic Performance

The origin of the name Kattaikkuttu lies in the elaborate ornamentation known as *Kattai* as well as the wearers of these ornaments known as the *Kattai Veshams*. These head and breast ornaments, hand-crafted by local craftsmen, make use of lightweight wood of the *Kalyana Murunkai* tree, though they still demand great stamina to carry them throughout the performance. They are adorned with coloured paper, glass and paint. One of the most

important pieces is the bigger crown, known as Kiritam. All the ornaments are greatly revered, so much so that before any piece of ornamentation is picked up, it is touched with the right hand and brought to either the chin or eyes. A pooja is performed to give life to these ornaments, which is also known as the “*eye opening ceremony*”, before each performance. These ornaments are symbolic to supremacy, royalty and superhuman qualities, which are conveyed to the wearer, and their make-up visually outlines their character. The eye make-up is captivating for it reflects belligerence, power and determination. While the character is an amalgamation of the costumes, ornaments, and makeup, these characteristics vary regionally. Similar Kattai ornaments are used in various other dance forms in Tamil Nadu like *Bhagvata Melam* as well as beyond the borders like Kathakali in Kerala, Kuchipudi and string puppet (miniature ornaments) in Andhra Pradesh and Yakshagana in Karnataka. Apart from dance forms, they are also used in sculptures that are built in villages in celebration of the *Paratam festival* ², and the same eye-opening ritual is performed. Regional diversification is also witnessed between the north and south of Tamil Nadu through Kattai adornments (de Bruin, 1999).

Kattaikkuttu has materialized from various heroic stories pertaining to local traditions and Indian epics, and it portrays mainly snippets of the Mahabharata and other local stories. Some goddess cults have also contributed to the development of this theatre genre, like Draupadi. It revolves around a common theme of self-sacrifice of warriors on the battleground. Like other local theatre forms, Kattaikkuttu has itinerant presentations (primary stage of development) as well as full-fledged performances which are distinctive in terms of portrayal. Kattaikkuttu faced a setback when Natakam or drama stepped into spoken Tamil films and posed as a competitor (de Bruin, 1999). Many socio-economic aspects came into play there onwards, especially the Mamul system, which led to the deterioration of the status of Kattaikkuttu.

Cohesively, Kattaikkuttu certainly cannot be seen from a lens of solidarity for it interlaces with various traditions within and across borders, and is influenced by a spectrum of factors, although its aesthetics creates an identity for itself. It possesses “Karuttu” or an essence that elicits a sense of heroism through the theatre’s religious status, which makes it stand out as a heroic theatre.

4.3.2 Putting Performances in a box (Folk & Classical)

The misperception about the differences between art forms, particularly classical and folk, is rooted in the generalizations that are made regarding these diverse art forms. Differentiating one practice of art from another, merely on the basis of their classification as classical or folk, reflects a lack of holistic investigation to understand the art form. Thus, it is highly crucial to analyse the requirements and complexity of individual art forms.

This differentiation and politics of performance classification can be understood by analysing the history of how ‘folk’ and ‘classical’ emerged in the context of oral traditions. Oral traditions serve to be an integral aspect of Indian theatre. Existing initially as a method of transmitting the most cherished cultural values in the form of stories, legends or myths, oral traditions became a vital tool to shape the society and establish common perceptions. In India, oral traditions were generally tinted with a religious significance.

As society became more complex, the need and mode to express the religious elements began to be translated in performance practices. These performances were with the intention of praising or pleasing certain gods and were based on mythological stories with sacred relevance that was passed down generationally.

With time, the performance traditions became more structured and a framework to comprehend them emerged. Natyashastra, a profound Sanskrit text that covered all aspects of stagecraft, was a major milestone in this timeline. Written between 200 BCE-200 CE, the ancient transcript was used as a reference to analyse the performance space. Its rules and guidelines were applied to assess the calibre of a particular performance art form, and thus emerged the distinction between classical and folk forms.

Performances that fit into the framework of the Natyashastra were given the dignified classification of ‘Classical’ forms (Bharatnatyam, Kathak, Kathakali, Kuchipudi etc) while those that found relevant only in the sphere of oral traditions were labelled as ‘Folk’, (Kattaikkuttu).

According to this narrative, Kattaikkuttu is firmly established in the sphere of ‘folk art’. Due to fact that performers were traditionally low caste, the art form was flexible in nature and there exist elements of audience interaction and improvisation, Kattaikkuttu was labelled as folk.

The most significant aspect of the performance, which perhaps is the primary reason for it to be regarded as folk, is its requirement of physical devotion from the performers and

musicians. Kattaikkuttu, an overnight performance that lasts for more than eight hours, demands great physical exertion from its performers. Here, one needs to recognize the additional responsibility of elaborate costume pieces, comprising of the headgear, wooden earpiece, shoulder and chest, and leg gear, that performers take on in addition to the extensive dance routine. Similarly, it is a continuous and long drawn journey of pure physical effort even for the instrument players and background singers.

