

POPULAR THEATRE AND THE RISE OF NATIONALISM IN TAMIL NADU (1919-1944)

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‘The instinct of drama . . . to mix itself up with politics is incorrigible’—Sir Edmund Chambers: *The Medieval Stage* : 1903¹

An inscription chiselled on the walls of *Rājarājēsvaram* temple, *Thanjāvur*, refers to ‘a drama *RĀJARĀJESWARA NĀTAKAM*, which was enacted every *Vaikāci* festival. The leader of this troupe was awarded a donation by the munificent king *Rajaraja I* (AD 985—1016)² The drama presumably told the story of *Rajaraja’s* career, culminating in the dedication of the great temple.

Though the tradition of drama goes back to the *Caṅkam* period (AD 3rd-4th centuries), modern drama as we know, with divisions of acts, scenes, sceneriography of painted settings and a stage with concealed orchestra, is not more than a century old in Tamilnadu. The classical drama was in dance form performed in temples during festivals and was not commercially organised.³ Modern drama, run on commercial lines is open to everyone without any barrier, class or caste. Recent researches have pointed out that such a popular, commercial drama exhibits characteristics of mass communications and fulfils such a role. It also serves as a reflector of the existing social norms. Such a function of the drama deserves notice and can be understood only in terms of the popular stage’s inter-relationship with the rest of the society.⁴ When it appeared on the cultural scene of South India by the end of 19th century, popular drama, in the absence of radio or cinema, came as a major means of mass communications. It appeared in an age when insemination of ideas and information was crucial to the emergence of nationalism and in time came to be used as an instrument in the nation’s struggle for liberation. This aspect of freedom struggle has not received the scholarly attention it deserves from historians. During 1870s, certain Parsi and Marathi drama companies camped and played in Madras, demonstrating the viability of a dramatic organization as a commercial proposition and soon local itinerant companies came to be formed. One of the earliest was *Original Mōkaṇa Nāṭaka Company*, founded by *T. R. Govindasamy Rao*.⁵ He set a model by running his organisation as a theatrical ‘family’, and many other companies, in which the artistes lived together, came to be set up. One such as *Sāmi Nāyudu Nāṭaka Company*, which camped in Madras

and played to crowded houses. The phenomenal popularity of the dramas of this company led some educated youngmen of Madras to take a curious look at popular theatre.⁶ This, coupled with the increasing interest in English literature, particularly Shakespearian drama and the study of Sanskrit classics, created an interest in legitimate theatre, as different from the popular one. *Suguna Vilasa Sabha*, an amateur dramatic club, was founded in 1891 by *Pammal Sambanda Mudaliyar* and in time a number of similar clubs were formed in the district towns also, like *Sudarsana Sabha* of *Thānjavur* and *Rasika Ranjani Sabha* of *Tiruchirapalli*. V. G. Suryanarayana Sastri, a teacher in Madras Christian College got deeply interested, started writing plays in Tamil, meant for stage, with acts and scenes, following the principles of both Shakespearian and Sanskrit dramas. His first play *Rūpavati* was staged in 1897. Explaining the characteristics of legitimate theatre, he wrote a treatise *Nāṭakaviyal*, mainly to help the small band of drama-enthusiasts around him.⁷ The amateur clubs did not handle controversial themes in their plays; many of the members were working for the British government and they carefully played it safe. However, a number of dramatists trained in these amateur groups went over to commercial companies, taking with them new ideas on theatre.

An offshoot of the commercial drama company was the 'Boys Company.' Young boys, below the age of 12, were recruited and trained in singing. No wages were paid but food and clothing was taken care of. One reason for engaging boys was that among them it was easier to enforce discipline and they came cheap. Acting on the stage was still very much a taboo for women and the boys played female roles, till their voices cracked. *Samarasa Sanmārga Nāṭaka Sabha*, founded by *Sanṅkaradās Swāmigal* in 1910, was one of the earliest of such companies.⁸ *Thapa Venkātachala Bāgavathar* of *Kumbakōṇam* started a similar company in 1911.⁹ These companies moved from town to town, camping for months in one place till they exhausted their repertoire. In addition to these two types, there was third category known as 'Special drama'. This was a kind of free lance arrangement. Playwrights like *Sanṅkaradās Swāmigal* and *Egai Sivashanmugam* adapted many popular mythological stories for the stage, by writing and publishing the songs and the little dialogue that there was. These became the standard versions. When a 'special drama' was organised, actors who had specialised in specific roles in these plays assembled from different places and enacted the play, each one faithfully reproducing portions from the standard versions.¹⁰ Number of permanent drama houses came up in many towns, in addition to the temporary sheds that served the purpose in smaller towns.

From a small nucleus of commercial and amateur groups, the popular theatre diversified and grew when the 'Boys companies' and 'special dramas' developed. In about forty years time, a large number of drama

companies came to be formed and drama houses came to be built and popular theatre emerged as the single largest mass entertainment. In the first few decades of its existence, it remained purely as an entertainment form, handling themes from purāṇās and folklore.

