

## Let's salute our Father of Tamil drama on his death centenary!



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The Tamil drama has a long tradition. It is the practitioners of performing arts, who were the origin points of the Tamil scholarly tradition. The ancient Tamil literature has lots of information about artistes, instruments of art and methods of performing arts. It was the Father of Drama, Thoo. Dha. Sankaradas Swamigal, who was hailed as the chief teacher of the Tamil drama for his rich contributions to the Tamil drama and for his refinement and reformation of the genre.

Born at Kaatunaickenpatti in 1867, Thoothukudi Dhamodaran Sankaran made a foray into the world of drama at a very young age. Playing mostly the role of a demon, the young Sankaran would hop here and there, stride like a colossus, fully made up, on the sandy stage in the village. At the time the Tamil drama had as its staple the Hindu mythological tales. He strutted about

majestically on the stage in the guises of the mythically demonic characters such as Yama (God of Death), Gadothkajan, Iranyan, Ravana and Saneeswar (God of Saturn).

There have been several legends speaking about the fabulous histrionic skill of Sankaradas Swamigal. Once, the way he essayed the role of Yama (God of Death) catching hold of the life of mythological Satyavan, husband of Savithri, was so horrific that a woman in the audience had an abortion; when he roared like a thunder wearing the mantle of the diabolical king Iranyan throwing away his heretic son Prahalathan, a woman in the audience fainted, terror-stricken. Watching Sankaran donning the guise of Saneeswar (God of Destiny) and assuming the airs of a cruel and fear-striking personage in the drama 'Nala Dhamayanthi', a woman spectator had her blood vessels burst out and died.

It was said that these incidents bearing the stamp of his histrionic skill caused guilty feelings in Sankaran. So, though he was at the zenith of glory in theatre, he quit acting.

### **New lease of life**

Feeling guilty of having been the cause of some innocent women's death and diseases through his amazing acting skill, he walked out on the profession and donned the saffron and plunged into the life of an ascetic, wandering about in the places of holy pilgrimage such as Kasi, Rameswaram etc. It was at Kathirkamam in Sri Lanka that he got his head tonsured and carried out the customary Hindu last rites (kneading a marshal of food) for himself - which culturally a man does for his father. It was thus that Sankaran turned into Sankaradas Swamigal.

At this time, Pudukottai Kanjira vidwan Maanpoondiyar adopted him as his child and trained him in music. Sankaradas Swamigal made friends with Dhashinamurthi, also a student of Maanpoondiyar, and learnt from him the nuances of the Tamil music.

At that time, the Tamil drama was down in the dumps as the plays used to be staged according to the whims and fancies of the leading actors. The quality of drama was relegated to the background on account of the actors' cut-throat competition, quarrels and controversies.

Then, Sankaradas Swamigal made a re-entry into drama, this time not as an actor but as a dramatist. He took upon himself the much-needed responsibility of reforming the theatre and introduced several measures to infuse a disciplined structure into the performing art. He wrote new plays and composed countless songs brimming with literary beauties. He also introduced several changes into the musical instruments and changed the seating arrangements for musicians on the stage.

As a result, the Tamil drama got a new lease of life and the society's contemptuous outlook towards the drama artistes changed for the better. The general attitude of equating the drama artistes with immorality underwent a healthy makeover. The customary contemptuous Tamil word 'Koothaadigal' (slang for drama artistes) yielded to the more refined decent word 'Kalaingargal' (artistes).

### **Upside down**

But unfortunately, Sankaradas Swamigal's reformation was short-lived as at one point of time actors started showing their true colours, delivering lines and singing songs on the spur of the moment and thereby exhibiting their innate indiscipline. The drama field relapsed into the old practice of infighting and indiscipline. So, Sankaradas Swamigal experimented with a new method of staging plays. He roped in boys and trained them in the dramatics. Thus, he formed what later on became well-known as 'Balar Sabha' (Children's Theatre).

It was this 'Balar Sabha' which gave birth to the later-day acting and singing stalwarts such as T.K.Shanmugam, T.K. Bhagawathi, S.G.Kittappa, M.R.Govindasamy.

Sankaradas Swamigal wrote over 50 plays including 'Valli Thirumanam', 'Pavalakkodi,' 'Bhaktha Prahalatha,' 'Lavakusa,' 'Harichandra', 'Kovalan Kathai' and contributed to the growth of Tamil music drama or opera.

Out of Sankaradas Swamigal's handwritten manuscripts and small prints, only 16 have, so far, been retrieved. Musicologist Arimalam, Su.Padmanathan and Prof. V. Arasu have compiled these plays.

Why is there no drama literature in the Tamil literary tradition dating back to over 2,000 years ago? The reason is that the Tamil plays used to be written more as performing texts rather than as written texts.

### **Tendency of negligence**

Sankaradas Swamigal's dramas are, in fact, an immense literary treasure, which read more delightful every time they are perused. They are all excellent works of art in terms of structure, discipline, charm, elegance and tastes. But unfortunately, his works teeming with nuances of the Tamil drama tradition have not been brought into the domain of public reading. Nor were their literary standard and beauties measured.

The reason why Sankaradas Swamigal's writings were not treated as literary creations was the tendency on the part of the critics to neglect them. They have ignored his works and have never evaluated their supreme splendour on the literary touchstone. It was a sort of 'untouchability.'

In the twilight of his life, Sankaradas Swamigal was bed-ridden with paralysis and had lost the ability to speak. Yet, he continued

to visit the theatres and correct the actors' performance, watching the plays from an easy chair stashed away on the sideways.

The Father of Tamil Drama, who was responsible for the renaissance of the Tamil theatre, breathed his last on November 13, 1922. He was buried in the burial ground at Karuvadikuppam. Every year on the day of his death anniversary, drama artistes from various parts of Tamil Nadu come and pay homage to him.

It is a century since the Father of the Tamil Drama passed away. He must be given due respect and paid right homage by conducting celebrations that will hold aloft his dramas, books and speeches. It is only through these remembrance events that errors and pitfalls plaguing the world of the Tamil art can be set right.

*November 13 marks the end of Sankaradas Swamigal's death centenary.*

**Translated by V. Mariappan.**