Rajagopal very beautifully expressed the essence of Kattaikkuttu as physical labour in the form of a song which he sung for us on the night we arrived (translated from Tamil):

Work, physical work; when you tie your hair up tight and move around. It's work, physical work.

(aspects of the costume are highlighted in this song)

From the pearls on the forehead, headgear, wooden ear-piece, the chest and pieces on the leg, carrying all this and dancing is work, physical work

(about the Kuttu being a night-long performance)

They say there is nothing in Kuttu.

But it is only when you delve deeply into it that you learn how to relish it.

You can see (see), listen and relish it.

You can see (see), listen and relish it.

Staring at ten, it only wraps up much after dawn when the sun has fully risen (something in between)

Essentially, it's hard labour.

Through these lyrics, Rajagopal elucidates the importance of the physical nature of Kattaikkuttu. And while traditionally, this classifies it as a folk practice (regarded as less sophisticated than Classical forms) he examines the physical dimension as the essence of the art form, as the special characteristic that makes it more unique, compelling and extraordinary as compared to other art forms.

Furthermore, Rajagopal hints at the personal connect that the performer must develop as a *koothu* performer. In Kuttu also you have to become the character when you're singing; this is a personal connect that classical singing lacks. Thus, folk art performers experience a

‘oneness’ with their character, in comparison to a classical art performer for whom such a connection is absent (de Bruin, 1999).

Classical art forms, are staged on the notions of spirituality and religion. They are exemplified as distant from physical aspects of expression. Interestingly, the characteristic of physical expression and exertion seems to play a significant role in the categorization of an art form into spiritual. While patrons of classical forms, in endeavours to promote it as spiritual do not want to admit that there is a physical aspect to it; *koothu* does not comply to this. The art form takes this embodiment of spirituality further in the sense that these artistes have to move while performing, thus, the devotion they express magnifies. But since traditionally there is a counter-relation between physical labour and spirituality, the mainstream ideologies shape people’s understanding of *koothu*, thus labelling it as folk and not classical. Additionally, Rajagopal suggests that the analytical side of classical art forms is rather a recent development and so differentiation based on this characteristic can’t be made.

De Bruin comments on the debate regarding the relation between physical labour and spirituality in art forms such as Kattaikkuttu:

“So, for those arts like Kuttu that are grounded, does it mean that they aren't spiritual? What is spirituality? When we use the word Jñāna it gets the meaning of a kind of divine inspiration but grounded in the here and in the now, you don't go out of your body, there isn't a transcending experience. And this is a kind of suppressive take on how grounded Kuttu is.”
(personal interview)

Her opinion reflects the disgruntlement that performers of the ‘folk’ often feel. The classification of art forms on a rather superficial yet binding manner leaves them misunderstood. More importantly, this “folk” designation has financial and social impact on the performers, through the Sangam’s busy touring schedule to theatre festivals across India is trying to change this. After watching several Kattaikkuttu performances, it is clear that the accusations of folk art as being less rigorous, spiritual, or lively than classical art forms are based on historical prejudices rather than present reality. It is important to first comprehensively analyse a performance and then assess which category will be the right fit, rather than attempting to put an art form into a category that seems vaguely appropriate.

4.3.3 Transformations in the style of *Koothu*

Dance and theatre have been powerful media of communication and entertainment since time immemorial. With changing times, *koothu* has had to evolve to remain relevant in

the prevailing societal context. The relevance of *koothu* at any point of time is owing to the fact that the style of the art form is adaptable, as any theme being performed can be expanded or contracted, as per the audience, time constraints and resources available to the performers. When asked whether performers have had to change their style in order to please audiences' now, de Bruin said,

“I don't know because recent actors don't have experiences that go far back. Rajagopal thinks that the pace of performances has speeded up and younger audiences want more realistic performances but at the same time, they want to know what one sings and its meaning so he tries to combine both to satisfy different segments of the audience.”

Koothu is an audience oriented art form and despite its ancient origin, performers' endeavour to strike a connection with the audience and the environment setting is commendable. Comedy has always been an integral part of *Koothu*, and every time the performers feel a dip in the audience enthusiasm, the clowns spontaneously bring in the element of contextual humour. In the rehearsals and performances, we saw the clowns often made jokes in English or said funny words in English in order to catch our attention, thus adapting to their audience. At one point in the overnight performance that we witnessed, the clown Durai crouched down, looked directly into our camera lens, smiled and waved! Actors also engaged directly with comings and goings of audience members and those sitting in the front several rows.

Similarly, an excellent performer and teacher of the Sangam- Tamilarasi, realized in her time spent abroad that the westerners require a more analytical approach even while being taught the art of performing. Consequently, she learnt to break up her movements in a different style while teaching, adapting as per whom she was teaching- children of the Sangam, the westerners or people who attended workshops. On an individual level, certain actors have more of a cinematic style of performing and they incorporate them into their performances. For example, each clown has the freedom to show their version of comedy in any manner they wish to either through voice or gestures. As clowning is a building block to all night performances, there's a lot of improvisation that goes on as they react to audiences they face, performing in a certain style when they perceive certain emotions from the audience.