Politically, Madras province had not been much active during this period and came to be referred to as the 'benighted province'. The sporadic activity that there was, was confined to a small section of the intelligentsia as political consciousness had not permeated masses.¹¹ The political activism kindled by V. O. Chidambaram Pillai and Subramanya Siva in the extreme south of the province during the first decade of this century, suffered a severe set back with their conviction in the court of law in what came to be referred to as the *Tirunelvēly* Sedition case. Only in 1914, when Mrs. Besant began to tour the province demanding Home Rule, was their action again and the movement started by her merged itself with the Non-co-operation and Khilafat movements (1919) giving a lasting and a broad-based character to the nationalistic struggle in the province. By this time commercial drama companies had emerged as a truly popular mass medium and the nationalists saw in it the much needed tool to spread their message, widely and effectively. Once nationalism acquired a mass base in Tamilnadu, popular theatre, the major mass entertainment, began to get involved in political action and play an active role in the cause of nationalism.

A close look at the history of popular theatre in Tamilnadu brings out its role in the freedom movement, a role that arose out of its relational interaction with the society. As it was run on commercial lines it could present only works which were acceptable to the audience and thereby served as an instrument to gauge the changing moods and concerns of the society. The commercial drama companies that came into existence by the end of 19th century were, in fact, theatrical 'families', living and travelling together, a situation in which the artistes influenced each other very much. Out of these groups emerged a number of artistes who eventually formed their own companies where the process was repeated. In addition to their work on the stage, many of them carried on direct political activity off-the stage and eventually came to hold responsible positions in the National Congress. In the other directions, the stage, by encapsulating the ideas and concerns of the intellectual elite, the leaders, in a popular entertainment form directly influenced the audience.

The historical context in which the popular, commercial theatre appeared, was a significant period for India. Centuries old beliefs and patterns of social behaviour had to be changed and adapted in the face of certain totally new concepts. Western education was slowly and steadily spreading. Signs of nationalism could be discerned. The press had appeared and a new revolution in this direction was on its way and in the realm of drama there was a slow awakening.

By the end of 19th century, when commercial drama companies appeared, the country was in the throes of change. There was a slow realization that social reforms were necessary, if any progress could be made towards nationhood. When the Indian National Congress was founded in 1885, it was intended, primarily, to deal with social reforms. In Madras, though the movement for reform was slow to catch on, there was an active, small group of reformers and they started a journal *Indian Social Reformer* in 1890. In the same year Hindu Social Reforms Association was founded in Madras and soon branches sprang up all over the province. While at the national level Narayana Ganesh Chandavarkar was the leader of the reform movement, in Madras, his close associate Kamatchi Natarajan led the movement. Natarajan proclaimed himself a rational reformer, untrammelled by the canons of the sastras. Madhavarao of the Congress, along with reformers like Sankaran Nair campaigned for widow re-marriage and temperance. Chandavarkar visited Madras in 1903 and the Hindu Social Reforms Association gained a new vigour. The Depressed Classes Mission Society in Madras was established in 1909 and soon, mainly due to the work of Veeresalingam Pantulu, branch associations in the districts were also set up. Social institutions with the sanction of tradition behind them came to be questioned. Gandhi lent his charisma movement when he declared in Belgaum Congress that social reforms are essential for *swaraj* and that the congress should take up this programme seriously. The demand for social reforms came to be identified with the cause of nationalism.¹² Gandhi's tour of the province in 1920 along with the Ali brothers created a new awakening. E. V. Ramasamy Naiker, P. Varadarajulu and Thiru. Vi. Kalyanasundaram took the message of Gandhi into rural areas.

While the press and certain social organisations influenced the literates, to the bulk of the masses the popular theatre that had emerged as a distinctly new phenomenon, the drama companies, served as the only means of mass communications. In a society where the people and their culture is preponderately oriented to spoken word, the appearance of a popular theatre, which packed ideas of social reform and nationalism with the main ingredients of traditional form of entertainment, like music and mythological themes, was bound to have significant consequences.¹³ Such a stage not only serves as an entertainment form, but does something more to the society. J. S. R. Goodlad states that it is likely that in a group of audience watching a drama, they are not merely escaping from the pressures of their day-to day life, but that they are escaping into a kind of understanding of society, an understanding that is necessary for them to participate in the society in a meaningful way. By watching a drama, they may be learning how to react to certain new factors that they have to encounter as the society gets more complex ; they may also anticipate as to what is permitted in the changing circumstances and what is more appropriate for social behaviour. Every society requires a cultural

mechanism through which the social and political conflicts are analysed and it is in this sense that the popular drama assumes certain social functions. He goes on to say that three principal features can be detected in all forms of truly popular drama. The drama will explain to the community the moral rules that are required for a smooth functioning of a community. In situations where individual ideals and aspirations struggle against the conformity which are called for by the society, the drama will reflect the arguments that are going on in the society and the inherent conflicts that are working in the society will also be reflected in the dramas.¹⁴

Till 1919, the popular theatre was content with putting up mythologicals with all the ingredients of 'escapist' entertainment. Stage artistes regarded, as veritable out-castes, kept themselves away from the main stream of society. It was the political activity stirred up by the Non-Co-operation movement which galvanised the drama artistes into action and a new phase began in the world of mass entertainment. Certain nationalistic leaders in Madras greatly encouraged artistes in their activity. S. Sathyamurthy, deeply interested in performing arts and himself an amateur stage actor, firmly believed that drama and music could be creatively used for nationalistic purposes.¹⁵ He did not share the elitist apathy for popular arts, and often declared 'we will sing our way to freedom'. He freely associated himself with stage artistes, inspite of the stigma attached to their profession at that time. Number of artistes, led by actor M. M. Chidambaranathan, gave him active support when Sathyamurthy organised non-violent agitation at Madras, in 1920. Hundreds of drama performances were held in the villages around Madras and the money collected was used to supply food and clothing to the volunteers of the agitation.¹⁶ Subramanya Siva, who was by that time out of prison after having served the sentence, went a step ahead, organised a drama troupe, Sri Bharatha Vilasa Sabha, and travelled around staging nationalistic plays like *Netaji* and *Desingu Rajan*, in which also acted. When the play was banned in Chidambaram by the local magistrate, Sathyamurthy raised the issue in the floor of the legislature.¹⁷ Such an encouragement gave a tremendous fillip to the role of popular theatre in the freedom movement and conferred on the artistes a respectability which they had not enjoyed hitherto.

