

Performative Interventions in Tamil: A Reading of Dalit and Feminist Theatre

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Abstract

Theatre is a powerful medium to represent, critique, resist and subvert structures of oppression and institutionalised biases on grounds of gender and caste. This paper looks at plays performed in Tamil in the period covering 1995 to 2005 by dramatists and Directors who put forth feminist, revisionist theatre and Dalit liberationist theatre. The paper offers a critical analysis of the plays of activist dramatists and directors like Inquilab, Mangai, K. A. Gunasekaran. Looking at collaborative, community theatre that seeks to mirror forms of gender based and caste- based oppression and violence, the paper draws attention to content, form, deployment of songs, masks and other theatre resources to understand key features of interventions made by Feminist and Dalit theatre in Tamil. Their strategies to generate discussion in the community, initiate a dialogue between the oppressor and the oppressed, between the actors and the spectators are mapped in the paper.

Keywords: Marginalised, Interventions, Dalit, Feminist, Democratizing of theatre spaces, Theatre in Tamil.

Introduction

Performativity carries different signification to different communities within a shared political, geographical location. In a pluralistic, hierarchical society, difference is located as a rationale for the operation of an oppressive social structure. In the context of India, Dalit writers and activists contest the continued subjugation of Dalits in post-independence India and point out that decolonisation has been limited and selective. Dalits argue that Independence for India has not resulted in the dismantling of oppressive power structures in our society. Dalits continue to battle for freedom from casteist oppression and violent, social marginalization. Dalits continue to be allotted a secondary status within the country despite

Constitutional guarantees. Their rightful place as free citizens is seriously undermined by the prevailing social structure that is discriminatory and caste-driven.

Dalit autobiographies, poetry and fiction in Marathi initiated a liberationist movement in literature in the late 50s and early sixties that steadily spread to other Indian languages. Interrogating received ideas concerning literary, cultural and aesthetic paradigms and norms, Dalit writers seek to represent the silenced voices of their community and challenge the continued hegemony of upper castes in social and political corridors of power.

This paper examines the interrogation of cultural, political and performance space in contemporary India as undertaken by Dalit playwrights in Tamil. The emergence of Dalit publishing houses, revival of Dalit oral/performative arts, formation of Dalit theatre groups and staging of Dalit-centric plays since the late nineties in Tamil Nadu have invigorated theatre culture at large. Dalit theatre addresses issues of identity formation, power relations, contestation of caste hegemony in social, political and private domain. Dalit theatre challenges the valorisation of drama as a sacred text, (*Pancham Ved*) as a construct that upholds the *Varna Niti*, thereby marginalising Dalit participation in cultural space. Dalit playwrights initiate a democratization of performance dynamics by linking theatre to the struggles and aspirations of the marginalized. They employ theatre as a vehicle for communication, as an alternative platform for initiating a dialogue and interaction with the oppressor and empower and enable the oppressed to a critical awareness of their rights, to write and agitate for their rightful space in society. A simultaneous marshalling of the oppressed and the oppressor in the arena of performance space, leads to radical dialogue and subversive negotiation of social spaces and role-play between the contesting groups.

In Tamil Dalit theatre, political use of Dalit vocabulary, the interweaving of Dalit performative, traditional arts with contemporary concerns of the community, subversive use

of stage space, the choice of gendering of crucial stage traditions like the chorus, the Sutradhar and the radical re-ordering of the clown are some of the striking features. Its self-reflexive grappling with the presence of Dalit patriarchy within the community and its search for evolving an alternative theatre idiom are some of the aspects that this paper seeks to explore. The ideological affinity between Feminist theatre and Dalit theatre in Tamil would be briefly examined. The plays of K.A. Gunasekaran, *Inquilab* and *Mangai* would be discussed with a view to enquire into the performative quest for freedom from oppressive, discriminatory social structuring in contemporary India.

Mangai's plays and the theatre group Mounakkural founded by her have made significant interventions in Feminist theatre in Tamil. Mangai's use of open space, the market square, the village tea stall corner for the staging of plays, her deliberate presentation of a group or a team of actors instead of individual characters, her use of folk songs sung by women agricultural workers on the fields or songs celebrating puberty rites, laments and lullabies which intersperse scenes that are often presented as montage, as points of argument rather than as a sequential, conclusive movement recall Brechtian strategies that stand assimilated with indigenous, localized cultural tropes.

