

Poramadi Nadakam and Araya Culture: Dramatic Representation, Cultural Traces

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“Drama is the reconstruction; the reproduction of the great experiences of a people, and helps them to live more abundantly” (Dhlomo 39).

Araya is a tribal community residing in Idukki, Kottayam, Pathanamthitta and certain parts of Thiruvananthapuram districts in Kerala. In A. Sreedara Menon’s *Kerala Charitram*, the tribe is categorized as an *Australoid* race. Since the Araya people used to live in the hilly areas, they are also known as Malayaraya. Their myth says that they are creations of Lord Shiva. To take care and control of the Earth, Lord Shiva created a male and a female and sent them to Earth. One day, while they were living on earth, saint Agastya saw them. He was astonished to see human beings wearing bow and arrow. He questioned them and after listening to their story, decided to test them. He pointed to a big tree and asked the man to shoot a leaf from the tree. The man shot down the whole tree with a single arrow. Inferring that if they were allowed to live they would conquer the whole universe, the saint swallowed them. Lord Shiva who was in search of his creations met the saint and enquired about them. Agastya told him the truth, that he saw them and destroyed them knowing the danger if they lived on earth. But Lord Shiva insisted on a resurrection of his creations. Finding no other means, Agastya recreated them from the sacrificial fire. He advised them to have fruits as food and to use plants as medicine. Thus Agastya became their guru and Shiva, their father. The Araya people regard the man and the woman as the progenitors of the Araya tribe. The man and the woman went to Ponmudi and settled there. Their successors established the Ay dynasty. At the end of the seventeenth century, the Chera king attacked and conquered Ay and an era of war followed. Some Arayas of the Ay dynasty entered the forest to escape the attacks and to lead a free life.

Another story tells that the Arayas were Kings who worshipped Madura Meenakshi, in the princely state of Tamil Nadu. As the Pandya king conquered them in a war, they left the place. Led by Adithyanarachan, they took the idol of Madura Meenakshi and migrated to the Western Ghats. On the way a debate originated among the King, the minister and the one who carried the idol on his back, regarding the authority of the idol. A female voice, from nowhere, declared the king as the rightful authority. The minister and his followers went to the shores of Kanchiyar and the carrier and his followers went north. According to this story, the king and his followers became the Araya tribe, the minister and his followers, Mannans, and the carrier and his followers, Muduvans. Adithyanarachan took the idol, led to North and placed the idol near a wild stream. Now the place is known as Meenachil and the river, Poonjar.

The Malayaraya community has a great tradition of cuisine, architecture, agricultural methods and literature. They were the first forest dwellers who crossed the borders of the forest and came in contact with the mainstream. Their early mingling with Malayalam culture and

language caused the extinction of their own culture and orature. This paper is a pioneering endeavour to bring academic attention to the unique drama form of this tribe – ‘Poramadi nadakam’. The word ‘poramadi’ means imitation, and ‘nadakam’ means ‘drama’. So, as a ‘poramadi nadakam’ or imitation play, the drama did imitate the culture and life of the tribe. Like other literary productions, this drama form too was an imaginative reflection of real life: the life of the Araya people in the past. The life style which is presented in the play is no longer familiar to the present generation.

Poramadi nadakam was coordinated with the ritual Malathullal. On the first of Malayalam month Makaram, the chiefs (Mooppan) of each sector of the tribe used to go to the place of worship (which were in dense forest in the past). They call it Malakettam (derived from *mala* which means hill, malakettam literally means climbing the hill). There they conducted Malathullal. Enactment of the nadakam provided entertainment to the rituals which lasted for seven days.

Though humour is the prevalent element of this art form, it dexterously conveys the Araya tribal life. The closeness to life is the main feature of this play. As M. L. Varadpande in the introduction to his book *History of Indian Theatre* comments, “Folk theatre . . . is a kind of entertainment which is not entertainment alone. It carries within it the entire folk culture with all its social and religious institutions. We find reflected in the folk theatre the cults, customs, rituals and beliefs of common people. It assumes different forms and fulfils multiple functions” (3). Similarly, in the past, Poramadi Nadakam did reconstruct the life of those people: the hierarchical structure of the community, their medicines, livelihood, surroundings and their knowledge of the outer world.

The actors of this play have specific costumes and make up. They put red, green and white dots on face. They use charcoal, leaves and rice flour to prepare the colours. They mix turmeric and slaked lime to get red colour; leaves for green, and rice flour for white colour. The characters are Muthan (the title name of tribal chief), Vallon (one who knows martial arts) and Ulladan (a word denoting any young man). Muthan wears a white ‘mundu’ (dhoti) and a white towel. He carries a cane called Porappan – the sign of authority. The cane has silver rings. Vallon wears a long cap which has some decorations at the edge (a cap resembling the joker’s cap). He carries a sword and wears a long towel around the waist in a certain manner.

