



NATIONAL FOLKLORE SUPPORT CENTRE

with

Ekalaivan Villupattu Centre

presents

WORKSHOP ON VILLUPATTU

NOVEMBER, 21st—25th



VILLUPATTU

VILLUPAATTU - INTRODUCTIONS

Villupaattu is an art of traditional story-telling with songs interwoven. Its roots are as such in pre-historic times. This ballad-singing performance is peculiar to the southern districts of Tamil Nadu. This bow-song is a folk genre named after a musical instrument used in the performance - "Vil" - a large bow with a single string to which small jingling bells are attached; other more conventional instruments are also played. This bow (Vil) accounts for the several other names of Villupaattu like Vil, Villu, Villadi, Villadipaattu and Villadichanpaattu 'Villisai'.

Villupaattu is generally performed during 'Kodai' festivals of folk deities at the temples in Tirunelveli, Kanyakumari Tuticorin and Nagercoil.

The spectrum of its themes ranges from mythological to social satire of these days. Initially, Villupaattu was rendered with a melancholic strain whereas a novel dimension of Humour has been added to it during the days of Kalaivanar N.S. Krishnan and Kalaimamani Kavignar Subbu Arumugam. This art has been adapted to suit changing times, of course, without marring the pristine beauty of its tradition.

ORIGIN:

The Origin of this art is believed to be in the 16th or 17th century A.D. Some believe that this art must have existed even before.

Gomathinayagam (1979) enumerates on the different versions presented by experts of this art, regarding the time and birth of this art.

Justice Maharajan is of the opinion that the ancient man must have invented this art to overcome his fears and hallucinations by engaging himself in something more fearsome. (i.e.) Villupaattu prevalent in Tirunelveli district.

Shanmuga Sundaram (1986) traces the origin of this art to the heroic age, performed to celebrate their victory or to offer their worship to the deceased warriors.

Somaley (1973) and Perumal (1978) also designate the heroic age as its origin.

Subbu Arumugam (1969) maestro of this art in these modern days enumerates that a king of olden days who went on hunting, filled with remorse tried to make amends, singing the praise of Lord by transforming his weapons into instruments.

According to him, the origin of this art is "Ahimsa" (i.e.) Non-violence.

To Iyampillai, Villupaattu must have originated during the 9th century during the period of Manikkavasagam.

Silapathikaram, Thaivachilayar's 'Virali Vidu Thoodhu' and Kavimani Desika Vinayagam Pillai's 'Marumakkal Vazhi Manmium' have references to Villupaattu.

Most of the prevalent versions agree that this art was temple-based in southern districts of Tamil Nadu.

STRUCTURE, FORMAT AND INSTRUMENTS OF VILLUPAATTU:

There are usually five members in a Villupaattu troupe. They are;

1. Pulavar or Annavi or the lead performer singer
2. Secondary performer often and Instrumentalist
3. Kudam (pot) player
4. Jalra player and
5. Udukkai player

All these performers also accompany the main singer in his songs and also follow him through chorus singing. They also participate in the dialogues by assuming certain imaginary roles in the course of the narration.

The Pulavar or the Lead performer: The Pulavar is the head of the troupe. He is usually a poet and a singer as well. Composing songs impromptu and delivering the same to suit the occasion and audience are his special talents. He is ready-witted, humorous in narration and capable of acting, gesturing and taking the whole troupe and the audience along with him. He is also called Annavi. It is he who wields the Veessu-Kol or the shafts for striking the rhythm on the chord of the bow.

THE BOW: (The Villu): Villu, the bow, is the principal instrument of this folk art. A lacquered bow 7 or 8 ft. long is fitted with a chord of strong leather. Sometimes, on the chord a few bells are suspended. The middle of the bow nests on a pot. The stretched string of the Villu is struck with two sticks that are provided with jingles. These sticks are called "veesukol" or "Villadi Kol".

Generally, this bow is made from the trunk of palm or Jack fruit tree. But now-a-days, some artistes use metallic bows also. The string is normally made of the sinews of cattle and occasionally a thick cotton string. A pair of shafts is used to play on the string which would produce a jingling effect because of the bells tied to the bow.

