



# Therukoothu, Draupadi Worship and Politics of Identity

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**Abstract:** The paper aims to discuss the historicity and practice of Therukoothu, performed in Southern Andhra Pradesh and Northern Tamil Nadu regions, not just as an art form but as a cultural practice rooted in goddess worship. The paper elaborates on the association of Therukoothu with Draupadi Amman Worship and Draupadi cult, while examining how a character from the epic tale of Mahabharata has become a goddess with a cultic history. The paper further progresses to a critical analysis of the patronization and practice of Therukoothu during the 14<sup>th</sup> Century and how it was used as a political tool to create false consciousness within the communities belonging to the Draupadi worshipping cult.

**Keywords:** Therukoothu, Kattaikoothu, Draupadi Amman, Draupadi Cult, False Consciousness.

## I. Introduction

Therukoothu is a derivative of Koothu, an ancient performance which was popular during the 14<sup>th</sup> century in the regions of Tondaimandalam, Tamil Nadu. Unlike Koothu, which was confined to temples, Therukoothu is now known as a street-theatre devoid of its traditional purpose, and is largely performed either for the purpose of entertainment or for story-telling of the Mahabharata. Largely, Therukoothu is known for narrating the Tamil version of the Mahabharata, i.e, the Villibharatam attributed to Villiputtur Azhwar.<sup>1</sup> It is believed that the Villibharatam is an improvisation of Perundevanar's Paratam<sup>2</sup> that was composed in the 9<sup>th</sup> century.

The term Therukoothu, is a colloquial Tamil word, literally refers to street-theatre, where 'Theru' means street and 'Koothu' suggests dance/performance/theatre. However, Muthukumaraswamy (2006) in his article "Fieldwork Report: Discourse of the blurred genre: Case of Draupadi Kuravanchi Koothu" highlights the etymology of "Koothu," and discusses its association with sacred possession or trance. Further, he mentions how possession or trance becomes a part of Therukoothu performances, especially during the enactment of the episode, 'Disrobing of Draupadi'. Therefore, Therukoothu is understood as a practice rooted in sacred rituals and shamanism, sharing a common root with other traditional art forms such as Kathakali, Mudi yettu, Yakshagana, Teyyam and Bhutam (Swaminathan, 1991). However, today Therukoothu is practiced in its folk versions, majorly for entertainment purposes, far from its traditional roots.

Although, Therukoothu is an umbrella term used for various forms of street performances such as Kattaikoothu, Kuravanchi Koothu,<sup>3</sup> Nattu Koothu, Chakyar Koothu<sup>4</sup> and Samaya Koothu;<sup>5</sup> it is widely

<sup>1</sup> Villiputhur Alwar, also referred to as Villiputurar was a Vaishnavite scholar and poet, hailing from the northern part of Tamil Nadu, composed the Villibharatam, under the patronization of the King of Vakapakai, Varapathi Atkondan in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century.

<sup>2</sup> It is one of the oldest versions of the epic, Mahabharata known as 'Bharatha Venba' a 12,000-verse Tamil work sung by the Sangam-era poet, Perundevanar.

<sup>3</sup> Muthukumaraswamy (2006) in his paper "Fieldwork Report: Discourse of the blurred genre: Case of Draupadi Kuravanchi Koothu" discusses Kuravanchi Koothu as a genre of Tamil folk theatre that is distinct with other forms of

popular as Kattaikoothu, which is central to my study. The name ‘Kattaikoothu’ however has come in common use only after ‘Tamil Natu Kattaikuttu Kalai Valaracci Munnerra Cankam’ has popularized it in 1990 (Venkatesan, 2021). In Kattaikoothu, ‘Koothu’ suggests drama or theatre and, ‘Kattai’ indicates stick or wood, referring broadly to the use of wooden elements and props that are used in the performance such as head gear (*kiritam*), shoulder gear, other ornamentation and weapons (Fig.1). They are known as the ‘Kattai Vesham’ (Bruin, 1999 *qtd.in* Venkateshan, 2021).



Figure 1 Kattai Vesham including Kiritam, Shoulder gear and sword; Source: Kattaikuthu\_official

The visual attributes of Therukoothu performers, such as the attire, ornamentation, and makeup play a huge role adding to the temperament of each character, and determine how a character in the performance is perceived and understood by the audience. For instance, the use of the colour green in the makeup signifies nobility, whereas, red represents ferocity and the colour pink is used for a dignified character and black oftentimes portrays a ‘wild character’ (Bruin, 1999 *qtd.in* Venkateshan, 2021). All the characters of the chosen episodes are played by men, including the roles of women. However, in recent times, women are taking active part in Therukoothu performances, especially playing the roles of Draupadi and Kunti.<sup>6</sup>

Apart from main characters in the performances, it is Kattiyakkaran (similar to Sutradhara in Sanskrit dramas) who plays a major role throughout the play. His part starts with introducing the characters, the episode that is to be enacted on the specific day, and then throughout the play he bridges the gap between theatre and audience by making pun and social commentary. As Venkateshan (2021) emphasises, the role of Kattiyakkaran becomes important as he “brings the divine world in a constant dialogue with the real world. Through such a breaking of the distance, religious stories and teachings are woven into the narrative for the people” (p. 55).