That said, most Kattaikkuttu companies perform in more or less the same style. Some performances combine drama from the Parsi theatre with *Koothu* in terms of costumes. What is common among all variations of Kattaikkuttu performances is the ritualistic aspect of performing on ground level and not an elevated stage. Furthermore, the kind of music used

during the performances is a defining factor of *koothu*, and either falls on the heroic side or on the tragic side, sans Srinagar rasa or any kind of the love stories. The Sangam's recent collaboration with TM Krishna to incorporate Carnatic music in *koothu* is expected to yield greater respect and recognition (and was covered in national media, for example). With this slight change in the style of music, Koothu opens itself up to an entirely new audience.

Despite the advancement of technology and a large-scale shift from live theatrical performances to television and cinema, the performance of Kattaikkuttu has been not been affected considerably as said by de Bruin in the following lines,

“The fact that people are still commissioning all night performances in spite of the cinema existing for so many years is evidence to the fact that it is very much alive. And the fact that it is a live performance makes all the difference. In cinema, the audience is passive, you cannot make a change or influence what you are watching, you can walk out or turn off the TV. But here it is a live interaction and it is a performance that is created or modelled on the audience. So, I think that for all live theatre, people have a need to experience that”

The art of Kattaikkuttu is much like a fresh canvas in the hands of each performer, as popular as it was centuries ago, evolving in a manner that keeps many individuals across the globe fascinated, allowing them to express themselves through it in their own imaginative ways, making it more unique and relevant with changing times.

4.3.4. Rural and Urban Audiences

With the dawn of globalisation and increased interconnectedness between cities and villages, changes have been reflected in the performance spaces and reception of the Kattaikkuttu art form. Historically, Kattaikkuttu was always performed in the villages, but with recent changes, Kattaikkuttu has slowly been making its way into the urban spaces as well. For the performers, performances have always revolved around audience reception, and this, along with the transitional nature of the art form, has allowed them to adapt their plays to suit their audiences. When performing in villages, the performers have a general sense of the viewers, their expectations, and their likes and dislikes. This seeming clarity of performance completely disappears when it comes to performing in urban spaces. Having performed in an urban setting

only a handful of times, Kattaikkuttu performers find it especially hard to adapt to the change in viewership, and audiences' reactions to the performances.

In villages, Kattaikkuttu has been performed for decades and has gradually become normalized for the villagers. However, urban audiences perceive it to be an exotic type of performance, and hence, it is appreciated greatly by them, since they take place only occasionally. There is also a difference in perception – people in rural areas often understand the difficulties faced when putting up a performance, and are also aware about the plight of women due to intense physical labour involved in the practice. Hence, participation of women is regarded as something special and exceptional. Contrastingly, the idea of women performers is not uncommon among urban audiences. Moreover, they overlook hardships the performers face, and are often surprised by how “lively” the performances are.

Additionally, methods of appreciation also differ between rural and urban viewers. In rural areas, monetary compensation is the only form of appreciation. Performers, more frequently female performers, are given individual donations to encourage them during their performance. In urban areas, viewers appreciate the performance by applauding. The performers from the Sangam were unaware of this method of appreciation; they thought they had done something wrong when they received applause for the first time. Adapting to these changing ways of appreciation contributed towards the advancement of the art form.

There are certain aspects of performances like duration, synchronization etc. that the performers alter based on whom they are performing for. Urban audiences are used to synchronized, western and classical performances, thus performing in a fluid and continuous sequence is a quality valued by them. For them, they expect performers to be professional, which is portrayed through performances that have no room for on-stage improvisations. However, in villages, performances are quite fragmented, and synchronization is not given too much importance. This is the way it has been performed for decades, but slowly, due to differences in audience preferences, Kattaikkuttu performers have manoeuvred their way to adapt to these modern-day demands. Furthermore, for urban performances, understanding factors like reduced attention span of the viewers is essential. Without doubt, urban audiences would not be interested in sitting through an all-night performance. Hence, a lot of effort goes into condensing performances and picking out scenes that are more important.

Within the rural spaces as well, changes have been reflected in the way the art form is being portrayed to the viewers. Earlier, sufficient time was given for the long and elaborate introduction of characters, which was one of the most significant parts of the play. However, nowadays, even in villages, people have less patience and want the story to commence as soon

as possible. Although this is something the audience prefers, in terms of the performance, making such changes in these traditional pieces often have grave consequences for the actual art form.

Rituals are, and have always been an important aspect of the Kattaikkuttu art form. The all-night performances are ideal spaces where ritualistic activities can be incorporated comfortably. For example, when we saw a performance in the village context, there was not only a ritual procession of the goddess but also the whole performance was facing the local temple. However, when these all-nighters are condensed into shorter 1.5 hour performances, it is almost impossible to include the necessary rituals involved. Repetition of music and certain dialogues have ritualistic aspects to it, but this repetition cannot be performed to its full potential in urban spaces due to the lack of stage time, which reduces the sanctity of the performance (de Bruin, personal interview).