While studying the role of popular theatre in the rise of nationalism in Tamilnadu, three distinct patterns could be discerned ; 1. the use of songs, 2. reformist plays and 3. allegorical and direct political dramas.¹⁸ The process started in an interesting manner. As the story in these dramas, was merely a series of excuses for songs, the companies had on their pay-rolls song-writers, conversant with classical and folk music who composed songs to suit popular taste. Known as *vāttiār* (teacher) his main work was to write songs and teach them to the actors. As the only

person with formal education in the company, he served as its antennae and the dramas reflected his reactions to the events outside. The Rowllatt Act, Jallianwalabagh massacre and the Non-Co-operation movement supplied grist to his mill. These songs served a very definite purpose of educating the audience on the political developments in the country. Earlier, Poet Subramanya Bharathi had shown the way in using popular songs for political education. His songs on V. O. Chidambaram Pillai's trial in the *Tirumelvēly* Sedition case and the conflict between the extremists and the moderates in the congress, published in journals like *Intiyā* served as models. These songs, which were simple and direct, created an awareness of current political events, effectively using one of the traditional modes of mass communications for this purpose.

It was M. G. Bairava Sundaram Pillai who began this trend by singing during a performance of a mythological drama *Alli Arjunā* in 1921, a nationalistic song written by him about the arrival of Gandhi on the political scene. He sang,

கதர் கப்பல் கொடி தோணுதே
மோகனதாஸ் கரம் சந்த் காந்தி—சிந்திய
கதர்க் கப்பல் கொடி தோணுதே.

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The song was timely and became a favourite piece among the play-goers. The style quickly spread when other song-writers also began popularising such stirring nationalistic songs. In time, such songs became a necessary ingredient in all the dramas of the popular theatre, be it mythological or historical.²⁰ Characteristic of this new school of song-writers was *Ōraṭi Muthuveerappa Pillai*, so named because of his single line (*ōraṭi*) extempore songs through which he commented upon and explained the daily political events in his dramas.²¹ The most well-known song-writers of this class were *Madurakavi Baskaradas* and *Bhumi Balagadas*. Their songs were sung by numerous artistes, and the most active among them was *S. S. Viswanatha Das*. He became famous through a moving song on the Jallianwalabagh massacre which established the usage of drama songs to kindle nationalistic fervour. This method was quickly taken up by other artistes. These songs set to rather elementary music and rendered in carrying voice by *Viswanatha Das* ridiculed the alien rulers appealed to the audience's emotions and was politically informative. His song about the Indians in South Africa, appealing to Gandhi for help, thus :

தீண்டாதவர்களைப் போல—நாங்கள்
தூரத்தில் வாழ்ந்திருங்காலே—எமை
வேண்டி விஜயஞ் செய்ததாலே—யாம்
வீரர்களானோம் வினயமோங்கு—ஒரு சேதி சொல்ல

வந்தோம். 22

He advertised his drama on the well-known *Kōvalan-Kaṇṇaki* story *DECIYA KOVALAN* (Nationalistic *Kōvalan*) indicating that the play had nationalistic flavour.

Uṭumalai Sarapam Muthusamy Kavirāyar, a poet bred in the classical tradition and conversant with grammatical works relating to poetry, was inspired by Khilafat movement to write simple and popular songs advocating nationalistic cause. The song-writers who were his students, were greatly influenced by his zeal and blossomed in the same mould as their master. *Uṭumalai Nārāyaṇa Kavi*, who worked as a free lance drama teacher for a long time and then joined films, *Kumbakōṇam K. V. Santhānākriṣṇa Nayudu*, who was the manager and teacher in *Ārya Gana Sabha* and M. M. Chidambaranathan were all his students. *Ārya Gana Sabha* was a veritable training ground for nationalistic dramatists. Poet Subramanya Bharathi used to visit the Sabha and *Uṭumalai Nārāyaṇa Kavi* who met him there came under his spell.²³

Another class of artistes who used songs for purposes of political propaganda were the 'back-stage' (*piṇ-pāṭṭu*) singers. A *piṇ-pāṭṭu* artiste, playing on the harmonium and singing along with the actors on the stage, formed the backbone of a stage performance. He had to be familiar with all the songs and have a good command of music; during periods of stage-wait he would give solo performance also. Songs, in time, acquired a significance independent of the drama and these *piṇ-pāṭṭu* artistes were sought after for individual performance. Many of them took part in direct political agitations. The actual presence of a political activist on the stage, as an actor or a singer, increased the authenticity of his appeals. One such singer was *Rāmaṇāthapuram P. V. Gōvīndasamy*, who courted arrest as a volunteer in the Non-Cooperation movement. *S. V. Vāsudēvan Nāir*, another *piṇ-pāṭṭu* artiste, started his political career as a volunteer in Vaikkam Sathyagraha in 1924 and later suffered imprisonment during the Civil Disobedience movement.²⁴