As the play starts, Muthan calls Ulladan to go for hunting. He says:

Eda¹ . . . hunter, skilful young man . . . kooo . . . koovee². . . Give common chain to common dog, brave chain to brave dog, take Muttambu³ and bamboo bow, call Kuttathinaya⁴ and come for royal hunting . . . koovee . . . (Kannadu 134)

Ulladan first tries to resent it and says: Athe⁵. . . Today . . . Common dog has no common chain, brave dog has no brave chain . . . have no muttambu, have no koorambu⁶ which is most beautiful in arrows. (Kannadu 134)

In a humorous way he gives an account of his works, like collecting honey and boiling water. But as Muthan asks not to give excuses and go for hunting, Ulladan obeys and gets ready to go. Muthan explains the reason for hunting as to chase the wild animals, for their vexation has increased. Then he gives a list of medicinal plants like Irumburukki, Kallurukki, Mullurukki,

Neelakoduveli, Korochana: medicines which the tribe used to cure many serious ailments. Before going for hunting Ulladan places his offering to Valithevar (Great God) and informs him that if he does not take the offering, Kooran (mouse-deer) will spoil that. His prayer to God vividly reflects the fears of people who live in forests. He goes, hunts, collects honey and medicinal plants and comes back to Muthan. He gives a description of his hunting to Muthan. Vallon enters here. When Muthan gives works to Vallon, he too makes excuses which enhance the comic essence of the play. He says:

. . . today . . . saying to the great mouth of chief . . . When I went to teach writing and martial arts to seventy two young men (killonmar) and seventy two young women (killothimar), living in the tuft of frog, which lives in the hole of a mango tree at the far away Kozhikodu⁷, I left my girl secured by tying with seven knots, seven cross knots and seventy two 'kizhikettu'⁸ and placed in a golden palace. Don't know whether people from north took her, people from south took her or you took her. I won't come to anywhere if I don't get my girl (Kalli) back . . . Koovee . . . (Kannadu 135)

His use of vocabulary not only sheds light on the people's understanding of the outer world but also delivers a perfect example of their verbal excellence. When Muthan says, "Eda . . . instead of saying this and that, get five bundles of leaves and five, eight bundles of woods" (Kannadu 135), he goes, collects and comes back. His speeches are full of pun. When he announces to give way for his royal entrance, Muthan asks what they should do for that. Then Vallon answers, "You have to walk with legs" (Kannadu 135). The drama continues like that and in between Vallon sings some comic songs. Muthan orders Vallon to collect the food items, and from those dialogues we come to know about the cuisine and agricultural methods of the tribe. The dialogues between Muthan and Vallon provide a vivid picture of the community's way of life with the escort of humour.

MUTHAN: Eda, great Vallon of the place, You look so lean.

VALLON: That's... Mutha... Nothing, poverty, poverty. Have heard that, you plant Cholvazha⁹ along with sowing. When I was coming with my sword and shield, looking here and there, could see a diversion at a distance. When I reached there, saw a stock of bananas, the skin of a banana was peeled off.

MUTHAN: That's a ripe stock.

VALLON: Don't say like that. (acting like cutting and placing the banana on his back). Have no fire at the edge of Thattathippara, Thalippara.¹⁰ Taking my sword and shield, searched here and there, saw a spark at a distance (acting whatever he says) I went there.

MUTHAN: That's the blacksmith. (Kannadu 136)

He goes to the blacksmith's place, takes the fire, and grills the banana. As the banana blocks his throat, he pats his back with the sword and swallows the banana. Then he drinks water from the rock's ravine. The following dialogues illumine the agricultural methods of the people:

MUTHAN: Eda, Vallon, the 'Kachil' and 'Cherukizhang'¹¹ have got long creepers. Called you to give support to the creepers, to pluck the weeds and mount soil.

VALLON: That's... Mutha... you would have given the 'Cherukol'¹² before we reach... that's why we don't come.

MUTHAN: Anyway, You come, place the Cherukol. (Kannadu 137)

Vallon and his friends act as they pluck the weeds from the land, place sticks, tie the creepers to the sticks and mount soil for farming. The sequence that follows – of hiding, seeking and finding of Vallon's wife – provides the drama its comic dimension.

The drama ends as Vallon gets gifts from Muthan and sings a song to conclude the drama. In the song Vallon addresses the audience. The song, like other dialogues of the play, is a play with words. The song goes:

A gift given by our Muthan
 See every one, see every one
 Everyone, everyone see
 Then, see the great people from Kangazha¹³
 After seeing, have it
 After having it, see it
 See, have, lie on the road
 Let someone beat you to death. (Kannadu 138)

This drama is “detached from the heart and mud of the present, yet vital to and able to comment upon the present” (Dhlomo 39). The play provides a glance into the goodness of a bygone time where people lived and believed in a collective and sustainable society: a mimesis in the natural context. The excellent characterization, settings and the mastery over language are the highlights of Poramadi Nadakam. The drama is one among the many rich facets of tribal literature and the academia should bestow proper attention to revive and archive this drama form, considering it as a relevant strand of subaltern literature.

¹ Eda: A word used as a general address.

² Kooo . . koovee: Calling.

³ Muttambu: Arrow with a round arrowhead.

⁴ Kuttathinaya: *Naya* means dog, *kuttathi* is the name of the dog.

⁵ Athe: A word to call attention.

⁶ Koorambu: A sharp arrow.

⁷ Kozhikodu: A place in Kerala.

⁸ Kizhikettu: Knots with cloths.

⁹ Cholvavazha: A kind of plantain.

¹⁰ Thattathippara, Thalippara: Places.

¹¹ Kachil and Cherukizhang: Rooters.

¹² Cherukol: A short stick.

¹³ Kangazha: A place.

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