In villages, there are superstitions attached to Kattaikkuttu. Many villages believe that the theatre is associated with the onset of rains, and increase in the following year's harvest. Thus, they hire Kattaikkuttu artists to perform at festivals meant for these purposes. In the cities, there is no such idea or belief and the sole motive of commissioning a Kattaikkuttu performance is entertainment. Making too many changes could result in the disappearance of the essence and logic behind the plays. However, society changes and hence, so does the art form.



Image 7: Typical rural audience during an overnight performance

Chapter 5

Oral Histories

The life histories of individual Kattaikkuttu Performers are observed to have been absent in the discourse surrounding the art form. The Kattaikkuttu narrative is devoid of the personal stories, experiences and even names of individuals who dedicated their lives to the performance of the theatre. One of the first statements made to us by Dr. de Bruin was that when conducting her dissertation fieldwork, she encountered many photographs of anonymous performers. Considering how fundamental the performers are to the art, such a dearth of their personal stories is appalling and arguably, tragic. It is crucial to include the histories of individuals in an academic pursuit, such as this one, studying an art form that is so flexible. This adaptive nature of Kattaikkuttu must be credited to its performers who enabled the evolution and modernization of such a traditional ritualistic practice. There is no doubt that the theatre has adapted, incorporated elements from other forms of art, greatly altered the traditional structure of the art form and undergone massive transformations in the last century. These changes could only have been possible if a single performer or organisation introduced a new style, proposed a novel component, borrowed from another art form and influenced other performers and troupes to adapt as well. But since there exists a lack of personalities in the Kattaikkuttu discourse, we will never be certain about how these evolutions took place and who to give credit for them.

Moreover, this absence of personal stories in the discourse becomes indicative of a certain politics when we take into account the creators or central contributors to the Kattaikkuttu narrative: the urban intelligentsia. This group of investigative literati has been primary in examining Kattaikkuttu in an academic, scholarly and research perspective. They have dictated how Kattaikkuttu is to be studied, perceived and recorded.

During our research, we came across several instances that reflected a bias that painted the art form in a particular light. The naming of the theatre as 'Kattaikkuttu' was a political move on the part of the Cankum. Before this term was introduced, the urban intelligentsia used to refer to the art form as 'Terukkuttu' or street theatre which, as mentioned before, began to be associated with poverty, lack of respect and a low-caste performance. 'Kattai' refers to the special ornament worn by the actors which is reflective of power, royalty and strength. The

new name brought with it a sense of pride for the performers and it became something they actively sought to associate themselves with. The changing of the name sparked debates and the nomenclature was rejected by many. Interestingly, it was the urban intelligentsia who were on the forefront of the debate, refuting the new name (de Bruin, 1999). Such political positions reflect how they themselves view the art form and how they choose to project it. Arguably, the dearth of personal histories in the discourse demonstrates how the literati view the identities of the performers (case in point, they do not).

Hence, in our research endeavour, we sought to change this. We recognized the importance of including the personal stories of those who make the art form and thus included oral histories as one of the methodologies of our research. Since our project takes the Kattaikkuttu Sangam as a case study to investigate the transitions in the art form, it was fundamental for us to record the stories, experiences and opinions of the individuals we met. We conducted extensive qualitative interviews to gain an insight into their journey. This research method enabled us to make sense of the translation of themes of Kattaikkuttu. For example, the inclusion of women or the impact of theatre education in the lives of individuals closely associated with the art form.

The first chapter provides a glimpse to how Rajagopal's life — through his various experiences and learnings — led to the establishment of a revolutionary organisation that institutionalised the art form. This serves as an example of the significance of oral history and how it enables research scholars, such as us, to get a qualitative and holistic idea of our subject matter.

Through this chapter, we seek to provide our readers with glimpses of our findings in the conduction of oral history research.



Image 8: Tamilarasi

A 24-year-old junior artist at the Sangam, Tamilarasi is the leading female performer in all of the Sangam's productions. She started performing Kattaikkuttu at the age of nine and was among the initial batches at the Sangam. Although her family wanted her to stop after passing her 10th grade, and then subsequently her 12th grade, Tamilarasi continued to perform. She had discovered a raging passion for the theatre and would not let anything get into the way of that. To appease her family members, she continued her education alongside her theatre practice and is aspiring to get her degree this year.

In the initial years of the Sangam, Tamilarasi remembers being one of the eight girls studying Kuttu. She marvels at how now the number has grown to 25 girls in the school which is half of the entire student body population. When she began performing, female performers were an extremely rare sight. It was an incredible deal to find women Kuttu performers. She comments on how today, seeing women on the stage is not as uncommon as it was before. Women being a part of the art is now a normality.

In fact, according to her, the inclusion of women has been proven to be beneficial on many accounts as performances with women get paid and respected more. She has observed how companies that include women charge a higher rate than those who do not. She can sustain herself just through the practice and performance of Kuttu.