Mangai's plays seek to foreground women leaders forgotten or erased from historical accounts. For instance, the political career of Manaloor Maniyamma is retrieved in the play *Chuvadugal* (1994). Re-reading history from a feminist perspective, representing silenced or erased women achievers in public life are essential aspects of Mangai's theatre. Her plays seek to subvert traditional cultural tropes, offering a revisionist perspective on gaps and silences in history. Adopting a gynocritical approach towards women's position in the past, in mythology, in literature and in contemporary society, Mangai's plays offer a critique of patriarchal containment of women. Her plays offer a re-reading of "women's place in history and constructions of history from a woman's perspective" (Mangai 2003: 35).

In *Chuvadugal* (Footprints), Mangai draws our attention to Maniyamma's contribution to the communist, labour movements in Tanjavur district which worked for the rights of unorganized agricultural labourers. Maniyamma's early marriage to an older widower, her early widowhood, her participation in Gandhian and later socialist movements, her decision to cast aside a widow's traditional sartorial bonds, her decision to wear the male robes of Veshti, shirt and a towel in public life, her training in martial arts and cycling, her popularity among the masses and her marginalization within the party are depicted in the play. Despite the sequential narrative in this particular play, Mangai makes certain striking innovations. The different phases of Maniyamma's career are represented on stage by multiple actors playing the role of the protagonist to foreground the undocumented lives of women leaders, pioneers and public figures who are thus lost or forgotten. Mangai's attempt to recover such lives, re-construct received historical, literary accounts and re-present women's history and women's place in history, is a significant intervention in theatre history as well. Her plays offer a subtext to the critical common place that women's presence is insubstantial in theatre. Mangai's theatre troupe *Mounakkural* is largely women centric and relies upon women stage actors and their training in traditional folk arts, music, traditional martial arts and body-centric movements.

Mangai's use of songs in her play reinforces the links between folk music and theatre and her belief in going back to the “root and soil to energize stage craft” (Mangai 2003: 70). In another play *Pacha Mannu* dealing with female foeticide, some songs are taken from *villu pattu* a traditional Tamil performative art, an oral epic that combines music, performance and narrative by the main singer of the epic using a bow-like instrument played with two sticks. The lament of the pregnant wife who is pressurized by her husband to abort the foetus, is modelled upon the ritual lament *oppari* as performed by the character Gandhari in *Terukoothu*. Mangai thus traverses through history, mythology, folk forms and collaborative,

collated material from multiple sources. The collaborative aspect of her plays pertains to actors' participation in the evolution of the script as well as to short pieces (usually songs) written by other dramatists or poets. In *Paccha Mannu* the use of disembodied voices, some five to six of them to dramatize the prevailing attitudes towards the girl child or to depict the bargaining that facilitates a marriage alliance is an interesting intervention that ably rescues the play from the trap of a propagandist rhetoric. It effectively dramatizes the cultural conditioning of men and women, young and old who participate in the silencing of the girl child both before and after birth. The bargain scene at marriage combines humour and censure, colloquial and commercial advertisement discourse to indicate the commodification of women in our society. It also helps in implicating the family in perpetuating a gender bias. The tale of foeticide is presented as a *villupattu* and this helps in entering into a dialogue with a rural audience.

The most striking innovation in this play is the use of a vidushak-like character who intervenes periodically to push the actors ahead, interrogates characters on stage and interacts with the spectators urging them to intervene, decide or exercise choice on the subject under discussion. He uses humour, colloquial language and breaks out of his character to indicate he is an actor coordinating with the troupe. He is named aptly but simply as *Idaiyeedu*-- Intervention. Mangai's theatre is, thus unambiguously interventionist. She wants the spectators to turn into active participants and decision-makers.

