



OVERVIEW OF DARU IN TAMIL TRADITIONAL FOLK THEATRE – THERUKKUTTU

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Abstract: Therukkuttu, also known as Kattaikkuttu or Koothu, is an indigenous folk theatre tradition from Tamil Nadu that masterfully combines elements of drama, music, dance, and ritual in a unique performance spectacle. Rooted deeply in rural culture, its narratives primarily take inspiration from Tamil adaptations of the Mahabharata, dramatising epic tales for village audiences through an engaging blend of storytelling and performance arts. Central to the vibrancy and narrative flow of Therukkuttu is the concept of Daru—a segment that interweaves dialogue, song, and dance to create a dynamic and interactive dramatic thread.

This study aims to explore and analyse the concept and usage of Daru within Therukkuttu performances. This research aims to elucidate the structural and performative significance of Daru by investigating how it operates as a narrative and musical device. Special attention is given to the role of Daru in seamlessly connecting spoken word, musical interludes, and choreographed movements, thereby enhancing dramatic expression and audience engagement. This study also examines how Daru functions to bridge emotional transitions and intensify the theatrical experience, establishing a cohesive link between the various performative elements. Through detailed analysis, this research hopes to highlight the integral part Daru plays in both the aesthetic and cultural fabric of Therukkuttu.

IndexTerms - Terukkuttu, Kataikkuttu, daru

I. INTRODUCTION

Tamil traditional folk theatre serves as a powerful reflection of the region's cultural heritage, religious vitality, and social unity. It remains a living tradition that has endured through centuries, deeply embedded in the daily life, festivals, and collective consciousness of the Tamil people. This vibrant art form combines oral storytelling, music, dance, and drama, transforming community spaces into platforms for entertainment, spiritual expression, and social dialogue.

II. HISTORICAL CONTENT

Therukoothu, also known as Kattaikkuttu or Koothu, is a folk theatre form from Tamil Nadu that combines drama, music, dance, and ritual elements. It is thought to have developed from ancient Dravidian performance traditions, which also gave rise to other classical and folk theatre forms, such as Kathakali, Yakshagana, Theyyam, and Mudi yettu. References in the Tamil epic Silappatikaram from the Sangam era mention eleven types of theatre, believed to be linked to these early performance practices.

In ancient Tamil theatre, performances were classified into two main types: 'Pothuviyar Kuthu', presented for the general public, and 'Vethiyar Kuthu', staged for royalty and aristocrats.

During the Chola period, often regarded as the golden age of arts, Therukoothu gained prominence and became an integral part of temple festivals, receiving financial support for its performances. The narratives of Therukoothu were primarily drawn from the Mahabharata and regional legends, though stories from the Ramayana were also occasionally enacted.

III. THE PERFORMANCE

In the early period, the term 'Kuthu' referred to all forms of dance and movement, but over time, it came to signify a dramatic performance enacted by actors. Traditionally, performances take place in the streets near temples, though temple courtyards, fields, or any open communal space may also serve as venues. The audience sits on three sides of a rectangular stage, while musicians and the chorus (Pinpattukarar) occupy the rear, and actors perform at the front, addressing one another and the spectators.

In southern Tamil Nadu, performances begin at a slower tempo and gradually build in intensity, whereas the northern style starts at a faster pace. In the southern tradition, the play opens with the entry of Lord Ganesha (Vinayaka), followed by the Guru's ritual worship (pooja)—a feature usually absent in the northern form. The Guru then steps onto the stage to introduce the story of the day, while in the northern version, this role is taken by the Kattiyakaran (Sutradhari).

Before the main characters appear, music and introductory songs set the tone. The story is conveyed first through song, then dialogue, and again through song and dance, moving from slower to faster rhythms—often repeating the message several times to enhance its emotional and aesthetic impact. Therukoothu thus represents a fusion of music, song, dance, and drama, much like other Indian theatrical traditions. The performers wear vibrant costumes and ornate wooden ornaments (*bujai kattai*), adding grandeur and visual appeal to the performance, which is occasionally enacted.

