

Looking Back: Folklore Studies in Tamil Nadu

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Abstract - Though the Postgraduate and Research Department of Folklore at St. Xavier's College, Palayamkottai, Tamil Nadu, was established in 1987, Folklore Studies as a discipline had already been initiated two decades earlier. Since then, it has flourished as a key discipline within the institution. One of the pioneering scholars of Folklore Studies, Na. Vanamamalai (hereafter, Na. Va.) was not only based in Palayamkottai but also situated his research forum, Nellai Aivukkuzhu (Nellai Research Group) in this location. Na. Va. organized monthly meetings initiating debates on various themes cutting across disciplines such as History, Literature, Sociology, Anthropology and Folklore and published the essays presented at those meetings in a journal, popularly known as *Aaraichi*. When the Jesuit management, which administers St. Xavier's College (SXC), Palayamkottai, decided to start an academic programme on Folklore, riding on Prof. S. D. Lourdu's expertise on Folklore, the research atmosphere created by Na. Va. played a crucial role in establishing the discipline of Folklore as an interdisciplinary one. Both the Department of Folklore and its sisterly institute, Folklore Resources & Research Centre, have contributed to create debates in Folklore and Culture Studies through field-based research, documentation and publication. However, commercialization of education and its consequences pushed disciplines like Folklore to the margins. This paper documents major developments in the Folklore discipline at Palayamkottai. It attempts to situate Folklore Studies in Palayamkottai, first by focusing on the role of eminent folklorist Na. Vanamamalai and the Department of Folklore, SXC. In the subsequent sections, the paper analyses the major contributions by the Department and the kind of crisis it has been facing during the past few years. The final sections deal with how the Department attempts to negotiate with the reality and tries to establish its identity taking into consideration the contemporary educational context. It also briefly discusses some practices that the Department can adopt to recover itself from the present crisis.

Keywords - Folklore, Nattar, Vazhakkarukal, Na. Vanamamalai, S.D. Lourdu, Subaltern

Folklore as an Academic Discipline

Folklore Studies have emerged in the early 19th century Europe in concomitance with ‘the context of romanticism, a penchant for historical reconstruction, and emergence of nation states’ (Dundes, 1999, p. 1). The pioneering studies in this field were collections of various genres of folklore such as tales, myths and social customs, especially in countries like Germany. During the same period, disciplinary debates like ‘What constitutes folklore?’ and ‘How does one collect folklore?’ also drew the attention of pioneering scholars like the Grimm brothers and Wilhelm Mannhardt. However, folklore as an academic discipline was formally established in Finland. Finnish folklorists including Elias Lonnrot and Julius Krohn started collecting folklore to reconstruct the history of the Finnish people and to create a national identity (Dundes, 1999).

When Folkloric research was carried out in India, it had an altogether different objective. Though pioneering Indian folklorists such as Sankar Sen Gupta treated folklore as a potential source to reconstruct the history of oral cultures, folklore research did not receive a similar attention in India as it received in Western and European countries. Here, folklore is always treated as an alternative, contrast and/or opposite to classical traditions. Hence, folklore did not receive much institutional patronage. None of the central universities in Northern India had a separate department of folklore till 2009.¹ Interestingly, South Indian states like Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Kerala have folklore programmes at their universities. Karnataka has even established a separate university for Folklore. In Tamil Nadu, folklore was formally recognized as a field of study by Prof. Muthushanmugan while he was teaching at Madurai Kamaraj University in the 1960s. Later, Tamil University, Tanjore, too started a Department for Folklore. It was followed by the inauguration of a post-graduate and research department of Folklore at St. Xavier’s College, Palayamkottai. It was indeed a radical start in the field of Folklore Studies in Tamil Nadu.

