

Kuravañci Nāṭya Nāṭakam: A Study of Its Dance Heritage, Decline, and Revival



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Abstract

Kuravañci, originating from the kuriñci region of Tamil Nadu, represents the indigenous Tamil gypsy woman. Portrayed as beautiful, wise, and skilled fortune tellers, they excel in reading faces, bodies, and palms for rewards. They are referred to as kaṭṭuvicci, showcasing their cultural importance and societal role. During the Sangam age, these women actively participated in social, cultural, and literary endeavors, leaving a lasting impact on Tamil literature. Kuravañci Dance Drama centering the Kuravañci, originally a temple art, gained prominence in the later centuries. Kuravañci integrates all elements of dance and music. This was performed in temples during rituals and festivals. Kuravañci faced decline due to legislative changes but experienced a renaissance thanks to the efforts of cultural enthusiasts like Rasigamani. T.K. Chidambaranadha Mudaliar and Smt. Rukmani Devi Arundale. Their endeavors led to the staging of Kuravañci in public theaters, marking its transition into mainstream performing arts. Over time, Kuravañci became a staple of cultural festivals, college events, and Sabhas, symbolizing the resilience and adaptability of traditional art forms. Its inclusion in academic curricula further underscores its cultural significance. Today, Kuravañci Nāṭṭiya Nāṭakams are celebrated globally by Bharathanatyam dancers, embodying the enduring legacy and universal appeal of this ancient art form.

Keywords : Kuram, Kuravañci, Kuravañci Nāṭya Nāṭakam, Kalashetra, Dance Drama

Research Paper

Introduction

Kuravañci refers to the indigenous Tamil gypsy woman from the kuriñci, the mountain region of Tamil Nadu. These women are portrayed as beautiful, wise, and skilled fortune tellers, adept at reading faces, bodies, and palms to gain rewards. Tolkāppiyam, the oldest extant Tamil grammar, refers to these women as kaṭṭuvicci, highlighting their cultural significance and role in society. During the Sangam age, these communal women not only played a part in social and cultural activities but also made significant contributions to Tamil literature (Arunachalam 4).

In the Tamil epic Cilappatikāram, the Kuravañci is referred to as “Tēvarāṭṭi”, a woman possessed by the Holy Spirit, who performs dances with intricate hand

gestures and abhinaya, perfectly in sync with the tala, the rhythmic cycle. This depiction underscores her spiritual and cultural importance, as well as her artistic prowess (Mohan 37). Additionally, the Periyapuram, a medieval Tamil text, mentions these women and their recital of musical songs, further emphasizing their contributions to the arts.

The role of the Kuravañci extends into the realm of love and marriage, where her fortune-telling skills are used to reassure the heroine about the hero's imminent arrival for marriage. This narrative function illustrates her influence in guiding and shaping personal destinies within the community. Over time, the art of the Kuratti's (gypsy woman's) fortune-telling evolved into a distinct tradition, influencing Tamil literature, music, and dance.

This evolution underscores the deep-seated cultural heritage and the dynamic role of the Kuravañci in the Tamil region, reflecting a blend of spiritual, artistic, and social elements (Premalatha 13).

Methodology

This research employs a descriptive and analytical methodology to study the revival and transformation of Kuravañci Nāṭya Nāṭakam. Initially, the historical context and sociopolitical factors leading to the decline of traditional performances post-Devadasi Abolition Act are described through archival research and examination of historical records from texts. The efforts of Rasigamani. T.K. Chidambaranatha Mudaliar and Smt. Rukmini Devi Arundale is documented to illustrate the revival process. The analytical phase evaluates the adaptation strategies for transitioning Kuravañci from temple rituals to public theatre, focusing on the 1944 public staging. The impact on modern audience engagement and cultural significance is critically assessed through a review of contemporary performance references.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To explore the origin and evolution of Kuravañci from the Sangam period to the 19th century.
2. To understand the significance of Kuravañci Nāṭya Nāṭakam in temples, encompassing its contributions to literature, music, and dance drama.
3. To examine the decline of dance drama presentations following the Devadasi Abolition Act.
4. To analyze the revival of Kuravañci dance drama by Tamil scholars, enthusiasts, dancers, and institutions, recognizing its rich tradition of music, literature, and dance.
5. To study the adaptation of Kuravañci to other religious concepts.