Often, these interventions and humour by the Kattaikaran turn out to be social and political commentary. The efforts of the character, outside of the main plot, is to make the audience completely invested in the performance. The performance, unlike its other similar forms of Kathakali and Yakshaganam, is extremely dynamic, and full of vigour. The enactment consists of continuous leaps, energetic movements, and loud and emphatic diction in an attempt to create the dramatic atmosphere but more importantly to keep the drowsy audience awake and engaged.

Additionally, the performance is accompanied by music, with a team of musicians occupying the stage behind the Therukoothu performers. They also add to the dramatic ambience by creating the mood of the story or episode that is being performed. Various musical instruments such as Harmonium, Mirudhangam, Mukhavina, Kanjara, Nathasuvaram and Thala vadyam are used to enhance the enacting.

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Therukoothu due to the roles of male Kuravar(gypsy) and a female Kuratti (gypsy) who recite verses and deliver prophecies about audience’s future. His paper highlights Draupadi Kuravanchi Koothu, where the female gypsy assumes the role of Draupadi.

<sup>4</sup> The famous Chakyar koothu is practised in Kerala which has the basic root from Therukoothu. This Therukoothu is also been mentioned in Silapathikaram. See; Vijayalakshmi, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Samaya Koothu is to enact religious dramas and religious topics (ibid)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.thehindu.com/features/metroplus/koothu-comes-to-town/article5702479.ece>

Most of the times, the Therukoothu troupe select episodes from the Villibharatam that are already known to the audience, and treat the events in the performance as rituals during Amman festivities. The episodes include: Draupadi Kalyanam, Supattirai Kalyanam, Alli Arjunan, Pancal Capatam, Arjunan Tapam, Krishnan Titu, Abhimanyu Cantai, Karna Mokshayam, Patinettam Por, and Aravan Kalappali (Suganya & Vijayalakshmi, 2020 p.13).<sup>7</sup> These narratives often portray Draupadi as the protagonist, emphasizing her character as Virashakti, one who protects the Pandavas, unlike the vulnerable wife, as depicted in the Brahmanical versions.

## II. Historical Context

Nimeshika Venkateshan (2021) in her paper “Dialogic Interactions in Vernacular Hinduism: A Perspective on Therukoothu, Folk Ritualistic Theatre of South India” attempted to trace historical origins of Therukoothu by discussing the hypotheses proposed by prominent scholars in the field, including Alf Hildebeitel, Hanna M. de Bruin and Richard Armando Frasca. While Hildebeitel (1988) mentions the Therukoothu tradition as specifically performed during the Draupadi Amman festivals in Gingee of the Villipuram district (600- 700AD), Frasca (1990) shared a contrasting view, rejecting Hildebeitel, by stating its origins to the Tamil Pattini cult (100 AD) in Madras. However, Kathiravan (2016) confirms that the Draupadi cult has emerged from the existing Pattini cult.

Nevertheless, Muthukumaraswamy (2006) introduces Therukoothu performance as an essential part of ‘the big festival of Mahabharata in the Draupadi amman temple’. Further, Swaminathan (1991) observed Therukoothu as a form of worship, which is gradually transformed from tribal cult hero worshipping tradition to the epic deity, Draupadi Amman, who is associated with the war, and generally worshipped by warrior cult communities. Therefore, it can be established that the Therukoothu tradition saw significant changes with the emergence of Draupadi Amman worship patronized by Draupadi worshipping cult that was associated with wars.

## III. Therukoothu as a Ritual at Draupadi Amman Festival

Therukoothu becomes one of the important rituals organized and performed during the 18-day Draupadi Amman Festival. A few selective episodes of the Villibharatam are performed eulogizing Draupadi Amman. According to Suganya & Vijayalakshmi (2020) Therukoothu is a ritual performed to propitiate Draupadi Amman. It is performed in her honour, it is an act of service and prayer to the goddess. However, for Therukoothu, there is usually no set theatre ready for the troupe to perform. As a part of the Amman festival, which falls in the month of Chithirai, a post-harvest season, a temporary stage is organized in front of the shrine, or open fields are used as the stage. (Swaminathan, 1991). Like several other popular theatres, Therukoothu is performed during the nights, typically starting at around 10 pm and continuing until 4 or 5 am. People of the rural communities gather in front of the shrine, where the stage is set up, and arrange woven mats for seating. The spectators are not charged for watching the performance as it is patronized by the Draupadi worshipping community during the Draupadi Amman festival.