This article focuses primarily on the contributions by the Department of Folklore at SXC, Palayamkottai to the field of Folklore Studies. It attempts to situate Folklore Studies in Palayamkottai, first by focusing on the role of the eminent folklorist Na. Vanamamalai and the Department of Folklore, SXC. In the subsequent sections, it discusses the major contributions of the Department and the kind of crisis it has been going through in the recent years. The final sections

¹ Only very few universities such as Hyderabad Central University, Assam University, Arunachal Pradesh University and the newly established central universities of Chhattisgarh and Karnataka have separate Departments of Folklore.

deal with how the Department attempts to negotiate with the reality and tries to establish its identity in the contemporary context. It also briefly examines the practices that the Department can adopt in order to recover itself from the present crisis. As this article is written from the author's perspective, the data and all other details referred to here are culled from his association with the Department and the major folkloric debates that have taken place within the past 20 years.

Na. Vanamamalai and Folklore Research in Tamil Nadu

Though the Postgraduate and Research Department of Folklore at St. Xavier's College, Palayamkottai, (hereafter, SXC) was established in 1987, the field of Folklore Studies had already emerged two decades earlier. One of the pioneering scholars of Folklore Studies, Na. Vanamamalai (hereafter, Na. Va.) was not only based in Palayamkottai but also set up his research forum, Nellai Aivukkuzhu (Nellai Research Group) in this location. Na. Va. organized monthly meetings initiating debates on various themes cutting across disciplines such as History, Literature, Sociology, Anthropology and Folklore. He invited scholars and amateurish writers from different parts of Tamil Nadu for these discussions. Later, the papers presented by these scholars were published in a journal, popularly known as *Aaraichi*.

Apart from these academic engagements, Na. Va. himself wrote a series of essays and translated some important articles by scholars such as Romila Thapar. Na. Va.'s earlier research started with the publication of ballads such as *Muthuppattan Kathai* (1971a), *Veera Pandiya Kattabommu Kathaipadal* (1971b), *Ivar Rasakkal Kathai* (1974) and *Khansahib Sandai* (1972). These ballads were published by Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai with his scholarly introduction. Besides, he has two seminal collection of essays, *Studies in Tamil Folk Literature* (1969) and *Interpretations of Tamil Folk Creations* (1981). Thus, one could argue that Na. Va., has contributed immensely to the establishment of Folklore as an academic discipline at SXC. He did this through his scholarly writings and by nurturing young scholars through the Nellai Aivukkuzhu and *Aaraichi*. The inter-disciplinary nature of the essays published in *Aaraichi* coincides with the establishment of Folklore at SXC as an inter-disciplinary programme. Besides, Na. Va.'s ideological orientation also contributed in/directly to the development of the Department of Folklore.

Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli was established in 1990. Till then, SXC had been affiliated to Madurai Kamaraj University (MKU). It is, in fact, the professors who worked at MKU, Madurai, who were instrumental

in establishing Folklore as a new discipline for research as early as the 1960s. Prof. Muthushanmugan, in particular, motivated his students to carry out research in Folklore Studies after witnessing folkloric works flourishing at American universities. Mu. Ramaswami and Samuel Sudhananda were two such students who contributed to the field significantly.

During this time, a young man called S. D. Lourdu from Devakottai came to SXC to start his academic career. Initially he was appointed as tutor in the Department of Tamil. Another pioneering scholar of Folklore, P. R. Subramaniyam (hereafter, PRS) also joined the same Department as tutor. Lourdu's interest in Folklore was inspired by PRS. When PRS left the Department to read for a Ph.D. at the Dravidian Linguistic Institute at Thiruvananthapuram, he gave all his books on Folklore to his friend, Lourdu. *Analytical Essays in Folklore* by Alan Dundes (1975) was one among them. Inspired by Dundes, Lourdu decided to do his Ph.D. in Folklore. This became a decisive moment not just for Lourdu personally but also Folklore Studies at SXC. When the Jesuit management which administers SXC, decided to start an academic programme in Culture Studies in the Southern Tamil Nadu, Lourdu's expertise on Folklore directed them to start a separate department devoted to the study of Folklore. At the same time, the research atmosphere created by Na. Va. has played a crucial role in establishing the discipline of Folklore Studies at SXC, though he was no more then.