Review of Literature

Arunachalam, Mu. (1980), in the preface of Kuravañci, a collection of four Kuravañci dance drama texts published by the Tamilnadu Government, explains the origin, evolution, and development of the Kuravañci dance dramas. Kulendran, G. (2007), in her work Kuravañci nāṭṭiyap pāṭṭicai, provides a comprehensive analysis of the Kuravañci dance drama as a traditional art

form. This study, published by Tamil University, delves into the stylistic and thematic elements of Kuravañci, examining its role within the cultural and ritualistic practices of Tamil Nadu. This work is also instrumental in understanding the traditional frameworks and roles of Kuravañci performers. Meduri, A. (2005), in her work Rukmini Devi Arundale (1904-1986): A Visionary Architect of Indian Culture and the Performing Arts, published by Motilal Banarsidass, provides an in-depth biography of Rukmini Devi Arundale, whose efforts were pivotal in reviving classical Indian dance forms, including Kuravañci Nāṭya Nāṭakams. Kurālak Kuravañci, Tiyākēcar Kuravañci, Sarapēntira Būpāla Kuravañci published by Tanjore Saraswati Mahal helps to understand studying the musical and dance aspects of the Kuravañci Nāṭya Nāṭakams.

Kuravañci Literature

Originating from the feature kuṛam in Kalambakam poems, which were brief verses, Kuravañci evolved into an elaborate composition with multiple verses. The literary works of Kuravañci have transitioned into dance forms through the evolution of Kuravañ and Kuratti Pāṭṭu (Gunasekaran 87). This Kuravañci is a fusion of rich literature, music, and dance drama. These poetic compositions vividly portray the natural splendor of native mountain landscapes, flora, fauna, waterfalls, and prosperity, conveyed through enchanting musical verses. Vellai Pillaiyār Kuravañci stands as the earliest Kuravañci Nāṭakam, believed to have been composed during the reign of Vijaya Raghava, the last Nayak king, in the 17th century CE. Kuravañci is considered the foremodel for the musical discourse of the later period (Sundaram 31). Presently, there are more than 100 Kuravañci texts available especially adaptable for dance performance (Chokkalingam viii).

In addition to stories involving Hindu gods and noble men, Kuravañci narratives also explore diverse themes such as Saiva saint Kannappa Nayanar, the Karumari female deity Kuruṣṇa Māri Kuravañci, Christian themes like Petlakēm Kuravañci on Jesus by Tanjore. Veda Nayaga Sastri, Nānarattināṅ Kuravañci on Islamic themes by Beer Mohammed Sahib, and philosophical concepts in Meyñāṅ Kuravañci (Mohan 190).

Structure of Kuravañci Nāṭya Nāṭakam

Kuravañci is a distinctive form of dramatic poem or opera where dance, music, and drama share equal prominence. This poem primarily narrates the tale of a love-sick damsel whose hand is read by a Kurathi,



promising her that the Lord or hero will reciprocate her love. The narrative centers around five main characters: the heroine, her maid, the Kurathi, her husband, and his friend, with the heroine and Kurathi as the focal characters (Arunachalam 1).