The work of *piṇ-pāṭṭu* artistes brought in a new method of political campaigns. These songs were sung from political platforms and during picketings they served to lend an emotional support to the volunteers. Song-writers, unconnected with the stage, began to publish small booklets of nationalistic songs, a kind of degenerate poetry and subliterate in character, set to popular folk music, a genre of music popularised by the stage. Beggars in the train and campaigners in street corners sang these songs. One such writer was *Chūlai Māṇicka Nāyakar*. In his book published in 1928, *Mahathma Gandhi arrestu Pāṭṭu*, he comments on Gandhi's arrest, thus :

சீயார் தாசுடன் லாலா லஜபதி செல்வந்தர்களாம் அலி
சகோதரர்

ஞாயந் தவறுதலாய் பேசியதாய் நேயரைக் கொண்டு சிறை
யடைத்தார்
நான் கோபரேஷனை நாடிவந்து—அன்பர் நமக்கு உழைக்க
திடப்படுத்தி
அன்போடு சிறையில் பத்தாயிரம் பேர்க்கு மேல்
ஆனந்தமாய் வாடும் நானையிலே. 25

Such songs and poetry received particular notice from the British Government and formed the single largest category of printed matter confiscated.²⁶ Many such song books were printed in Ceylon and smuggled into India.

The appearance of Tamil novels in the last decades of 19th century on contemporary themes pointed to the possibility of 'social' plays. *Kāci Viswanātha Mudaliyār* wrote and staged at Madras *DUMBĀCĀRI* in the 1880s, one of the earliest 'social' dramas. *Pammal Sambanda Mudaliar* produced *DĀCI PEN* and *KOTURAVU NĀTAKAM*.²⁷ *Kandasamy Mudaliyar*, a graduate, trained in *Suguna Vilasa Sabha* and later working for commercial drama companies, served as a link between the legitimate and the popular theatre. He produced a fresh crop of reformist dramas through which he satirized certain social attitudes and highlighted the need for reform. In him, the social reform movement found an active supporter.

J. R. Rangaraju, a popular writer of 1920s, wrote novels dealing with issues like emancipation of women, issues which were agitating the minds of reformers. The innovative mind of *Kandasamy Mudaliyar* saw the possibility of adapting these novels for the stage. He gave up a comfortable job he had with the government and turned a professional dramatist, working as a drama teacher in a number of companies including *Madurai Bala Meena Sangitha Sabha*. When the popular stage was dealing only with mythologicals, *Kandasamy Mudaliyar's* 'socials' with emphasize on acting, an aspect of drama that had been totally neglected so far, came as a breath of fresh air. Audience welcomed this change and soon other companies, like *Madurai Original Boys Company* also began to stage reformist plays. A new direction was given to popular theatre.

RAJENDRA (published in 1920), one of *Rangaraju's* works, adapted by *Kandasamy Mudaliyar*, was about a newly wedded girl who is rejected by the husband because she hadn't brought dowry. The girl is forced into prostitution to earn enough money for dowry. When she eventually joins her husband, she recognises him as one of her clients. *CHANDRA-KĀNTHA* telling the story of the *Paṇṭāra Saṇṇadhi of Tirukāḷḷūr*, exposed the hypocrisy of some fraudulent priests in a dramatic manner. *RĀJĀM-*

BĀL was a story about an oldman marrying an young girl and also criticised corruption in official life.

The reformists soon recognised the role of popular theatre in communicating their ideas to the people. In 1924 *Veṅkaḷatūr Sāminātha Sarma*, who had been influenced by the reformist ideas of Theosophical Society staged in the society's campus at *Adyar*, his adaptation of Tagore's *SACRIFICE* as *JEEVABĀLAN*, a play condemning animal sacrifice. Dr. Besant and Arundale watched the performance and persuaded *Sarma* to take it into the villages.²⁸

The next development in the sequence was the introduction of political comments and symbols of nationalism in dramas, to begin with in mythologicals. Sly references to certain specific political situations were introduced in the dialogue. The scene in which people in the streets of *Ayōdhyā* comment on the royal order exiling *Rāma*, was used to make critical references to the repressive measures adopted by the British Government following 1919 movements. *Valli* would drive away the flocks of birds that come to feed off the corns, singing,

இந்தியாவைக் கொள்ளையிட எங்கிருந்தோ இங்குவந்து
குந்தி தின்னும் குருவிகளா ஆலோலங்கிடிச்சோ—உங்கள்
சொந்த நாட்டை தேடிப்போங்க ஆலோலங்கிடிச்சோ 29

In *ĀDIBĀDUSHĀ*, an off-repeated play, there was a court scene in which the king discussed the natural resources of India and wondered why with all this the country was poor. was it not because of alien rule? Three artistes, dressed fully in saffron, white and green, would at given moment stand in a row on the stage, forming a tri-colour flag.

