

Trekking the Tamil mindset through Tamil drama

By

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It's been a long time since I sat in an audience to watch a stage drama. The last time was when I sat in the audience at Elphinstone Theatre, a half year ago. That was to watch the "Janakaraliya" production of "Charandas". An adaptation of Indian dramatist Habib Tanvir's "Charandas Chor", the Janakaraliya production was based on the versatility of dramatist cum teledrama and film director Parakrama Niriella, who had given his own interpretation to the Indian drama in terms of the present Sri Lankan context. Since then, there was no other stage play that compelled me to set aside a few evening hours. The era of intellectually creative drama that was pioneered by Prof. Sarachchandra followed by playwrights like Dayananda Gunawardne, Henry Jayasena, Sugathapala de Silva and R.R. Samarakoon in the 60's and the 70's had fizzled off. Dharmasiri Bandaranayake, Asoka Handagama and a few others who lived through into the 80's and after, have not brought anything new on stage for over two decades. We don't have creative productions on stage any more that could at least stand in par with those in the 60's and the 70's. What needs to be stressed here about Sinhala stage drama is that it depended very much on adaptations than on originals.

We are most unfortunately talking of Sinhala stage drama only. Talking of Sinhala drama as a national fact that ignores Tamil drama altogether. Do we in the South know about Tamil stage drama? I honestly doubt, we do. We know of popular adaptations from Bertold Brecht, Henrik Ibsen, Jean Paul Satre and Dario Fo to name those from the developed proscenium theatre. Brecht of them all is better known than any local Tamil playwright. I for one came to know of Tamil dramatist Prof. Maunaguru and his production "Ravanesan" more through writings than through stage. There is definitely something amiss. We do not have any conscious interactions with Tamil stage drama and their dramatists.

There are two basic reasons for this. One, there had been very little Tamil stage drama in the first decades after independence that stood its own ground, in comparison to the new development of Sinhala stage drama that evolved with Prof Sarachchandra from mid 1950's. Development of Sinhala stage drama also had the advantage of being projected as a national effort with the advent of Sinhala politics in the South from mid 50's. Heavy emphasis on Sinhala art and culture was part of this emerging Sinhala politics. Two, Tamil stage drama perhaps stymied by being pushed into provincial status in social acceptance, also because of the hype given to Sinhala rejuvenation from the 50's was not an important cultural participation in the South. This therefore did not help develop a Tamil stage drama loving audience in Colombo that could sustain it, even with difficulty. Out of Colombo, they are no national events.

Within this broad cultural parameters in the South, the Sinhala dramatists did not look towards Tamil stage productions or literature for any discourse. Within our literary discourse, we did not have comparisons with or intrusions from Tamil literature. Way back in the 70's Dharmasena Pathirajah tried his hand on a Tamil film called "Ponmani"

and then Parakrama Kodituwakku came with a collection of Tamil poems translated into Sinhala titled “Indu saha Lanka”. They were the two most significant interactions between Sinhala and Tamil creative art. If there were anything else, they were insignificant in a society that was trying to come to grips with social aspirations divided and divergent as Sinhala and Tamil.

Political divisions on either side of the divide getting ethnically radicalised, the chances of moving together, in learning together in all forms of performing arts, also fell between extremism. They had moved away to such an extent that almost none knew Prof. Sarachchandra had borrowed from the Tamil “Koottu” dance traditions in producing his own “miracle” on Sinhala stage. For the Sinhala society, they were its own tradition brought down from the past. The Sinhala hegemonic politics in the South weren’t prepared to accept anything as Tamil even if they were.

This break down of literary dialogue among the Sinhala and Tamil artistes was the result of political antipathy. During the 1980’s and more conspicuously after the 1983 July pogrom, the escalation of the war closed all doors and paved the way for a new trend in Tamil political drama in the North, unknown to the South. That Tamil drama which struggled to establish itself in the Northern Tamil society, had a distinct difficulty in performing publicly as we do at the Lionel Wendt or at the Elphinstone theatre. They grew in an atmosphere of increasing political suppression trying to find expression among nonconventional audiences. This new Tamil stage drama produced a pioneering and committed playwright in the name of M. Shanmugalingam, better known as ‘Kuzhanthai’ Shanmugalingam, who wrote his own plays from what he saw, felt and lived in his own Tamil society. He was thus an organic product of the Tamil society in the North that struggled to express itself through drama.

Three of Kuzhanthai’s plays had been translated into English by a well known Tamil poet, S. Pathmanathan, also known as ‘Sopa’. The three plays have a cover title, “*Shanmugalingam – Three plays*” printed and published by Kumaran Book Home. It is wholly unfair to stand on judgement of plays that had been produced and staged in a very oppressive context, by a mere reading of their script. Yet it is worth the read, to get a glimpse of the mind set in Jaffna, as it grew over two decades from early 1980’s through armed conflict.

The three stage plays included in this book “*Maṇ Sumantha Méniyar* (With sweat and dust on their shoulders), *Entayum Tāyum* (The land of our parents) and *Velvithee* (The sacrificial fire)” cover a period from early 1985 to late 1993. Politically this covers the period begun after the 83 July pogrom and run till the end of the Premadasa era, through the IPKF presence and the Indo – Lanka Accord. Obviously, for a dramatist who struggled to have his foot hold in society, all these would have surely had their engravings with due stress.

These are all plays that have within them the echoes of the ordinary man in Jaffna. They are quite different to the armed cadres we generally see as Tamil life. The struggle of the innocent farmer in *Maṇ Sumantha Méniyar* is brought out with the hardened hope he

cherishes within a crumbling society. This play had first been staged in February 1985 and thereafter had become popular with youth groups that staged it in many parts of the peninsula. It was the period youth in Jaffna emerged with a loud bang to challenge the democratic presence of the traditional Tamil leadership. *Enṭayum Tāyūm* produced and staged in 1992, first in an inner courtyard of a house in Nallur, came at a time when Jaffna was in grips with itself. The famous Vadamarachchi attack by the security forces had left thousands displaced and homeless. The IPKF the Jaffna society thought would liberate them, had also left bitter memories. It was a period the older generation in Jaffna was struggling with a fractured conscience. This play portrays this elderly forlon life in Jaffna that tries to come to grips with the absent child sent off to seek safer and a greener future. What Kuzhanthai Shanmugalingam does best in the play *Veḷvithee* is using the old traditions of marraige in a contemporary society that rocks all traditions, not due to change of life by itself, but due to a hostile break down of normal life. He uses old stanzas as songs to drive his characters to contradiction and pitches them against Shakespeare's Othelo and Desdamaona too, in testing love and attachment in the burning world around him where even sacrifices aren't enough.

They are not mere reportage of Jaffna life on stage. They are all about human relationships and aspirations within a turbulent society. About life that nevertheless screams, wanting to live. Its life we are not familiar with and wouldn't see in the perspective of the victim. Finally, they represent a culture that has over the past decades distanced itself with a vengeance due to broken promises, but does not seem so distant in human terms. Sopa Pathmanathan with his lucid translations of these stage plays provides a rare chance for the South to reach out to the Jaffna mindset through Shanmugalingam's drama that otherwise would not be possible in this war ridden, politically divided and culturally diverging Lanka.