IV. PARALLELS BETWEEN THE NĀṬYAŚĀSTRA AND KATTAIKKŪTTU PRELIMINARIES

The Nāṭyaśāstra, attributed to Bharata (150–350 CE), is the earliest and most comprehensive Indian treatise on dramaturgy. It details the *pūrvaraṅga*—a ritual consecration of the stage—and the *āmukha* or *prastāvanā*, the formal introduction to the play. Scholars such as F.B.J. Kuiper interpret the *pūrvaraṅga* as a re-enactment of Indra's cosmic victory, transforming the performance space into a sacred arena through music and ritual.

Although Kattaikkūttu, the Tamil folk theatre, developed outside the Sanskrit framework, notable structural parallels exist. Both traditions open with invocations and musical offerings intended to appease deities and remove obstacles. Each features a Sūtradhāra-like figure—the *Cūstiratāri*—who oversees both ritual and dramatic functions, and a comic *Vidūṣaka*-type character (*Vikatap* or *Kattiyakkāran*) who acts as herald and companion to the hero.

In both forms, preparatory rituals are divided between backstage and stage spaces. In Kattaikkūttu, a private *pūjā* to Gaṇeśa is performed in the dressing area to ward off evil influences, corresponding to the Nāṭyaśāstra's *nepathya* music, which is offered behind the curtain.

Conceptually, both traditions regard theatre as a sacred action. The Nāṭyaśāstra conceives performance as a visual *yajña* (sacrifice), and Kattaikkūttu artists similarly view their enactment as a devotional offering. The removal of footwear and other acts of ritual purity underline the shared belief that the stage is a consecrated space, where performance becomes a medium linking the human and the divine.

In this context, the ritual and musical preliminaries in both the Nāṭyaśāstra and Kattaikkūttu can be seen as early manifestations of the Daru tradition, where music, dialogue, and ritual blend seamlessly to consecrate the dramatic act and prepare both the performer and the audience for the spiritual essence of the performance.

V. THE PERFORMANCE FRAMEWORK OF KATTAIKKŪTTU

A Kattaikkūttu performance follows a structured framework comprising three main phases—the opening, the middle, and the closing—each with its own functional subdivisions.

Opening Phase:

The performance begins with the *Mēḷakkattu*, a musical prelude in which the accompanying musicians render the five principal *tālas* (rhythmic cycles) used in Kattaikkūttu: *āṭi*, *āṭa*, *rūpakam*, *tirupaṭai*, and *jampai*. This introduction is performed in *rāga Nāṭṭai*, a melodic mode known for its heroic quality and energetic mood. The *Mēḷakkattu*, set in a brisk tempo, not only marks the commencement of the performance but also captures the audience's attention, preparing them for the dramatic event.

Following this musical invocation are opening songs and verses addressed to deities. In the Perunkattur tradition, the initial song is dedicated to Vishnu, followed by *pāṭṭu* (also called *tāru*) and *viruttam*—two distinct poetic forms—composed in praise of Ganesha, Sarasvati (also known as *Kalaimakal*), and Murugan. These invocatory verses sanctify the performance space and seek divine blessings.

Middle Phase:

The dramatic segment commences with the entrance (*praveśam* or *tarpār*) of the *Kattiyakkāran* (the announcer or clown), who proclaims the title of the play, the name of the troupe, and delivers a brief introductory speech. The entry of the main characters follows this, typically the *kattai vesams*—heroes or mythic figures—who make their appearance through a curtain. These structured entrances punctuate the narrative and provide rhythm to the all-night performance.

Closing Phase:

The conclusion consists of a formal *vacanam* (speech) declaring the end of the play, followed by the *mangalam*, a benedictory song sung at the close of every Kattaikkūttu performance. This final segment offers blessings and marks the ritual and dramatic closure of the event.

Kattaikkūttu performances feature primary types of verses, including *pāṭṭu*, *viruttam*, and *kantārttam*. The term *pāṭṭu* (also referred to as *taru* or *daru*) is believed to have originated from the Sanskrit word *dhruva*, meaning "a stage song composed in a specific metre and tune" (Tamil Lexicon, Vol. 3:1767). Musicologist P. Sambamurthy defines *taru* as a "story song featured in dance dramas and operas" (South Indian Music, 1963, Vol. 3:217–218).