But women who take up Kattaikkuttu as a long-term profession are still rare. Most of Tamilarasi's friends from the Sangam either got married upon graduating or left the practice to

pursue formal education. Although she herself has not faced any problems being a female Kuttu performer, she knows that it is difficult for women who perform to get married. Most families do not want women who participate in the art form as performance has a plethora of misconceptions, prejudices and biases associated with it.

Through her 15 years as a Kuttu performer, Tamilarasi has taken up several diverse roles that range across male and female characters. She recognizes the role of Draupadi as her favourite one. To her that role is special because the character radiates strength and grace. Moreover, the dance movements of Draupadi are unique and unlike any other character. The role demands perfection and for Tamilarasi, the process of learning it was challenging and enlightening at the same time. It was through Draupadi that she understood the complexity of Kattaikkuttu as a theatrical form of expression. Through her, she realised the importance of perfecting every movement and emphasising on every detail. She was taught to keep in mind the elements that make the character: her challenges, her strengths, likes, dislikes and personality.

Tamilarasi views the Sangam as having shaped and transformed her life for the better. She credits it for all the extraordinary opportunities she got and acknowledges its immense contribution in teaching her her passion. In 2014, Tamilarasi travelled to Switzerland and attended the Dimitri School to get trained in performing arts. After which she travelled to Liverpool in the company of just three more girls. Her learnings there expanded her skill sets and enabled her to become a greater performer. During this period, she also travelled to Cirque de Soleil in France for three months. This was an internship with the sole purpose of exposing selected theatre performers from India to the art forms of those regions. The connection was made with the individuals there when they had previously stayed and volunteered at the Sangam for two months. Through the time of her stay there, Tamilarasi learnt the skill of acrobatics. She thoroughly enjoyed this experience and observed tremendous growth in this period. She was also exposed to the art of clowning by some very experienced teachers there.

Upon her return to India, Tamilarasi's role at the Sangam expanded to teaching the children as well. Her training abroad had exposed her to new styles and manners of teaching the performing arts. This enabled her to guide her students better. For example, in foreign art forms, synchronisation is extremely important, thus the trainers there take special care to ensure all the performers are coordinated in their movements. Upon learning such a detailed oriented approach to teaching, Tamalarasi could guide her students a lot better.

Tamilarasi is eager, talented and passionate. She hopes to keep excelling in her practice and get to experience many more worthwhile opportunities. One of the things that she is

grateful to have gained from the art form and the Sangam is a name for herself. If she had not been here, she would have just sat at home, studied or gotten married off.

“Through Kattaikkuttu I got the chance to earn a name for myself because of my own skills and talents.”

-Tamilarsi, 2018

Selva



Image 9: Selva

Selva is an 18-year-old *koothu* performer who has been at the Sangam for around ten years. He is among the senior students and is juggling both, his theatre practice as well as his formal education. Selva is studying to obtain a BCom Degree and manages between his classes for that and his Kattaikkuttu performances.

When his parents had enrolled him into the *Gurukulam*, their priority was for him to learn English and the art form served more as an extra-curricular in their minds. In the initial

period upon joining the Sangam, Selva remembers to have perceived it as any other regular school. But with time, the art and music began to gain immense significance in his life. He began to be drawn towards acting and found it exhilarating to play different characters and put his learnings at the Sangam in use when performing at festivals or events.

Selva used to consider acting as his first and top most priority. He was interested in that above all, despite finding the physical dimension of the performance exhausting. It was only mid-way through his schooling years that he began to discover his interest and passion shifting towards the field of music. During this period, he could appreciate the Sangam's endeavour to teach the students all dimensions and elements of the art, ranging from acting, dancing, singing and instrument playing. His interest found direction when Rajagopal, his guru, acknowledged his talent and began putting him in more rehearsals for music. Selva is now one of the finest drum players at the Sangam.

For Selva, taking up Kattaikkuttu as a profession was not an easy decision. Even during the course of his education, he struggled to convince his parents to let him continue his practice. They didn't support him initially and demanded him to stop performing. But now, seeing him being able to balance both his formal education as well as his Koothe practice, they have given him the freedom to make his own choices. When he was joining the second year, they stopped him from going to the Sangam. Selva recalls several emotional pleadings to his parents where he often broke down while requesting permission to continue his art. Selva is dedicated to the art of Kattaikkuttu and is working hard to continue his practice despite not receiving complete support from his parents.

Adhinarayan Bharati



Image 10: Adhinarayan Bharati

In 2009, Bharati began studying at the Sangam. Although she is the first from her family to take up Kattaikkuttu, she receives complete support and encouragement from her relatives. A student of 10th grade, Bharati has recently started participating in the overnight performances, an event that is reserved for the older, more skilled children at the Sangam.

For Bharati, performing Kattaikkuttu is not just a requirement at the school she attends; through the art she has experienced liberation and strength. Performing makes her feel bold, and as she puts it in her own words, “I feel brave when I am on the stage.” In performing the theatre, Bharati recognizes an immense opportunity that she would not have received if it wasn’t for *Koothu*, a voice for herself, an expression.