In Kuravañci, the hero, who may be the presiding deity of the local temple or a king, is introduced in an elaborate procession. The heroine, captivated by the hero, encounters him while playing with her friends in the street. Her friends and attendants then adorn her with exquisite costumes, jewels, and fragrant flowers. The heroine expresses her love to the moon, Cupid, and her friends, who in turn console her. Eventually, she requests one of her friends to approach the hero and convey her feelings on her behalf. She confides in her maid, who then brings the Kurathi to read her hand and console her. The Kurathi appears on the scene, singing praises of her native place, describing its mountains, rivers, her community, and her occupation of foretelling. After performing prayers and rituals, she reads the heroine's palm and observes body symptoms (Meduri). The Kurathi then foretells that the heroine will marry the hero she fell in love with during the procession. Feeling elated, the heroine rewards the Kurathi with jewels and rich prizes for her predictions. The conversation between the heroine and the Kurathi forms an engaging part of the drama.

Meanwhile, the Kurava, her husband, often called Singan, searches for his wife with his friend Kuluva after gathering wild birds. Upon finding her adorned with the jewels she received for her fortune telling, they have a brief conflict followed by a reconciliation. The couple engages in a charming dialogue and returns home contentedly (Premalatha 12).

The themes of Kuḷuva Nāṭakam and Kuṛatti Nāṭakam were combined to create the Tamil Prabanda poetic form known as Kuravañci. This dance drama, a fusion of the two nāṭakams, was written by great scholars to be performed in temples (Arunachalam 2).

Kuravañci in Temple and palace

Devaradiyars, the temple dancers skilled in music and dance, performed Kuravañci nāṭakams during festivals. In Thiruvarur, during the Paṅkuṇi festival in the Tamil month of Panguni, they enacted Tiyākēcar Kuravañci for three continuous days at the Tēvācīriya Maṅṭapam near the East tower of the Thiruvarur Thiyagaraja temple. During the Chittrai festival at the Tanjore temple, Sarapēntira Būpāla Kuravañci was performed

annually in the early 19th century during the Maratha period. The stage for these performances was referred to as the “Kuravañci mēṭai”. Kuravañci Nāṭakams adorned the palace with their performances during the Bhosale kings' family weddings, special occasions, and the festival puja celebrations of Chandra Mouliswarar, the presiding deity of the Tanjore palace (Ayyar 3).



Figure 1. Sarabhendra Bhupālā Kuravañji Nāṭakam at Tanjore Big Temple. By Jiteendra Hirschfeld. Sadir Dance Art, 15 July 2005. Pinterest, <https://pin.it/19ErpmngL>.

Decline of Kuravañci

The Madras Devadasi Act, implemented in the early 20th century, made it illegal to dedicate girls to Hindu temples, effectively ending the Devadasi tradition, with the ban of Devaradiyar in Temple. This legislation aimed to address the exploitation and social issues against women. As a result dance performances, integral to temple festivals and cultural rituals, were discontinued. Kuravañci dance drama performances, known for their elaborate combination of dance, music, and drama, ceased along with the regular dancing rituals in temples. Temples such as Thiruvarur, Thanjavur, Kumbakonam, and Thirukkuttralam, renowned for their Kuravañchi enactments, saw the decline of these traditions, impacting the cultural landscape and the livelihoods of those involved in these performances (Kulendran 18).

Revival of kuravañci

Tamil scholar Rasigamani T.K. Chidambaranatha Mudaliar played a pivotal role in encouraging Smt. Rukmini Devi Arundale, the founder of Kalakshetra, to introduce and perform the Kuravañci dance drama.

Captivated by the poetry and language nuances of Kurṛālak Kuravañci by Tirikūṭa Rācappa Kavirāyar, she was inspired to stage the traditional Nāṭṭiya nāṭakams. The musical poetry deeply impressed her, leading to her decision to incorporate the Kuravañci literature, with its dual plot allowing for both classical and folk music and dance elements, into her performances. Smt. Rukmini Devi Arundale envisioned presenting the Kuravañci Nāṭakam as a performing art form for the public stage (Shanmuga Sundaram 168). Despite the absence of practitioners or references, she diligently traditionally choreographed the production.

Veenai. Krishnamachari, brother of Tiger. Varadhachari, meticulously crafted music for the Kuravañci Nāṭakam by integrating Carnatic ragas that complemented the poetry and suited the characters and scenes. The dance sequences were choreographed under the guidance of Natyamani. Karaikal Saradhambal, a hereditary dancer, blending both classical and folk styles seamlessly into the performance (Kulendran 25).