UDUKKAI: The udukkai is supposed to be the instrument in the hands of Lord Siva producing a sound reverberating as Tamil, Tamil. Other names for this are "Tudi", "Parai" or "Idai Surungu Parai". This is a very vibrant rhythm instrument. This is a small drum, about 30 centimeters in length with a narrow waist in the middle.

Right along the middle passing over the twine is a thick tape, the squeezing of which tightens the thin string on the membrane resulting in the sharpening of the tone. The effect of this is really interesting. Mostly, the shell is of brass, wood or clay.

KUDUM: There is no distinction among any kind of Music. Music has universal appeal as an illustration of this, we can compare the "Ghatam" of Carnatic music with the "Kudam" of Villupaattu. This instrument is supposed to be shrewd improvisation of the pots carried for collecting honey during hunting. Of course, now it has become "symbolic", it is still the pot of sweetest music. It provides the base tone of "Ghum Ghum" to the high pitch of the jingling of the bells tied to the bow.

SHRUTI BOX OR HARMONIUM: Shruti box or Harmonium is also being used now-a-days.

The traditional instruments such as pambai, Urumi and Thakkai are also being used. These instruments were very noisy as Rev. Robert Coldwell found them. As this noise did not allow the words to be audible to the listeners, Dolak, Dolki, or Mridhangam, Tabla, Kol, are replaced now-a-days.

Every performance is started with pooja (invocation) and a Thuvakkamelam or Theermanam (Signature Rhythm)

With no additional makeup, the artistes are seated around the Lead artiste on the stage.

THEMATIC CHANGES IN "VILLUPAATTU":

As far as the themes are concerned, Villupaattu has faced very many evolutionary states. Initially, the artistes had only one motive that is to keep the audience awake. So they used stories such as Neeli Kathai, Sudalai Maadan Kathai,

Khansaheb duel, Anju Rajakkal Kathai, Esakki Kathai and son on. Though these stories were familiar to the audience, they liked to listen to them in the form of villupaattu; because of its music and interesting narration.

In due course, people wanted to listen to their contemporary stories or stories that have some relevance to their life and times. Subsequently biographies of national leaders or Social reformers were introduced as "Themes of Villupaattu". The latest addition into the themes of Villupaattu was Science and Health Issues.

CONTRIBUTION OF KAVIGNAR SUBBU ARUMUGAM to "VILLUPAATTU" and the TITLE OF HIS VILLUPAATTU SCRIPTS AND THE BOOKS PUBLISHED.

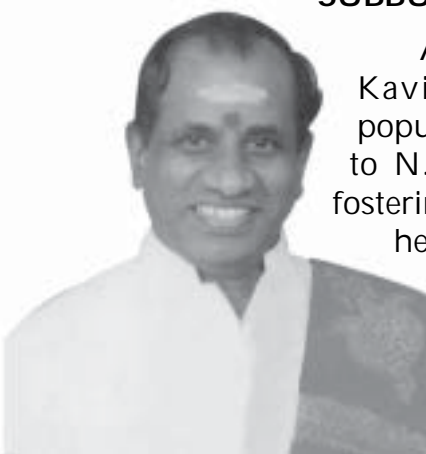
The growth of Villupaattu in the 20th century was swift and steady.

Some of the chief exponents of this art are Sathur P. Pitchai Kutti, Kalaivanar

N.S. Krishnan, Kothamangalam Subbu, Thovalai Sundaram Pillai, Eolappa Pillai, Kuladeivam Rajagopal, Sevalkulam Thangaiya, Villathikulam Rajalakshmi, Sivagasi Gandhimathy, Kovilpatti Ghinnappa, Srinivasan, Chellappa, Kanchi Muthuganesan and Contemporary artistes like Kavignar Subbu Arumugam. S.S. Rajendran, Athur Gomati and Kanchipuram Vajravelu. These artistes have made an admirable contribution to the growth of Villupaattu, making it a well-known folk art in Tamil Nadu during this century.