## IV. Mother Goddess Worship and Draupadi as Amman

In South India, Amman worship is common community cultural practice. They believe that Amman (mother goddess), in her various forms, protects the devotees from various problems associated with their lived realities.<sup>8</sup> For instance, a very common and widely worshipped deity, ‘Gangamma’ (the river/water goddess), is invoked for seasonal rains or during the times of draught. Similarly, ‘Ankamma’, the cholera goddess, is generally worshipped to protect the people of the village from any disease. Alternately, a few village goddesses/Grama-devathas are named after the villages that they reside/protect such as Addankamma (goddess of Addanki), Pandilamma (goddess of Pandil) (Whitehead, 1921). These mother goddesses that are believed to protect the people of the village are located at the periphery of the village and often times do not own a permanent shrine, rather temporary ones are built during the goddess festivals, often referred to as ‘Jataras’ (Whitehead 1921, p. 20).

<sup>7</sup> Muthukumaraswamy (2006) mentions that belief in the people about receiving boons and blessings for witnessing different episodes of the Bharata. For instance, it is believed that ‘Karna Moksham’ liberates the departed soul of a closely associated deceased from the cycle of rebirth, and attending ‘Arjuna’s Penance’ brings blessings to enhance the fertility in women.

<sup>8</sup> Rangarajan, Padmini. (2019). “Significance of Rural Female Folk Deities- Rituals, Culture, Belief System and Celebrations in Tamil Nadu” Vol 11. 214-220.

However, with the Sanskritization of village goddesses, permanent settings such as temples and shrines were built in the recent centuries. Along the same lines, one can observe that the village goddesses that were originally worshipped in aniconic forms are now given human forms and sculpted into three-dimensional iconic figures. For example, in my field work I found iconic forms of Draupadi and Dharmaraja dominating the original aniconic form of Amman at the Katherapalle Draupadi Amman Temple, Andhra Pradesh. Thus, it can be hypothesized that Draupadi Amman may have originated from Pattini cult, as several scholars believe, and was worshipped in aniconic form, later transformed into Draupadi Amman. This can be suggested by the lack of coherent iconography that is specific to her, which is often the case with various village deities that are affected by the sanskritization. In today's context, it is noticed that Draupadi Amman is often portrayed as a standing female figure carrying a trisula as Kali, or as Mariamman (Diesel, 2002), and other times she appears holding a flower, hinting at the Hinduization of local deity with adaptable iconography (Fig. 2).



Figure 2 (Left) Aniconic form of Amman in front of the Idols of Draupadi Amman and Dharmaraja at the Katherapalle Draupadi Amman Temple, Andhra Pradesh; (Right) Wooden Idol of Draupadi Amman, holding a flower, at Chilamakulapalli Draupadi Amman Temple, Andhra Pradesh (Photographed by Author).

## V. The Draupadi Worshipping Cult

In addition, Hildebeitel (1988) mentions that one of the verses in the pucari song<sup>9</sup> calls Draupadi Amman as the “mother of my house” and as “kulateyvam” (community goddess), who resides in Gingee. In this context, Draupadi Amman, is a ‘lineage deity’, and worshipped in her ‘warrior forms’, by a few warrior-castes and communities belonging to South India such as Konars<sup>10</sup>, Vanniyars<sup>11</sup>, Vellalars<sup>12</sup> and Mutaliars<sup>13</sup> (Hildebeitel, 1988). According to the medieval Dravidian caste system, Vanigan and Vellalars were categorized as occupational communities as merchants and agriculturalists respectively (Subrahmanian, 1980),<sup>14</sup> and were considered as the communities belonging to the

<sup>9</sup> Pucari songs are songs sung by the priest in the praise of the goddess Draupadi Amman. Hildebeitel (1988) in his “The Cult of Draupadi” Volume 1 analyses the translated versions of Pucari songs that are sung at the Draupadi Amman Temple in Gingee.

<sup>10</sup> Konars claim their origins from the Kon dynasty that ruled the Gingee area and built the Draupadi Amman temple at Melacceri, north of Gingee (Hildebeitel, 1988).

<sup>11</sup> The immigrant Vanniyars, who are named Tigalas in Karnataka, retain the ‘Vira’ character for Draupadi amman. They also refer to themselves as ‘Virakumaras’, which directly indicates their earlier status as martial community (Soni, 2015).

<sup>12</sup> Hildebeitel (1988) writes that, “When one looks to Vellalar traditions more generally, one finds considerable evidence for Kstria affinities”.

<sup>13</sup> Kenneth (1977) in “The New Wind”, through the Origin myths of castes from the Skanda Purana, evidently points out that Mutaliyars (Mudaliyars) were warriors, who were given the title ‘Mutaliyar’ for their bravery.

