

Traditional Performing Arts of Tamil Nadu as Instruments of Rights-Based Advocacy in Historical and Contemporary Contexts

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Abstract: *Tamil Nadu, known for its rich cultural heritage, has long been a center of traditional art forms that reflect the history, values, and social dynamics of the region. These forms have not only preserved the civilization's collective memory but also continue to evolve, addressing contemporary social issues. From the ancient practices of Sati and women's discrimination to modern struggles like Jallikattu and gender inequality, folk art has served as a powerful tool for empowering communities and advocating for social justice. Traditional performing arts such as Parai Attam, Villu Pattu, Oppari, Theru Koothu, and Silambam, among others, have been pivotal in giving voice to the voiceless and challenging societal norms. These art forms, deeply rooted in the cultural fabric of Tamil Nadu, have played significant roles in community identity, resistance, and rights-based advocacy, especially for marginalized populations. Over time, many of these practices have been reinterpreted in modern contexts to address pressing issues like caste discrimination, gender equality, environmental awareness, and human rights. This paper explores the historical significance and modern-day relevance of these traditional art forms, examining their role in resistance movements, cultural empowerment, and social transformation. Through an interdisciplinary approach, it highlights how these art forms continue to shape rights-based advocacy and social justice in Tamil Nadu.*

Keywords: traditional arts, advocacy, right based approach, Tamil folk art, cultural heritage, social justice, community empowerment, rights advocacy

1. Introduction

For centuries, rights-based movements and activism have thrived in Tamil Nadu, which has long been acknowledged as a birthplace of socio-political reform. The state has cultivated a long history of opposing repressive structures and promoting social justice, as evidenced by the Bhakti movement, the Self-Respect Movement, and the current battles for caste and gender equality. Traditional performing arts have been crucial- yet frequently underappreciated- in influencing public opinion, inspiring communities, and expressing opposition during these movements. People have been able to express their lived realities and aspirations through art, especially in its traditional forms, in a way that is emotionally charged, approachable, and culturally relevant. These art forms, in contrast to institutional forms of communication, possess the rare capacity to engage audiences at the grassroots level, appealing to both the intellect and the emotions, making them potent instruments for awareness and change. Folk performances have frequently been the voice of the voiceless in Tamil Nadu, particularly for under-represented groups that are excluded from mainstream venues.

This study examines the historical foundations and current significance of a number of important traditional art forms, each of which has made a distinct contribution to rights-based advocacy: Parai Attam, Villu Pattu, Oppari, Theru Koothu, and Silambam.

- Originally used in funerary settings and connected to marginalised castes, Parai Attam has been reinterpreted as a representation of Dalit identity and resistance. Through movement and rhythm, it asserts dignity and questions caste hierarchies.

- Bow-song, also known as Vilu Pattu, uses music and storytelling to convey political and moral lessons. Originally employed to disseminate religious doctrine, it was later modified to advance political consciousness and social change. Villu Pattu turns difficult subjects into likeable tales by fusing narrative and song to teach rural audiences about political rights, environmental degradation, and caste discrimination.
- Oppari, a traditional female-sung song of mourning, has evolved into a vehicle for expressing sorrow over societal injustices such as gender-based violence and local tragedies, transforming individual grief into group resistance.
- Originally presenting epics and myths, Theru Koothu is a type of street theatre that has developed into a vehicle for political satire and education on topics such as caste, corruption, and inequality. Silambam, the traditional martial art, represents both physical empowerment and cultural pride. Theru Koothu, with its mythological dramatisations, uses satire and public performance to critique caste hierarchies, corruption, and patriarchy. Particularly when it comes to youth mobilisation, it has come to be more closely linked with identity politics and community defence. While Kuravanji Natakam is being reinterpreted to emphasise feminist and anti-caste narratives, Kaniyan Koothu offers philosophical reflections laced with social commentary. By connecting ritual to the discussion of rights, dance styles such as Karagattam, Devarattam, Kummi, and Kolattam are being used more and more to address issues of public health.