In 1944, Smt. Rukmani Devi Arundale made history by presenting the Kuravañci dance drama on a public stage for the first time under the name of Kurṛālak Kuravañci Nāṭṭiya Nāṭakam. Assuming the role of Vasanthavalli, the heroine of Kurṛālak Kuravañci, she was accompanied by her disciples who portrayed other characters in the production (Meduri 163).

Kuravañci Presentations in the 21st Century

The successful response to Smt. Rukmini Devi Arundale's presentation of Kurṛālak Kuravañci Nāṭṭiya Nāṭakam in 1944, many Kuravañci Nāṭṭiya Nāṭakams were choreographed for dance. Dance gurus and artists curated and staged these performances on special occasions and at Pan Research conferences conducted by the Chennai Tamil Isai Sangam.

- In 1956, Tanjore Kittapapillai and Muthiapillai presented Sarapēntira Būpāla Kuravañci at the Tamilisai festival at Chennai.
- In 1958, the Madurai Gandhi Rama gana team staged Virālimalai Kuravañci.
- In 1961, "Aḷakar Kuravañci Nāṭṭiya Nāṭakam" was staged under the leadership of Professor P. Sambamoorthi. It was also presented at the Pan Research Conference in 1967
- In 1970, Aḷakar Kuravañci was performed by Mrs. Kamala, and Tirumalai Āṇṭavan Kuravañci was presented by Natya Perarignar Guru. Shri. Vazhavor Ramiyapillai at the Tamilisai festival in Chennai.

- In 1972, at the Tamilisai festival in Chennai, Tirucceñkōṭu Arttanārisvarar Kuravañci was showcased by Nrithyodhaya, Director Selvi. Padma Subramaniam.
- In 1973 Varuṇāpurik kuravañci staged by Adayar Latchumanan.
- Cikkal navañitēsvarar kuravañci staged by Professor. K.N. Pakkirisami pillai.
- In 1962, Kaṇṇappar kuravañci in praise of Saiva saint Kannappa Nayanar performed by the Kalakshetra team.
- In 1971, Kuruṣṇa māri kuravañci on the praise of the female deity, Devi Karumari Amman was performed by the Kalakshetra team.

Kuravañci Nāṭṭiya Nāṭakams have become increasingly popular for performances at cultural festivals, colleges, and theaters on public stages (Kulendran 26).

Conclusion

The journey of Kuravañci Nāṭṭiya Nāṭakam reflects the resilience and adaptability of traditional art forms in the face of cultural shifts. From its origins in temple performances to its revival on public stages, Kuravañci has not only persevered but also flourished through the dedication of scholars, artists, and cultural enthusiasts. The evolution and resurgence of Kuravañci Nāṭṭiya Nāṭakam showcase a remarkable journey of cultural preservation and adaptation. Originally performed exclusively in temples, these traditional dance dramas faced decline with the implementation of the Devadasi Abolition Act. However, through the efforts of individuals like Rasigamani T.K. Chidambaranadha Mudaliar and Smt. Rukmani Devi Arundale in 1944, Kuravañci Nāṭṭiya Nāṭakams found new life on public stages, inspiring dancers to perform at cultural festivals, college functions, and Sabhas. The efforts to preserve and promote Kuravañci have not only ensured its survival but have also expanded its reach, making it a vibrant and integral part of global performing arts. The introduction of Kuravañci into academic curricula, such as its inclusion in the MFA (Bharathanatyam) degree program syllabus in Institutions for the choreography of Dance Drama, further solidifies its significance in the realm of performing arts. Today, Kuravañci Nāṭṭiya Nāṭakam is celebrated not only in India but also around the globe, as Bharathanatyam dancers continue to captivate audiences with their performances, keeping this rich tradition alive for generations to come.



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