Of late, this folk art has attained great popularity among the masses as a medium of communication and among school students as a good folk entertainment. Though this art originated as an art of time pass it went on to become an art of mourning and nowadays it has attained a fresh dimension of cheer with communi-cative elements thrown in, for good measure.

SUBBU ARUMUGAM



A notable and well-known on temporary artistes, Kavignar Subbu Arumugam carries the torch of popularising Villupaattu, with great zeal and nerve. Net to N.S. Krishnan, he occupies an important place in fostering Villupaattu. As a native of Tirunelveli District, he was interested in this art, right from his young age. Impressed by his talent, N.S. Krishnan invited him to Chennai to compose his Villupaattu programmes. During the days of N.S. Krishnan comedy tracks for his films were also penned by him.

After the days of N.S. Krishnan, Subbu Arumugam became a full-fledged Villupaattu artiste and is continuing to make tremendous contribution to this folk art. Subbu Arumugam is a pioneer is successfully making use of Villupaattu as a tool to effectively communicate the various social issues and messages to the masses.

He in fact, has ushered in a golden era in the history of Villupaattu. Being a poet and writer, handling various themes effectively remained a cake-walk for him. Kavignar has employed various techniques to make this traditional folk art a very

enjoyable art and an effective communicative medium by adding gentle and satiric humour and high literature, while cherishing the traditional aspects of it as well.

The range of his themes is very wide. Even a dry or technically tough subject is told by him through this art in a palatable and interesting manner like a sugar coated pill. His Villupaattu themes may be classified under sub-divisions as follows:

1. MYTHOLOGY AND LITERATURES

- a. Villisai Raamaayanam (Book)
- b. Villisai Mahaabhaaratham (Book)
- c. Silappathikaram
- d. Jeevaga Chinthamani
- e. Bhagvad Gita
- f. Puranic Stories like 'Vallithirumanam', 'Meenakshi Kalyanam', 'Skanda Puranam' etc.

2. BIOGRAPHIES

- a. Mahatma Gandhi 'Gandhi Vandhar' (Book)
- b. Jawaharlal Nehru
- c. V.O. Chidambaranar
- d. Nethaji Subhash Chandra Bose
- e. Mother Teresa
- f. Ramakrishna Paramahansa
- g. Holy Mother Sarada Devi
- h. Swami Vivekananda
- i. Thanthai E.V.R. Periyar
- j. Aadhi Shankarar
- k. Ramalinga Vallalaar
- l. Aringar Anna
- m. Kamaraj &
- n. Women-Achievers



3. WELFARE SCHEMES (GOVERNMENT)

- a. Rainwater harvest
- b. Twenty-point programme
- c. Prohibition (alcohol)
- d. Small savings
- e. Family Planning and
- f. Women's Welfare



