

THE ADVENT OF TAMIL DRAMA  
IN MALAYSIA

P.1

P.7

P.14

by

CHITRA RAMACHANDRAN

An Academic Exercise in Partial Fulfilment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Bachelor of Arts

UNIVERSITI SAINS MALAYSIA

1976

## CONTENTS

Chapter One	-	INTRODUCTION	P.1
Chapter Two	-	<u>THERU - KUTHU</u>	P.7
Chapter Three	-	THE REFORMERS OF <u>THERU - KUTHU</u> IN INDIA	P.14
Chapter Four	-	THE INTRODUCTION OF <u>THERU - KUTHU</u> INTO MALAYA	P.30
Chapter Five	-	CONCURRENT EVENTS IN INDIA AND MALAYA FROM MIDTWENTIES TO WORLD WAR II	P.37
Chapter Six	-	TAMIL DRAMA IN MALAYSIA TODAY	P.47
Chapter Seven	-	CONCLUSION	P.53
Bibliography			

LIST OF PLATES

- I SOUVENIR PROGRAMME OF NANDANAR BY MALAYAN SUGUNA  
DRAMA CLUB - COVER (1943)
- II SOUVENIR PROGRAMME OF NANDANAR BY MALAYAN SUGUNA  
DRAMA CLUB - ARTISTES
- III SOUVENIR PROGRAMME OF NANDANAR BY MALAYAN SUGUNA  
DRAMA CLUB - SYNOPSIS OF SCENES
- IV A PHOTO OF THE MEMBERS OF THE MALAYAN SUGUNA DRAMA  
CLUB AFTER A PERFORMANCE (1936)
- V AN EXAMPLE OF A THERU - KUTHU STAGE, SETTING AND  
COSTUMES (1920s)
- VI A POSTER OF THE SRI GANESHANANDA DRAMATIC TROUPE
- VII A POSTER OF THE SRI GANESHANANDA DRAMATIC TROUPE (1935)
- VIII THE ENGLISH PART OF THE ABOVE POSTER
- IX AN EXAMPLE OF AZHI ARULTHASAN'S SETS (KADARAM)
- X ANOTHER EXAMPLE OF AZHI ARULTHASAN'S SETS (NALLIRAVIL)
- XI THE MUSLIM AND HINDU RELIGIOUS LEADERS WITH THE  
HERO IN ALAMARAM
- XII A DANCE SCENE FROM ALAMARAM
- XIII A REVIEW ON PREM KAMAL BY JEBAT, UTUSAN MELAYU,  
JUNE 1974
- XIV A POSTER FOR ORU INSPEKTER VANTHAR
- XV A REVIEW ON M. MANIVASAN BY UTIH, SUNDAY TIMES,  
AUGUST 1975.

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is a multiracial, multicultural country. The Chinese and the Indians came here to trade. Some stayed a while, some settled for a longer period of time but eventually they all left for home. With the British intervention and exploitation of Malayan resources, immigrants were brought in to work. As time passed many of the immigrant races made Malaya their home and now form part of Malaysian society.

The Indians first came to the Malay Peninsula during the first century A.D. As traders and settlers they were responsible for the Indianised Kingdoms of South East Asia like Funan, Champa, Langkasuka, Sri Vijaya, Majapahit, Kadaram, Malacca and Tumasek. The Malacca Sultanate experienced very strong Indian influence that shaped their political, religious, social, economic and cultural life. With the traders, priests and envoys came Indian Theatre to Malaya. Its influence can be seen extensively in Malay forms as well as in Indonesian, Thai and Cambodian forms.

Tamil Drama itself is not a recent innovation; neither are the ties between India and Malaya new. But no study or research has ever been made into the history or the development of Tamil Drama in Malaysia. Mr. Karthigesu, a lecturer in Mass Communications in the School of Humanities told me one day, in the course of conversation, about a professional Tamil Drama troupe that toured the estates

2.

during his boyhood in Kedah. As he related some of his personal experiences of impromptu involvement in the plays, I grew interested in the topic. Investigations revealed that one of the leading heroes of the past, a Mr. C. V. Arumugam was still alive in Bukit Mertajam. Since nobody has broached the topic before, I decided to meet him in an attempt to accumulate and record information pertaining to Tamil Drama in Malaysia before it is lost forever.

Since there has been no previous research or documentation, I have had to rely on word of mouth. Several prominent men in the field of Tamil Drama today as well as a few old timers who remember the good old days have been interviewed. A certain degree of credibility has been maintained by attempts to double check and even triple check facts by talking on the same topic to different informants.