While Oyilattam, Thappattam, and drumming traditions like Urumi and Thavil assert Dalit identity and pride in public places, symbolic and ritual-based forms like Poikkal Kuthirai Aattam and Puliyattam are used in environmental and animal rights advocacy. Once associated with the Devadasi tradition,

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Sathirattam is now reclaimed as a feminist manifestation of resistance and self-determination. By transforming cultural expression into civic engagement, these various performance formats make the discussion of rights emotionally compelling, locally relevant, and socially transformative.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Villu Pattu and Social Change in Rural Tamil Nadu

Tamil Nadu's rural communities have long relied on Villu Pattu, a storytelling technique that involves singing while holding a bow, to convey political and moral messages. The use of Villu Pattu during the Dalit protest movements in the early 2000s is examined in a case study by Chandran (2015). Artists of this era used Villu Pattu to protest caste prejudice and promote social justice. With a special emphasis on the experiences of marginalised castes, the songs told tales of empowerment and resistance. According to Chandran's research, Villu Pattu was a dynamic platform for social change and political awareness in addition to being a tool for conserving cultural heritage. It brought marginalised voices to the fore and served as a catalyst for local communities to mobilise against systemic oppression. This case study serves as an excellent example of how a traditional art form can be strategically employed to promote rights and oppose social structures that uphold injustice.

2.2. Theru Koothu and Caste Resistance

A dynamic performance that has developed over time to address urgent social issues like gender inequality, corruption, and caste oppression is Theru Koothu, a traditional street theatre. The use of Theru Koothu as a means of caste resistance in Tamil Nadu is examined by Vijayalakshmi (2018). Dalit activists started using political satire in theatre productions in the 1990s and early 2000s, criticising discrimination based on caste and advocating for social changes.

According to Vijayalakshmi's research, the performances, which were frequently held in public areas, inspired spectators to question the status quo and assert their constitutional rights. Caste-related violence and social exclusion would be directly addressed in Theru Koothu performances, which would use satire and comedy as a means of upending long-standing social structures. The case study serves as an example of how traditional art forms can adapt to modern environments in order to promote movements for human rights.

2.3 Bommalattam and Public Health Awareness in Rural Tamil Nadu

In rural Tamil Nadu, traditional puppetry, or bommalattam, has been used as a tool for social change, especially in raising awareness of public health issues. Thiruvengadam's 2016 study details how non-governmental organisations have worked with regional puppet artists to raise awareness of topics like health education, domestic abuse, and child labour. The purpose of using puppetry to address delicate subjects was to get past the community's reluctance to speak candidly about things like domestic abuse and reproductive health.

According to Thiruvengadam's research, puppetry's interactive elements and visual appeal made it easier to convey difficult concepts, especially to rural populations that lack literacy. Bommalattam became a powerful tool for promoting social rights and health-related behaviour change through the use of visual metaphors and storytelling.

2.4 Kummi and Kolattam Dances in Women's Health Campaigns

Traditional Tamil folk dances known as kummi and kolattam, which are mostly performed by women, have been modified for use in social campaigns that highlight issues pertaining to women's health, such as maternal health, menstrual hygiene, and domestic abuse. The influence of these dance styles on Tamil Nadu's rural women's empowerment initiatives is investigated in a 2019 study by Ravichandran. According to Ravichandran's research, these dances served as platforms for social messaging and health education in addition to being celebratory. Local activists were able to increase awareness among women in rural communities by incorporating messages about gender equality and menstrual hygiene into the dances' rhythms and movements. This, in turn, helped to increase participation in health programs. The study emphasises how important health information can be shared through performative art.

2.5 Youth Empowerment and Silambam in Dalit Communities

In Dalit communities, the traditional Tamil martial art of silambam has been repurposed as a means of empowering young people. Shankar (2018) presents a case study on how Dalit activists have utilised Silambam to encourage young people's self-defence, physical empowerment, and sense of community pride. Dalit youth have been able to resist caste-based violence in their communities and assert their identities through martial arts training, according to the study. Silambam, which has historically been associated with cultural pride, has been modified in contemporary settings as a means of protesting social injustice, especially in places where Dalit youth experience institutionalised discrimination, according to Shankar's research.