Folklore Programme at SXC, Palayamkottai

The Folklore programme established at SXC was the first of its kind at the college level in India. Though there were few universities such as Madurai Kamarai University – Madurai, Mysore University – Mysore, Karnataka, and Kalyani University – Kalyani, West Bengal, have research departments with specific focus on Folklore, SXC might probably be the second or third institution to offer an MA programme in this discipline across India including universities.

When Folklore was introduced as a full-fledged post-graduate programme and as a doctoral programme at SXC, it got a new name, *Nattar Vazhakkariyal*, as opposed to the popular nomenclature *Nattuppuraviyal* in Tamil Nadu. Even now, the university departments at MKU – Madurai and Tamil University – Tanjore are known as Departments of *Nattuppuraviyal*. From naming the discipline to developing an inter-disciplinary syllabus to publishing seminal works in Folklore, the Department of Folklore has played a major role in Folklore Studies in Tamil Nadu. One could categorize the academic and research activities

initiated, nourished and developed by the Department as Palayamkottai School of Folklore. This Palayamkottai School would refer to both the activities and works of Na. Vanamamalai and that of the Department of Folklore at SXC.

Lourdu, in his book *Nattar Vazhakkariyal – Sila Atippataikal* (2011, pp. 9 -62), argues that the English word Folklore has two components, Folk and Lore, i.e., the people and their lore. Hence, it was expected that the Tamil equivalent should also have the equivalents of the two English terms. While the term, *Nattar* denotes Folk, *Vazhakkaru* in Tamil means lore. Since Folklore also denotes the discipline apart from the lore of the people, *Nattar Vazhakkariyal* fulfills this expectation. However, the term *Nattuppuraviyal* is incomplete in communicating the content of the discipline. The term, *Nattuppuram* means countryside and *iyal* means study. Hence the term, *Nattuppuraviyal* stands for the study of the country or rural side. This debate on the nomenclature of the discipline is not an end in itself. In fact, it actually raises the issue of what constitutes folk and lore. Hence, Lourdu argues the term *nattar* includes not only those in rural areas but also urban dwellers, whereas *Nattuppuram* specifically signifies the rural. In their contributions to Folklore Studies, Tamil scholars such as Aru. Ramanathan, I. Muthiah and others have advocated for the term, *Nattuppuraviyal*. Some even suggested other terms such as *Natodiyiyal* (study of nomads) and *Kiramappuraviyal* (study of villages). Likewise, some scholars also used terms such as *Pamarar* (uneducated) and *Natodi* (nomad) to denote ‘folk’. Lourdu demonstrated how these terms not only misrepresent the folk as an uneducated, rural or nomadic group but also invokes romantic sentiments about the rural. Some scholars often termed folklore, particularly folk songs, as *karril mitantha kavithai* (காற்றில் மிதந்த கவிதை), *serril muLaitha Senthamarai* (சேற்றில் முலைத்த செந்தாமரை) and *malaiyaruvi* (மலையருவி) invoking the romantic notions of folklore.

While proposing the term *nattar vazhakkariyal* as the proper name for the academic discipline, Lourdu clearly gives importance to what constituted the folk, their lore and the discipline. This idea of folklore, however, stems from the American notion of Folklore. While *The Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legends* offers more than 20 definitions of Folklore, Lourdu accepts the definition proposed by Alan Dundes: “The term ‘folk’ can refer to *any group of people of whatsoever* who share at least one common factor” (1980, p. 6). Likewise, there were various classifications of lore. Lourdu preferred Richard M. Dorson’s categorization of lore into four types: Oral Literature, Material Culture, Social Customs and Performing Arts.