Mangai's theatre is representative of Feminist theatre in Tamil as largely revisionist in nature. It seeks to recover women's history, foregrounding questions of sexuality or re-examining conventional tropes, stereotypes or myths relating to women or depiction of women in epics. In another play *Panithe* (Frozen Fire, 2002), Mangai presents the woman protagonist Ambai-Sikandi as a solo performer to examine formation of gender subjectivity in a patriarchal society. Drawing upon multiple versions of *The Mahabharatha*, the play deploys

folk narratives of the Bharatha tale popular in *Terukoothu*. While the *terukoothu* performances celebrate Bhishma's penance of celibacy, Mangai's play foregrounds the containment of woman's body in the person of Ambai-Sikandi and a woman's interrogation of masculinist presumptions regarding a woman's role within the institution of marriage, family and state. Mangai's feminist re-reading of Bhishma and Ambai posits difference as not inimical to affirming equality:

Even while being Equal, difference persists

In difference, yet, equality exists. (Mangai: 2003,89, tr. mine.)

While Feminist theatre functions as a radical, revisionist theatre that interrogates oppressive patriarchal structure, Dalit theatre problematises an unjust social structure in a gendered social space. In representing and challenging casteist oppression in particular, Dalit theatre differs from theatre of the oppressed people as practiced elsewhere. Arguing for a need to establish "a separate theatre" for Dalits, K.A. Gunasekaran outlines the chief features of Dalit theatre as a theatre with "commitment, clarity of thought and courage for action" (*JSL* Autumn 2006: 78-79). He argues for a theatre that facilitates interaction between the people and the stage, evolving a fluid structure drawing upon improvisation as an essential strategy. Dalit dramatists like Gunasekaran, Inquilab or Jeeva employ theatre as an enabling forum for the Dalit community, to posit "issues, strategies, agendas and plan of action", to help free Dalits from casteist hegemony (*JSL*: 2006,79, tr. mine.). Paratay looks at Dalit performative arts as "weapons of liberation, as tools of empowerment for Dalits" (*Kalagamozhi*, 2003: 135, tr. mine). Dalit theatre seeks to "instil a critical awakening among the spectators who are thereby motivated to participate in the liberation movement....to use theatre for the cause of Dalits...to raise subversive questions and adopt strategies of agitation" rather than encourage "passive reception" amongst the audience (*JSL*: 2006,81).

Inquilab's plays fuse Marxist, feminist thought to foreground the Dalit cause and the struggle for social justice. In *Kuralgal* (Voices, 1976), protesting voices echo the fermenting revolt among the student community against corrupt university administration. One of the student leaders points out, "this is not a struggle to negotiate for immediate demands alone. This is a struggle to transform the present social structure itself" (Inquilab 2003:29, tr.mine). When Periyanyakan exclaims, "The British were the aliens. They have left the land. Where is the need to agitate any further?"(Inquilab:2003, 15, tr. mine). Kumar points out that as long as there are dominant and suppressed classes, the struggle is bound to continue for "is it not one's duty to agitate for justice" (Inquilab:2003, 27,tr.mine). Inquilab's play *Meetchi* (Retrieval, 2003) extends this agitation for justice to include the struggle for an equal society, to question violations against the Dalits by the landed class, by the police and the state administration. In *Meetchi*, the Pannaaiyar boasts, "The government is mine, the courts are mine as well" (Inquilab: 95, tr. mine). The play is written in the backdrop of Keezhvenmani incident where Dalit hutments were burnt down and communist leaders were liquidated by the landlords. The landlords were subsequently acquitted by the courts on the ground that rich landlords are unlikely to kill farmers personally without hiring helpers to carryout the task. The play seeks to retrieve truths and buried silences embedded in the historical incident and presents survivors'testimony on the stage as their accounts were disregarded by the courts. Re-presenting truths, facilitating counter-interrogation by the public and foregrounding the caste-class intersectionality in the modes of oppression are the highlights of this play. Inquilab presents a young woman as the Sutradhar, the eternal witness who interacts with the audience, holding their passivity responsible for the atrocities unleashed on Dalits. "What have you stopped? What have you prevented? What did you agitate against? When we put on slippers, we were thrashed. When we carried a cloth on our shoulders we were bound andbeaten up. When we demanded to be seated at par at the tea stall, they threw us out of the

village. When we asked for our rightful dues, they urinated on our faces, poured excrement down our throats. When we demanded higher wages, they burnt us alive, burnt down our hutments Who was moved by our laments, by our screams...? "(Inquilab:2003, 73,tr.mine).