When reputed writers and journalists recognised the force of popular theatre and turned to the stage for expression the era of direct political propaganda began. So long commercial drama was not considered a medium of serious expression and it was *T. P. Krishnasamy Pāvalar*, foremost among nationalist playwrights who first moved in this direction and began developing a political theatre. Giving up his job as a Tamil teacher in 1914, he ran a daily *Inṛaya samācāram* for four years, devoted mainly to the ideas of Tilak and Gandhi and wrote in journals like *Bhārathi* and *Vidya Bhūshani*. He soon observed that literacy being very low, some other means should also be employed to educate the people politically. Trained in *Suguna Vilasa Sabha*, *Pāvalar* could see the potentiality of the stage in this direction. In 1920, he founded *Rāmaṇāthapuram Bāla Mōṇogara Gāna Boys Company* and initially staged mythologicals like *SATHI SĀVITHIRI* and *HARISHCHANDRĀ*. Once the company got established he switched over to historicals with a nationalis-

tic appeal, such as *HYDER ALI*, *DESINGU RAJAN* and *NAPOLEON*, stories of fight against the British. *Pāvalar* then went on to produce reformist plays like *PATHI BAKTHI* and *BĀLĀMBAL*, dramatizing the ideals of Gandhi, like temperance. And in *GOVERNORS CUP* he condemned horse-racing.³⁰

Pāvalar's direct nationalistic propaganda began when *KATARIN VERRI* (Triumph of Khādi) a dramatization of the ideals of swadeshi movement, staged in Royal theatres Madras in 1922. The economic implications of using only indigenous cloth was explained to the masses through the play. There was a scene in which *Sundaram*, the hero does not allow the heroine, *Maragatham*, to touch him as she is wearing foreign cloth. The confrontation between the National Congress and Justice party was also portrayed in the play. The daughter and the son-in-law of Congress, argue with the father who is a supporter of Justice party. He made good use of symbols like *Charka* (spinning wheel) and Gandhi cap in his dramas. Spurred by the enthusiastic welcome this drama received, *Pāvalar* produced *DECIYA KOTI* (National Flag) dealing with Nagpur flag agitation. His plays set new standards in popular drama and his troupe was invited to perform in Wembley exhibition in London in 1923, where both these dramas were staged. When he got back to India, he found that number of his plays had been banned and many companies were staging them under different names. He gave up the stage and took to full time political work as Secretary of Madras District Congress Committee. Till he died in 1934, he ran the monthly *Desabandhu*.³¹

Though *Pāvalar's* plays marked a new turn, the popular stage was still filled with mythological and folklorish dramas. Episodes from the *purāṇās* were enacted in wearisome repetition. Out of 94 Tamil dramas published during the years 1921-1925, only two dealt with contemporary themes.³² There were four drama versions of *Vaḷḷi's* wedding. Placed in this perspective, the innovation and courage behind *Pāvalar's* works are seen properly.

Saminatha Sarma published a nationalistic play *BĀNAPURATHU VEERAN* (The warrior of Banapuram) in 1924, a vernacular version of the story of Robert Bruce of Scotland, with the names of characters suitably tamilized-Bruce became *Purēsaṅ* and Wallace changed into *Valīsaṅ*. It was an allegorical dramatization of the freedom struggle. *Valīsaṅ*, a patriot of *Bānapuram*, is tried and executed and his friend *Puresaṅ* continues the struggle and brings liberation to *Bānapuram*. The role of women in the national struggle, an aspect stressed by Gandhi, was touched upon in this drama. It was promptly banned and *Sarma* himself fled to Rangoon. S. Viswanathan, a dramatist of Madras managed to stage it. This play was literary in style, as against the colloquial language which was the prevalent medium in all the professional dramas,

giving scope for improvisation, and was in a disciplined language, restricting the actors' freedom to modify during performance.³³

The British Government grew concerned about the growing politization of the popular theatre. Though the Dramatic Performances Act of 1876 had empowered the provincial government to ban any dramatic performance which it considered prejudicial to its authority, the difficulty of pre-censoring dramas, which did not have any working script, led the government to empower the local authorities like District Magistrates to stop the performance of any 'seditious' Drama. This newly acquired power was used frequently and the political character of the popular theatre abated for a while.³⁴ Well known nationalistic plays like *OMAITURAI*, *KATTABOMMAN*, *PĀNCALANKURICCI BATTLE* and *MARUDU PANDYAN*, all episodes from the poligar revolt against the East India Company during the end of 18th century, were banned.³⁵

The general political activism stirred up by the Civil Disobedience movement of 1930, particularly the execution of Bhagat Singh and others lent a new vigour to the popular theatre, which once again became politically communicative. *Sarma's BĀNAPURATHU VEERAN* was adapted for the popular stage by *Madura Kavi Bāskara Dās* and the drama company of T. K. S. brothers, *Bāla Shnamugananda Sabha*, staged it as *DECA BAKTHI* (Patriotism) in 1931-35a. The play opened with *Valisaṅ's* execution scene; he was dressed like *Bhagat Singh*, complete with a felt-hat and a neatly trimmed moustache; the soldiers and other men in the king's court were in British army officers' costume. The allegorical reference could not be missed.³⁶ *Valisaṅ* was shown as being hanged (the original play of *Sarma* did not mention the specific mode of execution) and the scene drew shouts of 'Hail Bhagat Singh'. The play was laced with *Bharathi's* songs and a *villu-paṭṭu* on the life of Gandhi was also incorporated. They also staged *KATARIN VERRI* of *Pāvalar* and *JAMBULINKAM*, another drama with nationalistic flavour. The District Magistrate of *Tirumelvēli* banned all these plays and the District Congress Committee protested and got the ban lifted, eventually. The troupe ran into trouble in other districts also in connection with *KATARIN VERRI*. The brothers corresponded with Gandhi about the play and the difficulties it was facing. The play was staged with a different name, as *KATAR BAKTHI* with certain changes.³⁷