Though the definition offered by Dundes advocated for the inclusion of any group with at least one common factor, the Palayamkottai school did not stick to that conceptualization. In general, ‘folk’ was always conceived as something that can be an alternative to or a contrast from elite or classic. For example, Prof. I. Muthiah conceives folklore as an alternative tradition to classical or dominant traditions. One of his monographs was titled as *Nattuppura Azhagiyal Marru azhagiyal*. In a similar vein, the Palayamkottai school, through their interdisciplinary curriculum, conceptualized the folk as subaltern, indirectly invoking Antonio Gramsci. As the discipline got situated in Palayamkottai (a place nurtured by Na. Va.) and developed with the support of Jesuit priests who promoted liberation theology, ‘folk’ were identified as subalterns, the oppressed and the poor. The seminars, conferences and workshops organized by the Palayamkottai school echoed this notion of Folklore repeatedly. The book, *Sanankalin Samikal*, published by Folklore Resources and Research Centre (FRRC)² was in fact a culmination of a conference and conceives folk deities as the deities of ordinary people.

Contributions of FRRC & the Department of Folklore

One could observe three kinds of contributions by FRRC and the Department of Folklore, SXC to the larger Tamil society. They are: (a) establishing Folklore as a multi-disciplinary academic program, (b) publishing key texts to help run the course and for the benefit of the larger society, and (c) training young scholars in the field of Folklore Studies.

Establishing Folklore as a Multi-disciplinary Discipline

When the Department of Folklore was established at SXC in 1987, the teachers recruited came from different disciplines: Tamil, English and Anthropology. The founding Head of the Department made sure that the Department remained multidisciplinary. Even after Lourdu’s retirement in 1996, the Department continued to accommodate persons from other disciplines such as Anthropology and Ethnomusicology.

Apart from the teaching staff, the syllabus of the M.A. programme was designed from a multi-disciplinary perspective. While designing the fundamental and core courses in Folklore, the Board of Studies (BoS) of the early period took solid steps to accommodate disciplines such as History, Sociology, Religion,

² FRRC is an autonomous institution established within the SXC premises as a support to the Department for Folklore research. It has a library, museum, audio-visual archive and publication division.

Cultural Anthropology, Semiotics and Performance Studies. Students at the time were exposed not only to Folklore but also other disciplines.

Parallel to these developments related to the curriculum, FRRC and the Department organized an international Folklore workshop in three phases. Established folklorists such as Alan Dundes, Lauri Honko, Alf Hiltebeitel and Stuart Blackburn were invited to these workshops as resource persons. About thirty young participants from different parts of the country attended these workshops, apart from the students and staff of the Department. Almost all the scholars associated with Folklore Studies including A. Sivasubramanian, I Muthiah, M Ramaswamy and Aru Ramanathan were all trained at these workshops.

FRRC has also initiated audio-visual documentation of folk practices across Tamil Nadu and South India. Students and scholars were brought in as field workers or research assistants for the research projects. Folkloric sessions such as story-telling, performance forms, ritual events and celebrations were given importance and were documented extensively with the available audio-visual equipment. These documentations were archived properly in the audio-visual archive of FRRC for research and academic purposes.

FRRC, particularly its founding director Lourdu, was keen on establishing a separate library for the discipline. While purchasing books for the library, Lourdu took meticulous efforts to buy books not only about Folklore but also related to other disciplines such as History, Sociology, Psychology, Religion, Linguistics, Communication, Performance Studies and Christianity. He also purchased subscriptions for journals from diverse disciplines that might be helpful to those who engage in Folklore Studies.

While the first decade established Folklore at Palayamkottai as a distinct and multi-disciplinary programme, it later undertook other ventures such as publication. Lourdu's book, *Nattar Vazhakkariyal: Sila Atippadaikal* was first published from FRRC as a revised edition. This book was previously published by Lourdu himself. Later, this book was revised and published two separate works: *Nattar Vazhakkariyal Sila Atippadaikal* and *Nattar Vazhakkariyal Kotpatukal* (2011). Lourdu was also keen to publish key texts in other disciplines such as Linguistics and Psychology and translated some of the major works in Cultural Studies. Thus, S. Subrahmanyam brought out two seminal texts, *Pecholiyyiyal* (1998) and *Pechukoorupattiyal* (1998). Though FRRC funded a separate work on Freud's psychoanalysis by T. K. Ravichandran, the book was

later published by another publisher. FRRC also attempted to translate *Fluid Signs: Being a Person the Tamil Way* by Valentine Daniel. Though the translation was completed, the book has not been published yet. However, the book, *The Servants of the Goddess*, by Chris Fuller (1999), was translated and published as *Deviyin Thiruppaniyalarkal*.

