

Issues and Challenges for Safeguarding the Intangible Heritage of Kuthu in Sri Lanka

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Abstract - Kuthu is one of the very ancient forms practiced among Tamils. It is considered an intangible heritage of performing traditions. There are different styles and stories used in various contexts to compose kuthu performances. It performs religious and other alternative spaces then and now. Kuthu in the traditional way belongs to a particular society, culture and space. Here the kuthu has a particular identity, culture, traditional craftsmanship and also a particular society's production its own. Anyhow there are issues related to the practices in alternative space; connected to the alteration, editing and other related aesthetic aspects. The research carried out so far is for the documentation purpose, justifying the practices, aesthetic aspect or complaining the practices. In some instances psychological and sociological aspects of Kuthu are discussed. There are some occasions when scholarly discussions make awareness on intangible heritage. This research understands that there are different methods of practicing Kuthu and also the practices in the religious related and based on particular society preserved under the conventions of intangible heritage. Interpretative methods are used to analyse the Kuthu practices. The issues and changes are identified by observation, discussions, interview with the practitioners and performers. Further this study analyses how the National cultural policy and Nation supports such practices. The mechanism at national level is how it is aligned with UNESCO's intangible convention (2003). Stable practices incorporated with the current practices are considered and identified. Possible suggestions are also made for safeguarding intangible heritage in the future. Even though the social and political changes always influence the Kuthu practices – in the other way those practices reflect the social and political changes of the existing society. Preserving intangible heritage is one of the best paths to revisit the traditions to build healthy societies in the future.

key words - intangible heritage, kuthu practices, safeguards

I. INTRODUCTION

Safeguarding intangible heritage has been practiced traditionally by the Tamils living in the Northern and Eastern

part of Sri Lanka and also in the mid country where the Tamils also lives. Anyway the density of the Tamil population is very high in this region and at the same time the Tamils are spread all over the Island. Due to the ethnic conflict and the civil war the Tamil population migrated to other countries all over the world. As the Tamil population migrates they bring their theatrical expressions where ever they live. Therefore the Tamil theatre practices are broadening and so any form or any style of the theatre performance using the Tamil language is called Tamil theatre.

The “intangible cultural heritage” means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. UNESCO article ii 2005 paper deals with issues and challenges of safeguarding the intangible heritage. Intangible heritage 1.1 is a body of popular myths or beliefs relating to a particular place, activity, or group of people.

There are various traditions such as traditional theatre practices - Kuthu, Isai Nadakam, modern drama – dialogue drama, other theatre forms of fusion of theatre elements used from various cultural traditions. Kuthu is practiced in various layers of the society among the Tamil community. The word kuthu means a story or event narrate by dance . It is practiced from ancient times and there is evidence in classical Sangam texts and Sillappathikaram and so on. At present the traditional Kuthu practices mostly belong to religious spaces.

Kuthu is one of the theatre forms practiced in different layers of the Tamil society and various forms and styles such as Vadamodi, Thenmodi, Kathavarajan, and Catholic Kuthu etc. are understood in many ways. As it is an intangible heritage kuthu practices, main issue has been discuss is the best way is excellent way of practicing Kuthu rather than discussing multiple diversity of the Kuthu practice. And also these all discussions are based on the kuthu form and the content of the Kuthu. At present this intangible heritage of the traditional theatre performances face/meet challenges for its existence. Even though there are research studies available on the Kuthu practices enough attention has not been paid to the worthiest

of intangible heritage. Maunaguru worked on historical aspects and the performative aspects of Kuthu in Batticaloa. Jeyasanker work on reformulation of the Traditional and published articles related to Kuthu reformulation as it is activism for the activities. Apart from that much works has been carried out in other types of Kuthu forms in Sri Lanka. Gillian Howell has done research on peace and reconciliation aspects of Kuthu. Furthermore, in many instances psychological impact of Kuthu was concentrated on by Daya Somasundaram.