The eagerness with which these dramas were patronised encouraged many other companies to stage similar plays. Madurai Original Boys company was one such and its proprietor, *Sacchidānandam Pillai* wrote and produced *DECA BAKTI* or *SĀKOTARA TUROKAM* (Betrayal of the brother), a story set in historical times, preaching non-payment of taxes as the king had not reduced the land tax. There was also a mock

session of the House of Lords. The authorities took notice of the play and observed 'some of the passages are clearly intended to bring the present administration into contempt'. Another company, very active politically and staged a series of dramas, was *Madurai Bāla Meena Ranjani Sabha* founded by a batch of nationalist-dramatists, the leader being *Jagannathayyer*.³⁸ Nationalistic plays began increasingly to include propagandistic plays in their bill. The British Government recognised the impact of nationalistic propaganda through dramas and in an effort to counter it through the same medium, engaged *M. K. Thyagaraja Bāghavathar* to stage plays in support of the war and collect money for war effort; *Bāghavathar* staged a number of dramas ignoring protests from *Sathyamurthy*.³⁹

The handling of social and political themes on the stage had an incidental salutary effect on the quality of plays. So long, though what was staged by these companies, went by the name 'drama', they lacked dramatic merit and were not very theatrical in performances. The principles of legitimate theatre, which the amateur clubs tried to popularise, did not have any appreciable impact on company dramas. Mostly well-known stories from the mythologies and legends were staged and therefore, there was no emphasis on story. Songs, often without any relevance to the plot structure, dominated the play and the only qualification for an actor, was the ability to sing. The most popular character of the drama was the clown who indulged in lot of ribaldry. Stage-craft and costumes were not given due regard and there was little respect for sequence; a 'dead' king would come to life and render one of his special songs when the audience clamoured for it.⁴⁰ With the arrival of 'social' dramas, this pattern began to slowly change and acting and dialogue began to acquire importance.

Gradually, the involvement of popular theatre in the cause of nationalism began to widen in scope. After years of campaign from the stage, the artistes began to take part in direct political activity off-the stage, thereby demonstrating their commitment to the cause they were supporting through their dramas and lent their popularity as performing artistes to the cause of freedom movement. In *Madurai B. Sārangam* and other artistes formed *Tamilnādu Nāṭikar Sangam* (Tamilnadu Actors Association) in 1928 with the aim of channelising the political involvement of the artistes properly and sponsored the members as volunteers for picketing and other such demonstrations. The artistes continued to receive encouragement from leaders; Jawaharlal Nehru and Rajaji visited the association during their tours in that area and appreciated their work. Kamaraj presided over a performance of *DECA BAKTI* by T. K. S. brothers in *Dindigul* in 1937. The association arranged benefit performances to raise money for Gandhi's Harijan Fund and for Quetta earthquake relief fund.⁴¹

K. B. Sundarāmbāl came into the movement in 1927, at the height of her popularity as a stage-actress, as a singing campaigner. She, along with her husband, *S. G. Kīṭṭappā*, one of the brightest luminaries of the stage, raised the quality of music in commercial drama. *Madurai Karuppaiya Vāthiyar's* nationalistic songs, set in classical music, were rendered with great impact by *Sundarāmbāl*. During the 1935 elections, *Sundarāmbāl* toured the province along with *Sathyamurthy*, campaigning for congress. From the same, she would sing stirring nationalistic songs and *Sathyamurthy* would appeal to the voters through his powerful speech. This combination had a powerful impact and a gramophone record, with *Sundarāmbāl's* songs and *Sathyamurthy's* speech,⁴² was also released as a part of election propaganda. *Kīṭṭappā*, though did not engage himself in any campaign directly, was an avowed sympathiser of Congress, always wore a Gandhi-cap, a symbol of nationalism and dressed only in *Katar*. His dramas always ended with Gandhi's prayer song *Raghupathi Raghava Rajaram*. During Non-Co-operation movement, the couple staged *VALLITHIRUMANAM* in Madras for the benefit of the women's wing of freedom fighters.⁴³ Actor *M. V. Mani* toured along with Rajaji, singing from the same platform. Number of actors took part in the agitations following the Civil Disobedience movement. *B. A. Subbaiya Pillai*, and actress *M. R. Santhānalakshmi* picketed toddy shops in Madurai in 1931 and courted arrest.⁴⁴ Famous music maestro of the stage *S. V. Subbaiya Bāghavathar* was a volunteer in the Salt Sathyagraha at *Vālaṅkulam* in *Coimbatore* and was imprisoned.⁴⁵ *Mannārgudi Nataraja Pillai* took part in *Vēdāranyam* salt agitation and was in jail for an year.^{45a} (Later he became a congress councillor in *Mannārgudi Municipality* and served one term) *M. R. Kamalavēṇi*, a *piṅ-pāṭṭu* artiste, took part in the 'Quit India' movement and was arrested in Erode while singing in a drama, in 1942. She was in prison for six months, taking along her two infant children with her.⁴⁶

S. S. Viswaṅātha Dās carried on his relentless freedom campaign storming the audience all over Tamilnadu with his messages and whipping up patriotic feelings. Local congress units sponsored his concerts. He was marked by the police as 'the man who has the reputation of singing seditious songs' and harassed him wherever he went. *Viswaṅātha* persisted in his style and many of his performances had ended in riots. Undaunted he would sing.