At this point, some of the spectators mount the stage, discuss recent incidents of violence against Dalits. The complicity of the state, the judiciary and institutionalized religion in supporting the oppressor is underlined. The woman then testifies on stage, re-presents the incident and at the end of the play the spectators join her in the torch-light procession signifying a collective struggle for justice and solidarity amongst the victims and spectators. The transforming of the spectator into actors, as agents of action is employed as an integral aspect of the performative dynamics of Dalit theatre. In *Tadi* (Stick, 2002) Chinnandi, a *vettiyan* by profession (a Dalit who cremates the dead) renounces his traditional occupation to subvert indignities, privations and discriminations that are directed at him on account of his occupation and caste. He asserts that it is not his *tadi*, a stick that completes the cremation rituals, but rather his anger against casteist structure that enables him to raise his stick against the dead to complete the funeral ritual of breaking open the skull of the corpse. Inquilab's play celebrates Dalits' refusal to carry out demeaning, socially discriminatory caste-determined occupations and valorizes their anger and the symbolic raising of the stick against the existing social order. The play juxtaposes prevailing casteist oppression of Dalits and their revolt against the system to a historical past that reveals an old woman's courageous defiance of a Prince who wanders into her hut on the outskirts of the village demanding hospitality and subservience. The clash of their respective sticks and the ultimate reckoning of the Prince of the rights of the old woman over her domain imaginatively dramatizes the likely course of liberation movement of Dalits in contemporary society, offering strategies and signs of hope for the long struggle ahead. The presence of a "Kattiyakkaran", an interventionist

commentator who bridges the two worlds-- historical and contemporary-- is an innovative handling of the persona of Kattiyakkaran, an essential fixture of *Terukoothu*. The play highlights the power equations prevailing in an unequal society. The violent destruction of castiest markers, the celebratory *Paraikoothu* and beating of the *Parai* to announce Chinnandi's decision are apt theatrical idiom for imaging Dalit anger and protest against oppression. *Paraikoothu* is a dance form accompanied by beating of the *Parai* drum, the traditional instrument associated with Paraiyars. The drum is used to announce deaths and is not allotted a dignified place among traditional musical instruments. Dalit activist and critic Paratay points out that "Dalit art forms have become Dalitised forms of art" and need to be recovered by the community to aid them in their fight for dignity (Kalagamozhi:2003, 135, tr. mine).

Both Inquilab and Gunasekaran use *Parai* in their plays to symbolize Dalit anger, to register their protest or make subversive use of it to image Dalit appropriation of sacred spaces and icons. For instance, in Gunasekaran's play *Pavalakkodi Alladu Kudumba Vazhaku* (Coral Creeper or Family Dispute: 2001), Lord Krishna is shown to make announcements of death by drumming on the *Parai*.

In *Pavalakkodi* Gunasekaran offers a feminist reading of Dalit women actors and troupe members who are exploited by theatre managers/husbands in their personal and professional spaces. Dalitfeminist theatre is a more radicalinterrogation of theatre troupes and received tradition than mainstream feminist theatre in terms of theatre idiom, stage craft and subversive content material. A theatre troupe performing a tale from the *Mahabharatha* provides an entry point to discuss the position of women in the epic world and that of the women artistes within the troupe. While donning larger than life characters on stage, the women actors face rigorous containment of their professional and sexual aspirations through the interweaving of the two domains, domestic and professional, the on-stage and back-stage