Anyhow it is still lacking to show the value of arts rather than complaining of the practices. Appropriate vocabulary has to be used in its context rather than framing it in the western way.

This research deals with the current issues and challenges in the kuthu practices and as it is an intangible heritage the possible safeguarding aspects are also taken in to the consideration in the conference on Intangible heritage in 2017 held at Swami VipiIlanantha Institute of Aesthetic Studies.

II. Materials and Methods

It is based on the Kuthu practices among the Tamils in Sri Lanka. An overview of current practices of Kuthu is made and discussed briefly. How the state's mechanism supports the practices in Sri Lanka and as they are considered as intangible heritage the role of safeguarding such practices will be analyzed.

Interpretative methods are used to understand the practices. The practical experience as viewer and participator in the research forums and the related research publications, self reflexivity, live performances and interviews from the practitioners and their views are the main references for this research. The current practices are analysed briefly to identify the issues and challenges.

III. RESULTS, DISCUSSIONS & CONCLUSIONS

Kuthu is one of the very ancient forms prevailing among the Tamils. Kuthus are composed in various themes and performed in various styles. It is evident from Sankam period onwards. The performing traditions continue in different contexts in each phase. It reflects the social identity, culture and customs. Even though social and political changes influence, the practices alter, adopt, change and sometimes perform and not perform the interesting aspect is that the traditions continue. Currently Kuthu is performed at various levels and mainly fall in two broad categories; one is the practices in the religious space and second, the alternative

spaces (not related to religious space). These categories are generally applicable for all Kuthu practices in different contexts. Especially aesthetic aspects and the viewer's response vary accordingly.

In this category two levels or phases are identified; Bound with rituals (eg:Aruchunan Thabasu in Up country) and Extension of the religious activity – (eg: Catholic Kuthu, Kovalan Kuthu).

The special characteristic of the space has a particular society and geographically define space and Kuthu in some occasion is bound with ritual. The Kuthus are performed as extension of rituals or religious activities. As it is a social activity the whole society is involved to produce Kuthu for their own. Society sponsors the kuthu.

1. Religious space

The Kuthu practices are not merely performances, it has several functions of a society; traditional healing, ancestral link, strong link with traditional professions, cultural rights, education and information, local ideas of preservation and cultural sensitivity. Each phase has its different functions. All practices can be considered as cultural engagement activities for instance Kaman Kuthu refashioned remodeled according to their context which they lived in Sri Lanka. they use kuthu for their identity formation (Valli Kanapathippilai,2009,p.150).

The Kuthu reformulation activities initiated by Jeyasanker in Batticaloa in 2002 more concern about the content and characterization than the form. This activities try to create perspective with contemporary thoughts to the traditional stories (Gowreeswaran.T, 2007,p.31). Social practices concerning nature and the universe, evidence of traditional craftsmanship Community consultation and participation, knowledge of agriculture, livelihood, and environmental information, important cultural identity, give community sense of continuity. Intangible heritage has intergenerational value and it evolves and changes over time.

2. Alternative space:

During the formation of middle class the Kuthu performances were shifted in to alternative spaces. For the aesthetic aspect needed to the modern audience many changes happened when it was produced. Beyond the religious space the Kuthu altered, edited, changed the aesthetic aspect practicing in the modern stage. The kind of Kuthu changed in that way after Vithyanathan initiated the Kuthu reformation activities in the 1950s. It was initiated by the academics in Peradeniya University. Then these kinds of practices developed different ways while maintaining the form of such edited version,

Kuthu form with contemporary theme, Kuthu elements used in Modern Drama, reformulation of Kuthu and Kuthu in electronic media or cyber space performances—consider functional differences when traditional became modern.

As it is called preservation of the traditional forms a question arises whether preservation means Kuthu performed as in the traditional way or as conscious only in the form? In this instance the physical form is more concerned than the contextual aspects.