போலீஸ் புலிகள் கூட்டம்

நம்மேல் போட்டு வருது கண்ணோட்டம்

இன்னும் நாம் அதற்கு அஞ்சோம்—அஞ்சி

நம்மை மன்னியுங்கள் என்று நாய் போல் கெஞ்சோம்.

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Officially also he served the congress, as a member of *Tirumangalam Congress committee* and as a representative of congress in *Madurai*

District Board. He kept up the momentum of his campaign till he died while singing on the stage itself, in 1940.

As the leading figures of the stage took part in political agitations and courted arrest, one after the other, drama artistes as a class lent their full weight to the cause of freedom struggle. The audience on their part also greatly encouraged this trend. Every drama had to have political flavour, at least a few nationalistic songs by the *pin-pāṭṭu* artistes, to make the grade among the play-goers. Even companies which had been playing only religious dramas, began to show change. Such was *Devi Bala Vinodha Sangitha Sabha* of Nawab T. S. Rājamāṅikkam. Covai A. Ayyamuthu, a writer doing pioneering work in organising swadeshi movement in Coimbatore area, came into contact with this troupe and had his brush with play-writing by producing *INBĀSAKARAM* which was staged by the Nawab's company at *Ponnamarāvathi* in 1936. The play, a historical set in Ceylon, preached self-rule and employed symbols like *charka*. It proved to be a durable drama and was staged 500 times in various towns, till 1939.⁴⁸ Throughout the nineteen thirties, almost all the drama companies were oriented towards nationalistic work.

In the late thirties, the appearance of Tamil 'talkie' affected the drama companies adversely. Drama houses were converted into cinema houses and the popular stage began to languish. This trend was reversed a while when the war broke out and the production of Tamil films dropped to an all time low. There was a revival in the stage. Tamil language itself was undergoing a change, with an emphasize on pure, literary style. A conference on drama, in which playwrights, actors and song-writers took part, was organised at Erode in 1944 and it considered the pre-occupation of the popular theatre with mythologicals and musicals as a sign of decadence. Steps to infuse new vigour into the stage were discussed.⁴⁹ The dramas, so far, were mainly with a view to exploit the histrionic talents of the artistes to the maximum and were not in the realm of literature. The new emphasize on the language acted as a link between the stage and literature and dramas written for the stage came to be widely read also. Symptomatic of this trend was *KAVIYIN KANAVU* (The Poet's Dream) of S. D. Sundaram, a young nationalist who was imprisoned during 'quit India' movement in 1942 wrote this play while in jail, telling the story of a poet who dreams of and realises his country's liberation. The play was staged at Nagapattinam in 1944 by *Sakthi Nāṭaka Sabha*, and the play ran for months to packed houses. The evening train for Nagapattinam from Thanjavur, which carried the playgoers, was referred to as 'Kaviyin Kanavu's express.' The same company staged another nationalistic play, *JEEVAN*.

After the end of the war, production of Tamil films once again picked up and the popular theatre could not hold its ground in the face of the

waves of films. Numerous cinema houses were built as cinema emerged as an entertainment colossus, completely eclipsing the drama and one after the other, the drama companies had to fold up. There was a frantic exodus into the glittering world of cinema, where many artistes found their niche.⁵⁰ Few well established companies continued to function, but nationalism as a subject for drama gradually disappeared as Independence came into view. When a particular issue is no longer a subject of conflict, it ceases to be reflected in the popular theatre. Also a problem, be it social or political, which has been solved or for which a solution is at hand, will be too dull a subject for the stage. Out of Self-respect movement, a fresh crop of play-wrights who were eager to use the stage to put their ideas across, emerged. It began with *Bharathidāsan's* *IRANIYAN* or *INAIYARRA VEERAN* and C. N. Annadurai's *CHANDRODAYAM*. A different phase had begun.

NOTES

¹ Quoted from Richard Findlater's *Banned: A Review of Theatrical Censorship in Britain*, (London 1967) p. 27.

² *M. Rajamanikkanar, Tamilaka Kalai-kaḷ*, (Madras 1959) p. 93.

³ *Mayilai Seeni Venkatasamy, Tamilar Valartta Alaku Kalaikaḷ*, (Madras 1956) p. 149-170.

⁴ John Russel (Ed.) *The Drama and the Theatre*, (London 1971) p. 150.

⁵ K. Sarangapani, *Cila Niyaivukaḷ, Naṭikaṅ Kural*, Madras, July 1957.

⁶ M. M. Chidambaranathan, *Nāṭakap-periyārkaḷ, Naṭikaṅ Kural* Sep. 1965.

⁷ N. Subramanyam, *Paritimal Kalai-ñarum Nāṭaka Tamilum, Paritimal Kalaignar Centenary Souvenir*, Madurai, 1972.

⁸ T. K. Shanmugam, *Nāṭakak Kalai*, (Madras 1965) p. 37.

⁹ Interview with K. Sarangapani, on 24-3-1975, Madras.

¹⁰ Interview with Narasimha Bharathi, 26-4-1975, Madras. 'Special' dramas are still staged, particularly in the southern part of Tamilnadu.

¹¹ B. S. Baliga, *Madras in the Struggle for Independence* (Madras 1957) p. 8.

¹² S. Natarajan, *A Century of Social Reform in India* (New Delhi 1959) *passim*

¹³ Surinder Puri, 'The Media Revolution' (cyclostyled). A paper read at the seminar on *Media and Politics* in May 1974 at the Ecumenical Christian Centre, Bangalore.