2.6 Parai Attam in Rights-Based Advocacy

The significance of Parai Attam as a revolutionary instrument in the Dalit rights movement is further explained in a study by Srinivasan (2020). The study discovered that the use of Parai Attam functioned as both an identity assertion and a protest expression during public demonstrations, cultural festivals, and even local political rallies. With its rich and resonant sound, parai evolved into more than just an artistic medium; it became a statement of dignity, freedom, and defiance of caste oppression. The Parai Attam performances were staged in both rural and urban settings, where Dalit communities experienced increased discrimination and estrangement, thanks to the efforts of activist groups. In order to mobilise support and raise awareness for Dalit communities in their fight for social justice, the drumming performances frequently featured stories of struggle. According to Srinivasan's research, Parai Attam helped to reclaim and redefine the role of Dalit communities in Tamil

society by bridging the gap between traditional culture and contemporary activism. According to the study, Parai Attam was a crucial cultural instrument in promoting political awareness by giving Dalit voices a forum in both urban and rural areas.

3. Contemporary Re-imaginings of Traditional Art Forms

Traditional performing arts have been reimagined as powerful instruments of resistance, education, and identity assertion in the context of Tamil Nadu's changing social justice movements. They have also helped to preserve cultural heritage. A dynamic engagement with current issues is reflected in their adaptation into modern forms of expression, especially in rural communities, urban slums, and marginalised caste groups. These artistic expressions go beyond mere amusement to function as platforms for social empowerment, feminist reclaiming, and political criticism.

3.1 Youth-Centric and Urban Forms

Gaana songs have become the voice of the oppressed, especially Dalit youth, in urban areas, especially in Chennai's working-class neighbourhoods. Gaana challenges systemic problems like caste oppression, police brutality, alcoholism, gender inequality, and urban poverty with its unvarnished lyrics and upbeat beats. It is an important form of cultural assertion and youth activism in the city because it blends individual experience with group resistance.

Similar to this, folk protest songs known as Nattupura Padalgal, which are typically sung at community or seasonal gatherings, have been modified for use at demonstrations, rallies, and social movements. These include Therukoothu Nattupura Paadalgal, which uses satire, critique, and performance to influence public opinion on topics like electoral justice, labour rights, and education. These songs act as cultural anchors that link activism with regional customs in addition to being protest tools.

3.2 Incorporation of Traditional Art Forms in Modern Education and Social Change

Traditional Tamil Nadu arts like Parai Attam, Villu Pattu, Theru Koothu, and Silambam are being incorporated more and more into school curricula and community service initiatives in the modern era. These artistic disciplines have evolved from being merely cultural customs to becoming effective instruments for political science, social work, and human rights instruction. They are crucial to modern rights-based advocacy because of their use in enlightening and empowering communities, especially marginalised ones. The ways in which these art forms are being integrated into volunteer-led social awareness campaigns and educational programs are examined below.

3.2.1 Incorporation into Academic Programs

a) Education in Social Work

Traditional art forms are being utilised in the social work field as instruments for empowerment and community engagement. These forms assist social workers in addressing

complicated social issues like poverty, gender inequality, caste discrimination, and human rights abuses. Students received instruction on how to advocate for social justice through Parai Attam and Theru Koothu. Students learnt how to use culture as a platform for advocacy and obtained practical experience in community mobilisation by integrating these art forms into the curriculum. Using these traditional art forms in workshops and campaigns to raise awareness about issues like women's rights, child labour, and caste-based violence, students worked directly with marginalised communities during their fieldwork. In tribal and rural communities, where traditional cultural expressions are highly prized, this strategy has shown especially good results.

b) Political Science Education:

To examine the connection between culture and political movements, political science programs also employ traditional artistic mediums. These days, a large number of political science students research the role of these arts in resistance movements, particularly in relation to environmental advocacy, gender justice, and Dalit rights. The use of Parai Attam in political science education to study grassroots movements and the influence of culture on democratic participation is covered by Radhakrishnan (2019). According to his research, students learn about the connection between political struggle and cultural identity, particularly in marginalised communities, by studying these art forms.

c) Human Rights and Advocacy:

Traditional Tamil art forms are being utilised more and more in human rights education programs, which aim to raise awareness of environmental rights, gender equality, and civil liberties. Traditional theatre forms like Theru Koothu and Silambam are incorporated into public awareness campaigns about human rights violations through a number of programs organised by the Tamil Nadu Human Rights Commission. In addition to being entertaining, these performances convey strong messages about cultural identity, environmental rights, and social justice. Human rights organisations collaborate with local artists to teach youth how to use these platforms to inform others about their rights and to become community change agents.