worlds. The women actors' dual exploitation, their sense of entrapment and their gradual gathering of courage to raise the banner of protest against their oppressor to affirm their dignity of self and profession is represented in this play. It depicts two levels of stage and the dynamic traffic between the two domains, offers a critique of patriarchal control over women in the epic world and in contemporary world. The character of *Komaali* (the counterpoint of Vidhushak from Sanskrit theatre) makes an apt comment, "Krishnan, Arjunan did not exist only in the age of the puranas. In today's context too they can be spotted in trousers and shirts, clad in *veshti*, donning a suit and tie in the market place, in our streets, at home, living amongst us in our nation. They continue to live..." (Gunasekaran 2001:64, tr. mine). This comment is juxtaposed to the act of the six wives of Arjun standing up together, sharpening their gaze upon the spectators while the unmasked Arjun and Krishna run through the auditorium to save their skins. The play also critiques Hindutva ideology's complicity in patriarchal and casteist oppression. The divine figures valorized in Hindu epics are relocated by Gunasekaran in the post-Babri demolition period as masculinist oppressors who sought to contain women's bodies and their social presence. The intersectionality of the performative world and real world, the collusion of anxieties of on-stage characters and those of back-stage actors, recall Genet's play *Blacks*. Dalit theatre's contribution to feminist concerns, and in particular in the foregrounding of Dalit feminist questions, is immense and merits serious attention.

In *Tottil Todangi* (From the Cradle, 1999), Gunasekaran underscores the need for Dalit women's participation in electoral processes and sharing of power in a democracy. An elected woman representative is murdered by a politician's henchmen as they refuse "to take orders from a woman" (Gunasekaran 1999:94). The play offers a collage of scenes involving custodial rapes of women, police custody of innocent women in order to trap their accused male relatives, violence against marginalization of women in public spaces. An interesting

intervention in the play is offered by the lament of Chandramati, the wife of King Harishchandra, who is not allowed to cremate her dead son and is forced to render services to her Brahmin master. Gunasekaran's use of valorized icons to underscore continued exploitation of women recurs in many of his plays. Through this strategy he is able to comment on patriarchal, Brahminical hegemony over the lives of ordinary, poor, low caste, labouring men and women. His plays encourage discussion on liberation of Dalits and obliquely critiques constitutional guarantees as meaningless to Dalits and women at large.

Dalit plays offer a scathing critique of our ritual celebrations of Independence Day or Republic Day as rituals that mask the hierarchical, unequal social structure that prevails in rural and urban India. His play *Arikuri* (Signs) presents the backlash of reservation policy in educational institutions that results in alienation of Dalit students from the mainstream student community. Dalit students are humiliated, segregated and branded as parasites even as their parents struggle to earn two square meals a day at their village home where they are terrorized by the landowning class. A mask of cow's head is placed on stage throughout the performance to underline the practice of untouchability.

Muniyan is humiliated by upper caste students at his hostel and is put on trial before the warden on trumped up charges. His mother's hut is burnt down in the village by the upper castes but she is denied justice at the panchayet which is controlled by the dominant castes. The two segments coalesce at the end of the play. The two trials mimic each other and conclude predictably, implicating the victim as the aggressor. The beats of *Parai* drum pierce through the scenes to project Dalit anger but it is undermined by the ferocious dance of the cow that emerges out of the mask placed on the stage throughout the performance. The cow, symbolic of the upper Hindu caste hegemony over Dalits clearly drowns the *Parai* beats which now seem to offer percussion support to the dance! Gunasekaran's theatre idiom, his

use of lights, props, music and body language is a powerful embodiment of Dalit political and literary discourse at large.

Gunasekaran's play *Bali Aadugal* (Sacrificial goats, 1994) is by now a classic Dalit play that fuses the Dalit woman question to the Dalit liberationist agenda. At the level of content and theatrical idiom, the innovative use of Dalit icons and religious rituals, the creative introduction of notion of androgyny, Dalit patriarchy and complicity of state, upper caste and institutionalized religion in their continued oppression of Dalits, *Bali Aadugal* is a representative, theatrically successful, self-reflexive Dalit reading of caste-gender intersectionality in contemporary Indian society.