The fact that Bharati feels brave when she is on stage proves that in art there is empowerment. She speaks about how if she would be back in the village, her life would be dictated on the terms of others. While at the Sangam, she has the power to be whoever she wants to be and the complete freedom to explore that power. At the Sangam, she is taught the skills to refine herself as an actress and experience this strength and courage at greater levels. For Bharati, the Sangam is more of a home than the one back in her village. She feels free at the Sangam, independent and able. Bharati says, “back in my village I see other girls my age live lives where they are denied freedom and the right to speak up about it. My life is very different from that and I am so thankful for it”

Bharati has played several roles ranging from Krishna, Draupadi to Karna. She identifies Draupadi as her favourite character, as she is powerful and brave. Perhaps Bharati adores this character as she embodies the qualities she herself chooses to possess. Bharati also enjoys playing Krishna as he is her most beloved God. Portraying him becomes a form of devotion while performing.

Such stories are fundamental when considering a qualitative research project such as this. They provide a glimpse into how the theoretical and historical dimensions of the subject translate into the lives of individuals. In our project, these longer-form interviews also serve as reflections of how our field-trip was. During our time studying Kattaikkuttu on field, our primary means to gather information was through interacting with relevant individuals at the Sangam. It was through their eyes that we began to discover Kattaikkuttu and under their guidance did we procure the resources used to analyse it. Thus, including them in the narrative of our academic project was crucial, as their significance in the art form and in our research endeavour was immense.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

Media and the urban intelligentsia continue to portray Kattaikkuttu as a dying art form, when in fact it is evolving, expanding and transitioning to become a more relevant and significant art form. Kattaikkuttu is undergoing remarkable transformations in socio-cultural, economic and political dimension. Through the course of our research we analysed these transformations using the Kattaikkuttu Sangam as our case study and this report sought to weave together the transitions in the art form as seen through the lense of the Sangam.

In chapter 3, we demonstrated that Kattaikkuttu has adapted to new financial and cultural structures. Koothu performers were part of the ritual-religious circuit, puppets in the hands of their patrons. They had to accept the remunerations offered by their patrons without any negotiations. However, with change in times, commercialization has led to sponsored performers for which the terms and conditions of the remuneration is negotiated by the artists and the sponsors. The transformation in the relations of the patrons and the performers was essential for the advancement of an art form like Kattaikkuttu. With commercialization of the art form, the remuneration of the artists has increased leading to heightened expectations. In order to cater to these elevated expectations of the audiences, professionalism and efficiency in the performance also increased in this process. These advancements in the performances charmed people from other parts of the country and the world, who were not associated with Kattaikkuttu in any way. Rajagopal used this as a way to introduce the theatre form on a national and further on a global level.

In Chapter four, we focused on shifting gender and caste dynamics impacting the art form. Kattaikkuttu is seen as an emergent of the art form of Terukkuttu; hence the inherited rights and obligations of members of a number of castes (mainly lower castes) have been transformed into performance traditions of Kattaikkuttu. As mentioned earlier, two such castes are Vannars and Pantarams, both of which are service castes of the Tamil community. Though the groups belong to socio-economically lower strata, their services are highly valued by the community.

The third prominent caste, which dominates the north and south of Tamil Nadu, is the Vanniyar caste (or Palli caste). The motive behind their engagement in Kattaikkuttu is undefined, but their desire to associate themselves with the Kshatriya caste on the basis of their warrior-like conduct hints at their resonance with the theatre form owing to its heroic elements.

Apart from these three prominent castes we discussed the involvement of other castes such as Harijan, Kuravar, inhabitants of hill areas of Tamil Nadu and the dwellers of Javadi hills who perform Kuttu once a year during the festival of Draupadi.

While caste has been a constant factor of the Tamil society, the Sangam's constant efforts to eradicate the issue's presence within its four walls have led to positive outcomes. Despite the presence of the issue in the practiced theatre form, the founders and administration of the Sangam have inculcated in their students, a sense of respect for one another. It is certain that every student faces social hurdles at different times in different settings. While many students positively respond to such deterrents in accordance with the principles of the Sangam, there are some who are unable to do the same. Unfortunately, government mandated documents and legal paperwork recurrently force them to consider the castes of the individuals working at the Sangam, yet, to the best of their ability, the founders pay no heed to the same when it comes to working together as an institution. Therefore, despite the existence and importance of caste in the larger Tamil society, the Sangam has established itself as a space that is free from caste based bigotries and discriminatory practices.

The fourth Chapter also sheds light on how contrary to the traditional belief of women being incapable or incompetent to perform, P. Rajagopal was of the view that gender does not define an individual's potential to perform. As mentioned above, gender bias was intricately weaved into Kattaikkuttu. The art form was traditionally a male only and women were barred from performing for various reasons. Kattaikkuttu being a physically demanding theatre form, requires the artists to perform for long, exhausting hours. And since women are assumed to be physically unfavourable owing to the differences in their biological structures they were regarded as unsuitable to perform. Additionally, exclusion of women is a consequence of ritualistic beliefs. Even though women are believed to be reincarnations of Goddesses such as Lakshmi, Durga and Kali, they weren't considered deserving enough to be part of the theatre form.