3.3 Volunteer Organizations and Community Outreach

a) Youth Empowerment and Volunteering

Traditional art forms are being used more and more by volunteer organisations in Tamil Nadu to educate young people and raise awareness of social justice, gender equality, and human rights. These organisations train young volunteers in the art forms themselves as part of their capacity-building efforts, in addition to planning cultural performances. In addition to giving young people more power, this process guarantees that these artistic traditions are maintained and modified for contemporary causes.

b) Training for Social Change

Traditional arts are also used by volunteer organisations to provide adults and children in underserved communities with informal education. Utilising these artistic mediums as instruments for social empowerment and critical thinking is the aim. The "Art for Social Change" program, created by the

Rural Action Centre (RAC) in Puducherry, teaches kids in Villu Pattu and Theru Koothu about their rights and obligations as engaged citizens. Discussions concerning human rights, gender equality, and community empowerment are then sparked by these artistic mediums.

c) Training Workshops

To give young people the skills they need to use traditional art forms for advocacy, numerous NGOs offer training workshops. For example, Karagattam is occasionally used to impart water-saving skills while incorporating messages about women's involvement in decision-making. These shows provide the community with engaging educational opportunities in addition to being entertainment.

4. Suggestions

The study suggest the following steps to advance traditional Tamil art forms as instruments for advocacy based on rights:

- 1) **Create Specialised Academic Programs:** Academic institutions ought to offer courses specifically focused on art-based advocacy across a range of subject areas. Through these programs, students can learn how to effectively use traditional art forms, such as Villu Pattu and Parai Attam, to empower communities and raise awareness of social issues.
- 2) **Encourage Multidisciplinary Learning:** These traditional arts can be incorporated into more comprehensive academic programs. For example, gender studies, environmental education, and community development can all benefit from the use of arts-based methods. Students from a variety of backgrounds can discover how these artistic endeavours give voice to under-represented communities and aid social justice campaigns.
- 3) **Encourage Partnerships with NGOs and Grassroots Organisations:** Working together with volunteer organisations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) is essential. They can give young people and students a platform to actively participate in practical projects that use these arts for advocacy. Students can put what they've learnt into practice in their communities by collaborating with grassroots organisations, which can help spread awareness of issues like environmental justice, gender violence, and discrimination based on caste.
- 4) **Encourage and Honour Traditional Artists:** More funds, training courses, and exhibition spaces should be provided to artists who are upholding and maintaining these customs. These art forms' continued existence and development as instruments of social activism will be guaranteed by government funding and scholarly acknowledgement.
- 5) **Use Technology for Outreach:** To reach a worldwide audience, utilise digital platforms like YouTube, social media, and online workshops. These platforms can teach people how to use traditional arts as a means of political expression and rights advocacy, as well as raise awareness, particularly among young people.
- 6) **Establish Community-Based Initiatives:** To introduce local populations to these art forms, community-led workshops and performance projects can be planned. This will strengthen local leadership and foster social

cohesion by enabling communities to use their cultural customs as a means of resistance.

- 7) **Cross-Cultural Collaboration:** Promoting cross-cultural interactions between Tamil Nadu's traditional artists and artists from other areas or nations can result in new kinds of cooperation and aid in the wider dissemination of messages centred on rights.

In conclusion, it is important to consider these traditional art forms as more than just entertainment. We can produce a generation of young people who are not only culturally aware but also prepared to use art as a potent tool for social change and empowerment by formalising their place in education and strategically utilising it for rights-based advocacy. This strategy will guarantee the survival of these artistic disciplines, their ability to represent the underprivileged, and their contribution to a more equitable society.

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