

Carnatic music and a folk theatre form come together to push the stubborn lines of caste and gender

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Performed recently in Mumbai, 'Karnatic Kattaikkuttu' allows 'for an aesthetic exchange', while retaining the integrity of the two diverse art forms.



Chirodeep Chaudhuri/First Edition Arts

On the night of January 19, Magsaysay award-winning Carnatic vocalist TM Krishna and Kattaikkuttu veteran Perungattur P Rajagopal were engaged in an animated discussion on the lawns of the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya in Mumbai. It was an interlude between two acts of a performance. The audience listened raptly, as the speakers encouraged them to consider a few weighty questions: Is art sublime knowledge or labour? Are the arts bound by caste, or does each caste have a designated art? Having just watched a unique collaborative piece, the answers to the questions did not come easily – even and especially for the rasikas. In that moment, the success of that night's experimental performance was evidenced. The collaborative presentation, titled *Karnatic Kattaikkuttu*, represented a coming together of two powerful performing arts: kattaikkuttu, a centuries-old folk theatre form, and one of the world's richest classical music traditions, Carnatic music. In the performance that lasted over two hours, a couple of acts from the Mahabharata – the disrobing of Draupadi and the 18th day of the great war – were played out. The kattaikkuttu troupe comprised 12-13 performers – actors, musicians and singers – who were dressed in the traditional makeup and costumes. The main characters wore the elaborate wooden shoulder and head ornaments called kattai, which gives this theatre form its name. In a reversal of traditional kattaikkuttu norms, several female actors played male characters in the play. The original track of the play was seamlessly punctuated by Carnatic pieces, performed by Krishna, Sangeetha Sivakumar and accompanying instrumental artistes. *Karnatic Kattaikkuttu* also featured a short poetic composition by award-winning poet Perumal Murugan, to pose questions about oppression through the epic narrative.



Photo courtesy: Chirodeep Chaudhuri/First Edition Arts.

Managed by the performing arts company First Edition Arts, *Karnatic Kattaikkuttu* debuted in December 2017 and has since been performed in several cities and at many events, including the Kochi-Muziris Biennale 2018 and the Serendipity Arts Festival in Goa. At the Sangrahalaya, the show received warm praise from a diverse audience, which included not only Carnatic and theatre rasikas, but all manner of professionals and young people.

The idea behind such collaborations, Krishna said, was to “demolish the classical-folk demarcation. This vocabulary diminishes the so-called folk, reduces it to a lesser, exotic, ethnic piece of curiosity.” Kattaikkuttu “is a serious art form,” he noted. “And there is nothing high and mighty about those art forms titled as classical.”

Undertones of caste

Kattaikkuttu is a folk theatre form from Tamil Nadu. It is often conflated with terukkuttu, but the two forms are decidedly different. While kattaikkuttu is a multi-artiste, all-night performance that is created primarily for entertainment, terukkuttu is part of a religious street ritual performed by two men in honour of the goddess Mariamman. The word kuttu – common to both – means theatre, teru means street, and kattai refers to the elaborate headgear and shoulder ornaments worn by the main artistes.



Photo courtesy: Chirodeep Chaudhuri/First Edition Arts.

According to theatre scholar Hanne M de Bruin, the history of kattaikkuttu is at least 200 years old. But given that it has many recognisable elements from the Sanskrit text [Natyashastra](#), such as the tuning of instruments, a musical invocation, invocatory songs to various deities, a comic element, elaborate makeup and costumes, one may infer that its origins go back further. Such elements are similarly conspicuous in other folk theatre forms of South India such Kathakali, Yakshagana and Koodiyattam, among others.

A traditional Kattaikkuttu piece entails a performance by a troupe of 12-15 artistes – all men – enacting episodes from the Sanskrit epics and the *Puranas*. The actors act, sing and dance, and are accompanied by a three-member orchestra. The musicians play a harmonium that provides the drone, a mirukantam/mridangam and tholak/dholak for percussion and a mukavinai, which is an oboe-like wind instrument. The hand gestures and footwork are simple and repetitive, punctuated by vigorous whirling, and the dialogue delivery is loud. It is designed to engage with audiences sitting on three sides of an open air theatre. The craft is usually passed down within the family and community, but fresh new apprentices may also be inducted into the fold.

An important feature of kattaikkuttu is the character of the kattiyakkaran, who is the herald, the jester and a sutradhar – all at once. The kattiyakkaran straddles and connects the worlds between the divine and the human, interweaving the traditional narrative with social commentary.



Photo courtesy: Chirodeep Chaudhuri/First Edition Arts.

A less visible aspect of this theatre form is the matter of caste. De Bruin says that kattaikkuttu forms a part of the village's social structure. "The involvement in its tradition of castes like vannars (washermen) and pantarams (flower garlanders) seems to have grown out of their particular position within the village hierarchy and the ritual obligations resulting from it." There is an evident divider between the entertainers and the entertained.

But at the Kattaikkuttu Sangam gurukulam founded and run by P Rajagopal and de Bruin since 1990 in Kanchipuram, Tamil Nadu, artistic traditions are being fostered without the incumbent caste and gender biases. "We believe that theatre is education: during their years of artistic training at the gurukulam, students acquire important skills – such as [self] confidence, the ability to present oneself in public, team work, problem solving [and] empathy, [skills] that formal education, unfortunately, often fails to deliver," said de Bruin.

Pushing boundaries

Artistic collaborations are not new, and performing artistes everywhere are coming together to create new forms and compositions. But the merit of

Karnatic Kattaikkuttu

lies in pushing the boundaries not just of art, but those stubborn lines of caste and gender.

Video courtesy: Sue Rees/YouTube.

While the Kattaikkuttu Sangam has led the way by training female artistes in an art formerly forbidden to them, the collaboration erases the caste lines that have divided folk and classical artistes over the centuries. It pushes the envelope further by putting together on stage two genres, which have thus far stayed on the opposite ends of the artistic spectrum.

De Bruin hopes that it helps the audience appreciate "the fact that each art form, irrespective of whether it has been labelled folk, classical or otherwise, requires extensive exposure in order to be truly appreciated". "We hope that experiencing *Karnatic Kattaikkuttu* will shift the mindset of the spectators," she said. "Folk and classical are value-laden terms that have less to do with the [different] aesthetics of these art forms and the way they handle performance knowledge, than with social divisions, prejudice and power."



Photo courtesy: Chirodeep Chaudhuri/First Edition Arts.

One of the difficulties, the organisers faced, says Devina Dutt of First Edition Arts, was to "declare that we are not an example of fusion or a spectacle or entertainment and still seek the funds needed for it". But, she says, they are committed to "retain the integrity and autonomy of the creative forces that have made this possible, and present it with sensitivity and in keeping with its aesthetic values".

The intention of such a collaboration, says Krishna, was "to retain each art form's distinctiveness, create meeting points and allow differences or disconnections to remain."

Such experiments, he said, "allow for an aesthetic exchange that is usually unseen or unheard because of the social, cultural and political distance between the two art forms and their respective practitioners. But we have to be very sensitive and careful to make sure that there is no appropriation or manipulating of the kuttu tradition."

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