One of the main reasons for excluding women in the art form was the fact that men did not want to reveal their secrets; they weren't willing to train women. They were of the opinion that women will not be able to devote enough time to this profession. According to them, homely duties would be their (the women's) primary concern. Lastly, women performers are usually looked upon as uncultured. Women that indulged in the art form were not considered "wife material" and hence families would not want them to participate in the art form. Owing to these social reasons, involvement of women in Kattaikkuttu was always looked down upon.

With the establishment of the Sangam, Rajagopal and Hanne actively sought to include women into the art form. Rajagopal inaugurated the inclusion of women in the art form through the Sangam. Through the course of our research it became evident that Rajagopal was a man with a modern mindset. According to him, gender should not be a barrier for any individual to showcase his/her talents. He also believed that gender cannot decide the role of an individual. Therefore, in spite of the inclusion of women, the role of an individual was solely based on the suitability of the character and the personality of the individual; he encouraged cross gender portrayal of roles.

Post the inclusion of women, a change in audience reception was noticed. They could connect with the characters even more. The Sangam has played a crucial role in embracing women in the art form; it was the first institution that involved women and endorses in the idea of a theatre space that is not divided by gender.

In Chapter four, we also discussed the various transformations that the performance of Kattaikkuttu has witnessed. With the influx of modernization and commercialization, the centrality of ritualism in Kattaikkuttu has faded, but certainly not diminished. There are debates surrounding the classification of the art form and what category of performance to put it under. We speculate whether or not such a categorization even captures the essence of an art form such as Kattaikkuttu. Moreover, even the style of performing the theatre has changed significantly, with influences from other art forms, both Indian and foreign, the theatre has witnessed the comedy skits acquiring new elements of improvisation and styles of humour, the costumes becoming grander and more appealing and even the style of teaching the art form becoming more organized. The chapter also shed light on how the (traditional) rural and the (novel) urban audiences differ from one another. How the rural expects longer, detailed performances for the purpose of spiritual upliftment while the urban expects shorter excerpts of the performances for the purpose of entertainment and “folk” art appreciation.

Our report also gives significant emphasis on the oral history method of research. It reflects the personal and qualitative nature of our time on field in terms of our interactions with the individuals there. Moreover, it draws attention to the importance of the lives, experiences and opinions of individuals in shaping and reflecting a socio-cultural phenomenon.

On the last day of our field trip, we attended a traditional Kattaikkuttu overnight performance that was being organized at a village around 17 kilometres from the Sangam. The Gurukulam’s professional troupe had been commissioned to perform there in celebration of a religious occasion. The performance began at 11:30 pm and went on through the course of the night up until daybreak at 6:30 am. The performers, which included the musicians, singers, and

actors performed an episode from the Mahabharata through the course of those eight hours.

Through the course of the night we observed several reflections of the art form's themes and elements in the performance and setting.

We observed a political dimension to the performance, which in the case of the overnight performance pertained to the exact location and direction of the performance on the designated street. Two individuals at the village got into a fight over whose house the stage of the performance would face. This reflects the ritual significance of the performance and hence the value it will add to the life of the individual in front of whose house the performance takes place. Before the stage was set up, a ritualistic procession took place, during which the image of Lord Krishna was carried from the start of the street to the temple of the same where it was placed. The procession was preceded by Dalits who walked in front of the idol in order to avert the evil eye, and it was succeeded by musicians.

According to Hanne, different streets from the same village commission Kattaikkuttu performances every Saturday. The structure of the village is such that most streets have a temple on one side. The entire street community collectively commissions the performance in order to spiritually uplift the village. As the procession was heading towards the temple, the musicians were playing drums around the idol and villagers danced along with the procession. The entire village seemed immersed in a spirit of celebration. A very interesting element we observed was the use of firecrackers during the celebration. We infer this to be reflective of modernization of the art form and the inclusion of non-traditional elements. When the procession reached the temple, the villagers gathered around while the priest conducted a ritual *pooja* ceremony. Musicians played instruments outside the temple and villagers sang along with them.

Around 11:00 pm the stage was set up on the street and within half an hour, the performance began. The narrative of the performance is based on an episode of the Mahabharata, originally adapted as a result of the expansion of the Draupadi sect, but different villages and different companies alter the script in accordance with the social scenario and religious context of their audiences. And hence we can observe the fluid and adaptable nature of the form.