A *pāṭṭu* can contain multiple lines and is typically structured into *pallavi*, *anupallavi*, and *caranam*(s) sections. These songs are performed by the lead actor on stage, known as the *munnani*, and each line is usually echoed by the chorus (*pinnani* or *pinpāṭṭu*), comprising supporting actors who are not part of the ongoing scene.

Kattaikkūttu is dominated by music, encompassing various forms of musical introductions and interludes. These are usually performed alongside dance movements or other stage actions and can be broadly classified into two types:

1. Functional musical interludes – which illustrate dramatic action, identify a character, or provide a thematic frame; and
2. Transitional musical interludes – which fill temporal gaps, embellish, or connect episodes within the narrative.

An important example of the first category is the *Mēḷakkattu*, the musical prelude that marks the commencement of a performance. It establishes the identity of the play as Kattaikkūttu, announces its beginning, and creates an auspicious atmosphere. Other functional musical passages include:

For example, *Corkattu pāṭṭus* – rhythmic vocal compositions sung by the actor or chorus, often paired with short dance sequences, as performed by Mohini (in Arjuna's Penance), *Prahlāda* (in *Hiranya vilācam*) and Arjuna-as hermaphrodite (in *Slaying of Kīcaka*).

From a functional perspective, these musical and verbal components act as building blocks in live performance. They serve two major purposes:

1. Narrative Progression – by providing cues, linking scenes, introducing new themes or characters, and elaborating on narrative moments.
2. Performance Stability – by reinforcing the structural framework, offering comic or moral relief, engaging the audience, showcasing the actor's expressive skill, and giving performers time to prepare for the next dialogue or song through formulaic passages.

VI. DARU TRADITION IN THE MUSICAL STRUCTURE OF KATTAIKKUTTU

Kattaikkuttu, as a performance tradition, is inherently music-centric, characterised by a wide range of musical introductions and interludes that accompany dance movements and stage actions. These musical segments may be broadly categorised into two types:

1. Functional musical interludes, which serve to depict dramatic action, announce the entrance of characters, or establish the thematic context of a scene; and
2. Transitional musical interludes, which function to fill narrative pauses, enhance aesthetic appeal, or connect successive episodes within the performance.

A prominent instance of the first category is the Mēlakkattu. This introductory prelude marks the commencement of the play and defines its identity as a Kattaikkuttu performance, creating an auspicious and anticipatory atmosphere for the audience. Another example is the Corkattu pāttu, a rhythmic vocal composition performed either by the actor or chorus, often accompanied by short dance movements—as seen in portrayals of Mohini (Arjuna's Penance), Prahlāda (Hiranya Vilācam), and Arjuna as a hermaphrodite (Slaying of Kīcaka).

From a functional standpoint, these musical and verbal elements operate as essential building blocks in the construction of a live performance. They perform two fundamental roles:

1. Narrative Progression – by providing cues, transitions, and introductions that advance the storyline or elaborate on thematic content; and
2. Performance Stability – by maintaining the structural rhythm of the play, creating comic or moral interludes, sustaining audience engagement, and offering performers moments of transition through the use of formulaic musical passages.

This framework closely aligns with the Dhruva and Daru system outlined in Bharata's Nāṭyaśāstra, where distinct musical compositions or Dhruvas—such as: -

- Varnana Daru - Descriptive piece, explaining on the personality of the character, place, incident, scenery, etc.
- Samvada Daru - musical dialogue or conversation between two characters.
- Patra Pravesa Daru -Beholding the arrival of various characters.

VII. CONCLUSION

The musical and verbal elements of Therukkuttu reflect the structural and functional essence of the Daru tradition found in classical Indian theatre. Segments such as the Mēlakkattu, Pāttu, and Corkattu pāttu serve as dramatic and musical anchors, guiding the narrative flow and emotional expression, much like the Dhruvas of the Nāṭyaśāstra. Through its oral transmission, improvisational style, and integration of music, rhythm, and dialogue, Therukkuttu preserves the core principles of the Daru tradition while adapting them to the cultural, linguistic, and performative idioms of Tamil folk theatre.

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