Bali Aadugal foregrounds the interlocking of gender and caste question most forcefully. Landed power and priestly power conspire to offer a human sacrifice to appease the village deity. They trap a man to act as a willing sacrificial goat but a transvestite person aids him to flee the village. The priests then lay their hands on a Dalit villager and order him to offer himself as a sacrifice to help push the Chariot at the temple festival. This time, the Dalit male persuades the priests and the Panchayat that as gods do not discriminate between men and women, they should offer his wife as a sacrifice and spare him his life. The co-opting of Dalit males into patriarchy and the dual oppression of Dalit women on grounds of their caste and gender forms the central focus of the play. The transvestite character observes at the end,

"All men join hands to sacrifice a woman at the altar

Women are a caste lower than the Parai caste.

Why do you trample women like withered grass?" (Gunasekaran: 1999,32-33, tr.mine).

The Dalit woman chosen for the sacrifice, is given no name and is simply referred as "Uduman's wife". Dalit women's Dalit identity is subsumed by their gender. Problematizing the issue of identity formation, Dalit theatre foregrounds intersectionality of caste and gender

identities in the context of oppression of Dalits. In *Arikuri*, forms of discrimination in rural/urban pockets, in poor/middle class sections, victimization of Dalits at micro/macro levels is delineated. Many Dalit plays focus on how oppression perpetrated on Dalits by landowning class is validated by the complicity between elected representatives, judicial system, land-owning class and institutionalized religion, be it the church or the temple.

Gunasekaran underscores the need for evolving a distinct Dalit theatre and has outlined its agenda, features, stage craft and its interface with audience. (*JSL*. Autumn 2006: 76-89). In *Bali Aadugal* Gunasekaran intersperses the dramatic text with a conversation between Babaseheb Ambedkar and Mulk Raj Anand. He presents two visually contrasting images, a Dalit group and a group wearing masks and sacred thread. Their movements, body language, groans, distinct vocabulary (colloquial and Brahminical, respectively) bring out the fractured social rubric of the real world. At the Panchayat meeting, the group wearing the sacred thread arrives at a decision to offer a human sacrifice and locate their target from the other group. The dominant group's dialogues are delivered in the style of mantric recitation to underline the co-opting of patriarchy, Brahminism and state administration. References to Ekalavya's torment on the one hand and Ambedkarite ideas on the other provides a rich, ideological texture to the play. The Play concludes with the women's choric group singing thus:

Talis are our fences

In every caste, women are slaves

Imprisoned by domestic labour, women

Are slaves who earn no wages

Female Goddesses adorn the temples

Female infants are found in the dustbin

The shame continues; it is a

Never ending saga

(Gunasekaran :1999, 36, translation mine)

This song is followed by Ambedkar's message to Dalits. When Mulk Raj Anand asks Ambedkar: "What is your message to those marginalized people?", Ambedkar replies, "Be lions! To acquire power, Hindus sacrifice goats to gods Not lions!" (Gunasekaran 1999: 36).

The play *Bali Aadugal* is based on facts documented on stone imprints. Gunasekaran thus fuses historical facts, historical personages, theatrical innovations, music, *oppari*, masks, songs in the visual representation of oppressive acts like pouring cow dung, down the throats of Dalits or raining whiplashes on them. A collage of theatrical language underlined by *Parai* beats, music, silence, body language and lighting culminate in a call for "a revolution like that of the French Revolution of 1789" (Gunasekaran 1990: 30) which as we know upheld, "equality, liberty and fraternity". In another play, *Paarayai Pilandu Kondu* (Rising through the Rocks), Gunasekaran delineates how hill dwellers are subjugated by the ruling classes by taking over their lands and seeking to suppress their indigenous culture.

The liberationist agenda of Dalit and Feminist theatre in Tamil offers a valuable critique of our society. The interventions through theatre forge a discourse that fuses political, cultural and historical perspectives to foreground oppression as well as resistance against oppressive structures of caste, gender that impinge upon marginalised communities. The documentation, re-visionist representation and strategies of resistance against oppression as reflected in the theatre idiom engender possibilities of re-negotiation of identities, hierarchies and social privilege. The opening of avenues for discussion, debate and dialogue between the actors and the spectators within such a theatre is likely to be mirrored in society at large. This strengthens the bond between performative and community discourses and praxis. The contribution of Feminist and Dalit theatre in Tamil needs to be posited in such a context.

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(All references from Tamil (plays, essays) have been translated into English by me for the purposes of this paper.)

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