The overnight performance that we witnessed began with musicians singing famous Tamil Kattaikkuttu songs and a prayer, which was followed by clowns performing. The clowns are one of the main characters to infuse the social context and engage the audience, which was proof of flexibility of the theatre in order to please and include the audience. These clowns often use words that they have learnt from other languages, dialogues that they have heard in

films or even contemporary references and jokes in their act. Furthermore, even teachers of the Sangam incorporate their own styles based on their learning as well as their students, hence it is these individuals who bring about uniqueness to the art form and keep it alive. The overnight performance made evident the intensive physical devotion from performers as well as musicians, scope for improvisation and the element of informality that the art form depicts. This aspect is also relevant in the context of rural and urban audiences; the variance in cultures and the reception of the theatre result in alteration in the styles. While performances for the rural audiences are elaborate, the same for urban audiences is condensed to the most important episodes of the selected narrative. The performances we had previously watched at the Sangam were very different from the overnight performance. While those were excerpts from longer plays, adapted for a more urban audience, the overnight plays are exceptionally detailed, with the actors getting over 3-4 hours of stage time individually. During the performance, the difference between urban and rural audiences became evident. As monetary remuneration and claps at the end of the performance are regarded as accepted forms of appreciation in urban settings, this is traditionally not recognized and hence found anomalous. Here we observed audience members walking up to the stage to hand tips to actors in order to express their appreciation of their skills. From this we also inferred that there is a sense of fluidity in the space of the stage and the strictness of its boundaries are not the same as other performance forms.

This theatre is unique for it stresses on the oneness of the performer with his or her character which is witnessed by all audiences. Despite the advancement of technology and the expansion of *Natakam*, viewers still wish to witness performances in real time, as digital documentation does not permit spontaneous adaptations. This was evident in how over 200 audience members stayed to watch the entire eight-hour performance, despite feeling sleepy and exhausted. Even the elderly sat on the street floor and stayed for the entire performance.

Lastly, the element of gender differences was explicitly present during the overnight performance. While the men and young children sat closer to the stage, women and female young adults sat separately. Even amongst the musicians, gender had its role to play; female singers were present in the band, but none of them played the instruments. Through the night, musicians switched places, but no female come forth. The reasons could differ from our assumptions of gender dominance, but these instances hint at the prevalence of gender disparities in the most fine-drawn ways.

In taking the Sangam as a case study, we witnessed a spectrum of positives, negatives, and changes within the heroic theatre of Kattaikkuttu. The art form has evolved into

a semi-autonomous professional theatre form with its roots firmly planted in the village society, that is now reaching out to urban audiences. It has managed to survive, adapt and flourish in the changing social settings and transitions owing to the contemporary world. It was a privilege to experience a folk-art form so profound and rich, in a space of pure positivity. The devotion and respect of a large part of the audience was reflected in their perpetual presence in the performance area, awake or not. Hence, the persistence of spiritual upliftment through performances, the evolution of Kattaikkuttu from Terukkuttu, and the progressive nature of the art makes it what audiences want to witness even today.

As the day dawns and the performance continues, the future of this art form is bright, and safe in the hands of its ever-increasing number of exponents.

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Glossary

Puranas: Ancient Indian religious texts

Koothu- Kattaikkuttu is commonly referred to as Koothu or Kuttu, meaning performance

Kattai: Ornaments

Terukkuttu: Teru translates to 'street' and Kuttu to 'theatre'

Ragas: Indian classical music with six modes expressing varying moods

Panis: Substyles

Tai: Tamil months of mid-January to mid-February

Purattaci: Tamil months of mid-September to mid-October

Tamil Natu Kattaikkuttu Kalai Valarcci Munnerra Cankam - Association for the Growth and Development of the Art of Kattaikkuttu in Tamil Nadu

Gurukulam: A form of residential education system

Puja: A ritualistic prayer performed as a manner of devotional worship to one or more deities

Ramlila: Performed mainly in North India, it is the dramatic folk reenactment of the life of Rama as per the ancient Hindu epic, Ramayana.

Bhavi: Performed mainly in Gujarat, it is a partly entertainment and partly ritualistic performance made to Goddess Amba.

Krishnattam: Performed mainly in the South of India, it is a dance- drama representing the story of Krishna in a series of 8 plays.

Kutiyattam: Performed mainly in Kerala, India, it is an art form combining elements of Sanskrit theatre with Koothu.

Kathakali: A classical Indian dance form originating in the Southwestern regions of India

Kattai vesham: Heroic embellishment, typically portrayed by physically strong men

Mridangam: A percussion instrument that accompanies a Carnatic music ensemble.

Mukavinai: A musical instrument that produces sound from the flow of air across an opening

Pali: Tamil for animal sacrifices

Mamul - Hereditary rights

Perungattur Ponnuchami Nadaka Mandram - A Kattaikkuttu company of the father of P. Rajagopal

Vannar, Pantaram and Vanniyar - The 3 castes that performed Koothu

Ammanai Varnittal - a song to praise goddesses

Mariyyamman Jattirai - A festival of Goddess Mariyyannan

Kaicilampattam - refers to a dance performed by holding anklets

Kalyana Murunkai - A tree

Eye opening ceremony - A pooja performed to give life to the ornaments

Bhagvata Melam - A dance form in Tamil Nadu

Paratam - Mahabharata festival to celebrate Goddess Draupadi

WITH THE EVOLUTION OF FOLK
THEATRE IN INDIA, A TIMELESS
SPECTRUM OF ART IS CREATED...