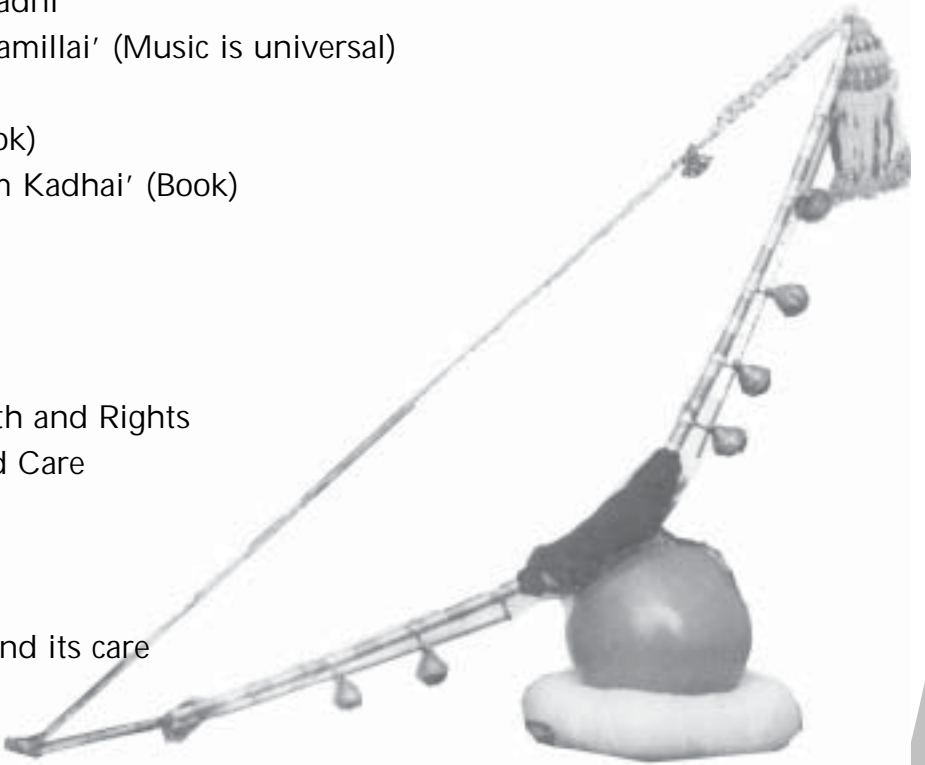
4. SOCIAL AND WELFARE SCHEMES

- a. Safety measures in factories
- b. Mussoriephos-fertilizer
- c. Tips to farmers on seeds, pesticides etc.

- d. Sarvodya and Khadhi
- e. 'Naadhathil Baedhamillai' (Music is universal)
- f. Social Forestry
- g. 'Neeli Kadhai' (Book)
- h. 'Noolagam Valarum Kadhai' (Book)

5. HEALTH

- a. Nutrition
- b. Family Planning
- c. Reproductive Health and Rights
- d. Maternal and Child Care
- e. Dental Care
- f. AIDS - awareness
- g. Heart Care
- h. Digestive System and its care
- i. Eye care
- j. Leprosy-awareness
- k. Brain fever and
- l. Cleanliness and hygiene



It has become customary among those who need to communicate any message to the public, to approach Villupaattu artistes like Subbu Arumugam for making a metamorphosis of the insipid scientific or technical facts into a very enjoyable presentation of public interest. For instance, his programme for ONGC (Oil and Natural Gas Commission, Government of India) on production and uses of Petrol' opened a new chapter in popularising this theme in rural areas. Singapore and Sri Lanka have enjoyed his programmes on different occasions.

His zealous thirst for message giving has elevated the standard of this art; of course, the tradition is scrupulously followed. There is never any compromise on the values of the themes chosen for propaganda. They are always aimed at providing useful and valuable information to the needy, who would be benefitted by this information.

LIST OF THE PLACES WHEREIN HIS PROGRAMMES WERE PERFORMED:

The range of audience is very wide nowadays. Kavignar has performed programmes invariably in the following places:

- a. Temples all over Tamil Nadu, Mumbai, Kolkata and in Singapore and Sri Lanka.
- b. Universities such as university of Madras, Annamalai University, Anna University and Madurai Kamaraj University.
- c. Sri Ramakrishna Mutts. and Sri Sai, Samaj in Tamil Nadu Sri Lanka and Singapore.
- d. Various T.V. channels including Dhoordharshan (Podhigai) and All India Radio.

- e. Factories such as BHEL, T.V.S. Lucas etc. Tamil Mandrams and Recreation clubs.
- f. Thiruvaiyaru Thyagaraja Aradhanai Festivals.

HONOURS AND LAURELS AWARDED:

- “Kalaimamani” by Government of Tamil Nadu (1975)
- “Fox the Sake of Honour Award” by Rotary Club of Madras Coromandal (1992)
- “Ki.Va. Ja” Memorial Award by Chennai Kamban Khazhagam (2003)
- Raja Six Annamalai Chettiyar’s “Tamil Chandror Award” (Cash Award of Rs. One Lakh) (2004)
- Mridhangam Maestro Karaikudi Mani’s “Gowri Manohari Award” Sruthilaya Kendra’s (2004)
- Bharath Kalachar awarded the title “Gnana Kala Bharathi” (2004)

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