During this period, FRRC also brought out two significant collections of essays, *Panpattu Verkalai Thedi* by G. Stephen (2006) and *Sanankalin Samikal* edited by T. Dharmaraj (2006). While *Sanankalin Samikal* has become a foundational text for understanding the various aspects of folk religion, *Panpattu Verkalai Thedi* is its complementary text in that it addresses the issues of religion, culture and politics. While these works aimed to enrich folkloristic knowledge in Tamil, FRRC also initiated steps to publish a journal in English. The journal was named *South Indian Folklorist* (SIF) and was published bi-annually journal by FRRC. SIF has carried articles by scholars across India and other countries.

Apart from these works, FRRC is widely acknowledged for another major publication: *Iyotheedasar Cinthanaikal* (1999). *Iyotheedasar Cinthanaikal* consists of three volumes. Two of these volumes are large. These volumes edited by G. Aloysius re-introduced Iyotheedasar from a social-science perspective. Pandit Iyotheedas's major writings, published in his *Oru Paisa Tamilan*, were painstakingly collected and organized under four themes, namely Literature, Religion, Politics and Society by Aloysius.³

Folklore Research

FRRC and the Department initiated many research projects in the first two decades. One of the significant projects was on the theme of social conflicts, funded by the University Grants Commission (UGC), New Delhi. Thus, the Department has transformed itself in such a way as to carry out social science research from Folkloristic perspectives. While the students of Folklore carried out their project work mainly on collections of lore from a particular region and/or community, the Department addressed these themes from a theoretical perspective. The collection of folklore becomes significant even in contemporary times as it was not carried out for all regions. However, the focus was also given to other themes such as ethnography, audience participation, performance, contextual importance and indigenous knowledge. The early research work, carried out by the students for their dissertations, were of high quality and could

³ Recently, the Tamil Nadu government has felicitated G. Aloysius for his significant contribution to the promotion of the works of Iyotheedas.

even be published as either monographs or research articles. However, this did not materialize. Though Loudu himself published a journal, *Nattar Vazhakkariyal*, the dissertation chapters of the students were somehow not considered for publication.

Nattar Vazhakkariyal Kazhagam

Lourdu started an initiative to establish an independent society of Folklore studies parallel to the Department. This independent society was known as *Nattar Vazhakkariyal Kazhagam*. He brought out three issues of a Folklore journal, *Nattar Vazhakkariyal*, through this society. These issues carry some of the seminal essays on folkloristics. While one issue was a special one on the theme of anthropology, the other special issue on psychoanalysis did not materialize. Though much later, the fourth issue of *Nattar Vazhakkariyal* came out in 2006, there was no fifth issue.

Is Folklore a Discipline in Decline?

Except the pioneering years of the MA programme in Folklore, the Department has always struggled to get a good number of students and faces heat from many quarters. During the initial period, though the discipline was nascent and so new, it did enjoy a good number of students. In fact, there was an entrance exam and an interview conducted to give candidates admission to the MA programme. As there was no BA programme in Folklore and graduates from any discipline could apply for the MA programme, the Department received a good number of applications. However, when the students did not get jobs immediately after their graduation and as there were hardly any job opportunities for Folklorists in educational institutions such as schools, the Department's battle for student strength began. Though occasionally there was reasonable strength, the Department also experienced dry periods, now and then, when there was no application for the programme. Though the Department is not the sole reason for such conditions, it has to take some responsibility for its failure to attract a reasonable number of students.