¹⁴ J. S. R. Goodlad, *A. Sociology of Popular Drama*, (London 1971) p. 178-179.

¹⁵ S. Sathyamurthy, *Sathyamurthy Pēcukirār*, (Madras 1945) p. 156-174.

¹⁶ M. M. Chidambaranathan, *Viṭṭalali Porāṭṭattil Kalaiñarkaḷ*, *Naṭikaṅ Kural*, Aug. 1957.

¹⁷ Proceedings of the Madras Legislative Council, Vol. XVII, Madras 1924. p. 231.

¹⁸ There is an inherent difficulty in the study of popular theatre which limits the scope of any research work of this kind. The performances cannot be preserved for study, unlike films which can be safely put away in the archives. Therefore, I had to rely heavily on interviews with play wrights and artistes who took leading part in involving the stage with the struggle for freedom. The scripts of the dramas had served only as a basic frame for improvisation during a dramatic performance and therefore, even if available, could not be relied upon.

¹⁹ 'There is khadar flag ship—
Mohandas Karam Chand Gandhi—
The flag ship of India'

M. M. Chidambaranathan, op. cit. Note 6.
²⁰ Interview with T. K. Bhagavathi, 30-12-1974, Madras. Bhagavathi is one of the T. K. S. Brothers and has acted in all their dramas in leading roles.

²¹ Interview with Ku. Sa. Krishnamurthy, 20-2-1975, Madras. Krishnamurthy, a well-known playwright and a poet, was associated with S. S. Viswanatha Das, K. S. Ananthanarayanan and other nationalistic artistes

²² 'Like untouchables

We have been living afar—since
your arrival, we are courageous
So, please listen to our plea'

G. O. 1050 Public (G) 10-10-1931.

²³ Interview with Udumalai Narayana Kavi, 4-6-1975, Poolavadi (Coimbatore)

²⁴ M. M. Chidambaranathan, 'op. cit. Note No. 16.

²⁵ 'Along with C. R. Das, Lala Lajpath and the noble Ali brothers were jailed on charges of improper speeches. And for the

cause of Non-co-operation tens of thousands of our friends are pining in prison'. G. O. 959-959 Public (Gen) 11-7-1932.

²⁶ N. Gerald Barrier, *Banned: Controversial Literature and Political Control in British India. 1907-1947.* (Columbia, U. S. 1974). p. 270.

²⁷ Pammal Sambanda Mudaliyar, *Nāṭaka Tamil*, (Madras 1933)

²⁸ Interview with Vengalathur Saminatha Sarma, 25-2-1975, Madras.

²⁹ 'From somewhere you have come here to stay and exploit India—go away, you brids to your native land, go away'.

The story of Valli, consort of *Murugan*, was one of the most popular themes on the stage.

Ma. Po. Sivagnanam, *Viṭṭalaipporil Tamil Valarnta Varalāru*, (Madras 1970) p. 193.

³⁰ M. M. Chidambaranathan, op. cit. No. 16.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Classified Catalogue of Books Registered from 1921-1925* (Madras 1971) p. 223-226.

³³ Sarma, *Bāṇapurathu Veeran—Oru Nāṭakam* (Madras 1924).

³⁴ G. O. 64 Public 9-2-21.

³⁵ G. O. 1225 Home (Ms) 7-3-38.

^{35a} T.K. Shanmugam and brothers were earlier trained by *Pāvalar* and in 1925 they had started their own company.

³⁶ Interview with S. V. Sahasranamam

Madras, He played Valisan in *Dēca Bakti* when he was in TKS troupe.

³⁷ T. K. Shanmugam, *Enatu Nāṭaka Niṇaiyukal*, (Madras 1973) p. 158.

³⁸ G. O. 250 Public 1-2-36.

³⁹ 'M. K. T. Bhagavathar Kathai', *Dinamani Kadir*, Madras 11-7-1969.

⁴⁰ S. Y. Krishnaswamy, 'The drama in Three tenses—A survey of the Tamil Stage', *The Hindu*, Madras, 31-1-1971.

⁴¹ M. M. Chidambaranathan, *Madurai mutal Cheṇṇai varai, Nāṭikaṅ Kural*, Madras Sep. 1965.

⁴² Interview with K. B. Sundarambal, 9-4-75, Madras. She continued to campaign for congress, during elections, till 1967. In 1958, she was nominated as a member of the Madras Legislative Council.

⁴³ S. Ambujammal, *Nān Kaṇṇa Bhāram*, Madras 1973) p. 158.

⁴⁴ *Kuṇṭici*, Madras. Nov. 1952.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* Madras. Feb. 1949.

⁴⁶ M. M. Chidambaranathan, op. cit. No. 16.

⁴⁷ G. O. 1050 Public (G) 10-10-1931.

⁴⁸ Interview with Kovai A. Ayyamuthu, 21-10-1974 Singarampalayam (Coimbatore)

⁴⁹ *Tamil Nāṭakak Kalai Abiviruti Mahānāṭu*, (Erode 1944)

⁵⁰ Almost all the leading actors and a many of the directors of the present day Tamil cinema, are from the drama companies including M. G. Ramachandran, Shivaji Ganesan, M. R. Radha, S. V. Sahasranamam, A. P. Nagarajan and K. S. Gopalakrishnan.