One interesting problem that transpired while talking to people trying to gather as much information as possible was the peculiarity of human memory. The old people I spoke to tended to glorify the past. They remembered and were extremely willing to talk about the successes of the troupes that came from India but were reluctant to talk about the troupes that failed miserably. There was especially an awkwardness when I tried to find out why some troupes had failed. This attitude I believe stems from a loyalty to all that is Indian among the

### 3.

older generation and hence an unconscious desire to want to tell and allow to be documented only the rosy side of the picture. Initially I tried recording my interviews on tape but I found that even the most experienced actor on stage became aware of the microphone that I held in front of him. Contrary to my belief that a tape recorder will help to record all information that came to my informants' minds without a break in the continuity of their thoughts. I found that it hampered the free flow of conversation because of self-consciousness. Hence I had to change my methodology. I still spoke to people but decided to write down the things they said. It has proven a much slower, tedious and finger-breaking way to record information but it had my informants completely at ease.

As I conducted my research, I discovered much to my horror and despair the incredible wealth of information available. The depth and extent to which the evolution of Indian Theatre in Malaysia can be and should be covered as a physical impossibility to me. My topic required me to travel and take time to talk to people in an easy, unhurried manner. I had only the weekends to do this and it had to be all done within one semester. On top of which these weekends had to be shared between my Academic Exercise work, other course work and my visits home to my husband as often as possible.

These limitations I have had to come to terms with

have forced me to restrict my research to purely Tamil Drama. Other traditional Indian forms do exist and when flourish in Malaysia. In fact the most active group of Indians involved in all aspects of theatre now are the Malayalees who come from the State of Kerala. They have preserved their traditional festivals, customs, music, dances and dance-dramas like the Kathakali and Ottam Thullal. The Kairali Arts Club (The Arts Club of the people of Kerala) has been consistently producing modern plays on various themes since 1956.<sup>1</sup> Opera style plays in the Telugu language had also existed in the 1920s.<sup>2</sup> The dances from the different South Indian States are also found in Malaya. To delve into the South Indian - Malayalee, Telugu and Tamil - Theatre in Malaya would be too big a task. Even to work on South Indian Drama alone would require much more time, effort, travelling and money than I can afford. Therefore I have cut my scope and parameters down to solely Tamil Drama in Malaya, making a linguistic rather than a regional distinction.

When a people settle in groups in a foreign land, it is inevitable that they will seek to live as they

- 
1. Interview with Mr. Raghavan Nair, A.M.N., President of the Kairali Arts Club, Kuala Lumpur in December 1975.
  2. Interview with Mrs. Chandra Shanmugam, Artiste, Kuala Lumpur in December 1975.

5.

always have. The fact that there are others who share their way of life serves to reinforce the pattern. When the Tamil labourers were brought to Malaya by the British to work in the rubber estates, they brought their religion, culture, customs, and their entire way of life with them. Every estate had a temple and perhaps an ad hoc stage for performances of Theru - Kuthu (Street-play) during festivals. Tamil Drama probably began in Malaya with the first performances of these Theru - Kuthu. As more people came and stayed to work in Malaya, more talent and interest were probably discovered and utilised. This sort of situation should have provided a healthy soil for Tamil Drama to grow in.

I should like to study the situation of Tamil Drama in India during the years of Indian immigration into Malaya, trace the transference of the same from the former to the latter and find out how it took root and evolved in Malaya.

I wish to thank Mr.R.Karthigesu for his much valued encouragement and suggestions. I would also like to thank Mr.C.V.Arumugam of Bukit Mertajam, Mr.Re.Shanmugam, Mrs.Chandra Shanmugam and Mr.B.Narayanan of Radio Television Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, Mr.Mohd.Ibrahim of Penang, Mr.M.Kandiah of the "Sangeetha Abiviruthi Sabha" (An Association for the Promotion of Music) Kuala Lumpur, Mr.Babu Rao, an old gentleman who has served as a make up man for dramatic troupes since his arrival in Malaya in



the early 1920s, and others who helped in many ways in obtaining information. I also wish to thank Dr.Thandayutham of Indian Studies Department, University of Malaya and Dr.Sidhu of History Department, School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia for their advice and loan of important books from their own collection.

I have no credible information about activities in the East Coast, Johore, or Malacca. I hear that Ipoh and Taiping have had many an active group but I have so far not gone to these places to find out more for want of time and contacts. I apologise to those I do the injustice of not documenting dramatic works done by them. I hope someone else would take the initiative to study the areas I have left out.