<sup>14</sup> Ancient literary texts such as Silapaddikaram and Tholkapiyam mention the Tamil caste system comprising of Brahmin, Arasan, Vanigan, and the Vellalar corresponding to Brahmana, Kshatriyas, the Vaisyas and Sudras of Aryan caste system.

'lower' caste in the rigid the social hierarchy (Hiltebeitel, 1988). Later, Vanniyars (who were earlier known as Palli) claimed themselves as 'Vanniya Kula Kshatriyas' and 'Padaiyachi' due to their assigned role, the head of the Army, during the Chola reign.<sup>15</sup> The title 'Padaiyachi' evidently suggests the participation of Vanniyars in the war-fares reinforcing their presumed Kshatriya roles. Furthermore, the Vanniyars in a village near Gingee are known as Mudaliyars (Anuradha, 2017). It is observed that the Chola King Karikala Cholan has awarded the title 'Mudaliyar' to the members of the Agam udiyar community.<sup>16</sup> This title is given to a first ranking person/people in the Tamil Chola feudal society occupying higher positions like ministers, army chiefs, regular rulers, soldiers and others. Mudaliyars were thus serving their role as avant-garde soldiers and army chieftains,<sup>17</sup> serving the role as 'Kshatriyas', which enabled them to mobilize towards the upward social hierarchy. Through various art forms, the warrior-caste consciousness was manoeuvred by the political hegemony such as Cholas, who strengthen their army by incorporating the communities to fight against the mighty Pandyan. Later this ideological approach was manifested into Kshatriya dharma when Nayakas and Vijayanagar rulers utilized the warrior-community consciousness to fight against the Muslim invaders. As a discourse of war and sacrifice, the story of Draupadi as Virapanchali and war-deity, was narrated to the communities such as Vanniyars, Velala Mudaliyars and Konars.

"Virapanchali", as the Therukoothu Bharata describes, is a chief Kshatriya ruler, who possesses 'Virya', a quality that makes her an accomplished warrior and brings to the forefront the 'he' in 'her'. Her aggression and strength are said to be "unparallel in the history of Kshatriya womanhood" (Sarkar, 2023). Thus, the above-mentioned communities worship her as warrior-deity, familial deity and cultic deity.

## VI. Conclusion

Drawing from the historical anecdotes, and local cultural practices, it is surmised that the ruling classes patronized Therukoothu as one among various other art forms such as Villupattu<sup>18</sup> to keep the epic tale in continuous discourse. This as a political ideology was employed in order to motivate the warrior communities to participate in the wars. Presumably, the art forms were widely used as effective political tools, to create a 'false consciousness' among the designated 'warrior-castes.' The rituals that are a part of the Draupadi Amman Festival add to the narrative. For instance, the ritual of Aravan Kalabali, where Aravan, son of Arjuna, born to the Naga princess Ulupi, sacrificed himself to the war-deity for the victory of Pandavas validates the sacrifice (Fig. 3). The reiteration of such a story, and idols placed in front of Amman shrines substantiate the understanding of 'self-sacrifice' (of a son, that the cult believes to be of Draupadi Amman) for the victory of war as the rightful, natural or even as a second nature/ 'common-sense.' The hand-picked episodes of the epic highlight the expected and appreciated qualities of a warrior, and this showcases how the cult was psychologically cultivated and conditioned to participate and sacrifice themselves for the victory in the war. Therefore, a ritual and the enactment of the story of Aravan, as a part of the discourse, could be highly politically motivated.

<sup>15</sup> A.K.Natarajan qtd.in the Vanniyakula Kshatriyas blog post

<sup>16</sup> <https://hindufestivalsandrituals.blogspot.com/2016/11/the-mudaliyar-community-and-its-history.html>

<sup>17</sup> <https://defonseka.com/front-page/the-articles/photo-essays/mudaliyars-explained/>

<sup>18</sup> Villupattu is a medieval oral tradition in Tamil Nadu. The songs are played using Villu (Bow) as a musical instrument.



Figure 3 (Left) A life size sculpture of Aravan, placed outside the Katherapalle Draupadi Amman Temple, Andhra Pradesh; (Right) A wooden sculptural head of Aravan, placed inside the temple at Sri Rangaraja Puram, Andhra Pradesh.

The traditional form of Therukoothu, which was once deeply embedded with political ideologies, has now been transformed into an annual ritual. However, in today's context, Therukoothu no longer serve any ideological purposes but it has evolved into a visual folk spectacle of Tamil street- theatre that incorporates various mythologies that are associated with village deities such as Gangamma and Mariamman.

Even though, Therukoothu has now become a mere form of entertainment, it is an artistic tradition that continued to evolve and flourish as popular street theatre due to Amman worshipping culture. This shift in the tradition can be credited to the dynamics of patronage to Therukoothu by specific communities associated with Draupadi Amman.

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