Despite the significant and scholarly contributions of the Department and FRRC, the Department did not find support from other institutions and colleges. This also coincides with the gradual decline of academic culture in Tamil Nadu and the commercialization of educational programmes in the post-globalization context across India. Disciplines such as Linguistics, Political Science, History, Sociology, Geography and Anthropology, established departments in the university system, too face a crisis due to commercialization of education.

Though Folklore was established at the college level in Palayamkottai, it did gain recognition at the national level despite poor student strength. The students from the Department have held such positions as Deputy-Secretary in Sangeet Natak Akademi, Professor and Chairperson of the School of Culture and Creative Studies, Arunachal Pradesh University, Ita Nagar, Arunachal Pradesh, professors in PILC, Ashoka University, MKU and so on. A good number of students pursued their higher education at premiere institutions such as JNU, New Delhi, University of Hyderabad and Columbia University, USA. Apart from academic professions, students from this field became police officers, government servants, theatre artists, cinema artists, businessmen and home makers. However, the achievements made by individual students of the Department did not attract enough young minds. Since degrees and education were viewed as an investment for the future, disciplines such as Folklore face a serious crisis.

Folklore at Present in SXC

This section includes a small note about the present condition of the Department and FRRC. FRRC employed more than 10 people in various positions including research and administration in the first decade. Though this continued in the next decade too, the number of staff significantly declined owing to lack of funds. For the last ten years, it has not had any funds to employ even an Office Assistant. The present Director, Dr. N. Ramachandran, former Head of the Department of Folklore, SXC, is an Honorary Director and receives no honorarium. As there was no other staff in FRRC, he gave the responsibility of administering FRRC to the teaching staff of the Department.

While senior folklorists like A. Dhananjayan and N. Ramachandran are now retired and others like A. Chellaperumal and T. Dharmaraj found positions at other institutions that they deemed better for their future, the Department has faced a critical situation from 2009 onwards. When new recruitments were formally done between 2012 and 2018, the Department tried to re-establish its past identity.

With no fund available at FRRC and with limited student strength, the Department needed to adopt various measures to attract students and create a folkloristic culture. The Department has thus started to collaborate with other institutions in organizing lectures, seminars and workshops at the local level. While the young graduates will be provided with an exposure in Folklore Studies, this might help in attracting students in the long run. At another level, those

continue to study their own disciplines would develop interdisciplinary research perspectives. Due to these continuous collaborative efforts with various institutions, the Department was able to attract at least the minimum number of students required to run the program every year. While the total student strength is 14 at present, the Department has nine students at the maximum in a batch. An interesting development is that students come from institutions with which either the Department or FRRC did not collaborate previously. So how did they come and why did they come?

Since the job market is still too narrow for those with post-graduate qualifications in Folklore, it is surprising to see that these students have opted to study this discipline. They had heard about the Department through their friends or relatives or teachers. These students come from diverse backgrounds. However, they did not have a dream of their own when they entered FRRC for post-graduation. Besides, many wanted to become government servants. However, they did not even know how to write a paragraph in either Tamil or English. This general decline in the standards with regard to academic practices poses severe a challenge when FRRC tries to teach them and expects them to write their own sentences either in Tamil or English.

To create a vibrant, interactive academic culture, the Department has decided to restart the publication division, though with a low budget at the initial level. Thus, Department started to publish the Endowment and other special lectures as short monographs. The Department planned to publish at least 10 such monographs in a year. FRRC provides all the necessary support including finances for this initiative. Apart from these efforts, the Department has also taken necessary steps to start research collaboration with other institutions at the national and international levels.

In order to revive a discipline or Department, collective effort is needed with unconditional responsibility from the management, staff, students and the larger public. Without collective efforts and support from the institution, no discipline or course can flourish. It is too challenging in our era where Social Science and Humanities education and research have become a liability and has no buyer across the world. However, Social Sciences and the Humanities have much to offer to resolve many of the current problems observed at the international level.

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