According to the cultural policy in Sri Lanka; reference to the Parliament Act (Act No.18 of 1952) three main points are indicated on arts; develop greater knowledge, practice of Fine Arts, increase accessibility of Arts in Ceylon, improve standard of Fine Arts, promote art and craft (Cultural Policy of Sri Lanka, P.19) A conscious attempt was taken by Vithyanathan for safeguarding the practices. Even though it is a kind of work to return to the roots, it partially missed the context of the Kuthu tradition. They consider the Kuthu forms as folk lore but not all the forms. Also the Kuthu tradition linked with a subtext is not widely utilized. Heritage is seen as western phenomenon as Eurocentric perception of cultural heritage. An authenticity issue in the traditional practices is an issue. Mentioning authenticity in the practices reflects it got changed in all aspects; space, context and the spectators. In the traditional Kuthu only the text has the individual authenticity.

III. SAFEGUARDING OF THE INTANGIBLE HERITAGE

Through the intangible heritage the traditional beliefs, customs, and stories of a community, passed across generations and generations. It develops moral value and social consciousness. The traditional performances are linked with way of life norms that set the legal, moral and cultural values of our traditional societies. Anyhow the practices at all levels safeguard in different extent.

The cultural policy of Sri Lanka (1952) describes the necessity of supporting the indigenous traditions and develops government mechanism for that. But it is mostly concerned about the tangible heritage and mentioned to mainly consider the nation's majority population, the Sinhalese. At the same time the formation of the Art Council (1956) created space for the traditional Kuthu. As the head of the Art Council's Director for Tamil unit Vithyanathan initiated many activities of the kuthu practices that are still followed, he criticized and has taken various dimensions as mentioned above. The Kuthu festival organized in Mullaithevu (1962) organized Kuthu

competitions, producing Kuthu in Peradeniya University created more interest in Kuthu. Even though this was practiced partially safeguarding activities but not in terms of UNESCO's convention in 2003.

Furthermore, Sri Lankan cultural policy mentioned National Theatre Trust. The main aim is popularities of Theatre outside Colombo. Ad hoc grants were utilized for these activities. It is understood that Art Council worked from bottom to the top and the National theatre concentrated from top to bottom activities.

Establishing the Cultural Ministry in Sri Lanka is another mile stone and state mechanism to work on the traditional forms. The cultural officers and the regional level cultural centers established the offices appointed to work. Unfortunately the implementation phase is the main difficult portion. The survey report of Intangible Cultural Heritage Safeguarding Efforts in Sri Lanka (2011) gives the details of how the Government mechanism works on Intangible Cultural Heritage. Anyway, it is mainly focused on buildings. Here the generally listed activities have to be considered as intangible cultural heritage. Kuthu is not mentioned here. Cultural Triangle of Sri Lanka focuses on Buddhist Art and Archeology and the geographical location is also limited for this purpose. Under the Folk theatre also there is a generalizing of the aspects but Kuthu practices are not considered. The mentioned future plan for safeguarding is mostly viewers' perspectives. There are suggestions which are all about showcasing and not practicing in the geographical and cultural context.

In the meantime the general safeguarding aspects such as transfer export, exchange, license authorizing, performers' rights and other related aspects are applicable to the kuthu as well. Apart from this the Intellectual Property Act protects the rights of the performers (Intangible Heritage of Sri Lanka Field report, ACT No: 36, 2003) and is very important to safeguard individual artists.

All safeguarding activities are incorporated with the UNESCO recommendation from time to time. Safeguarding of expressions, skills, practices, knowledge, Cultural or social, Communities define value as relevant to them. People enact and transmit, so Intangible Cultural Heritage changes over time but the main issue is how much legislative and state support is provided in the practices.

Without much concern about this the Kuthu practices implemented at the villages, schools and university curriculum are incorporated. It must be elaborated – it leads to an interaction between the artist and students and

academic seminars conducted in this regard. There are cultural societies established specially for this purpose only. Government mechanism for preserving performing arts initiated Digitalization. To achieve the whole aim the systems were based on social power structure and customary / community law. Local idea of preservation, protection ideas also must be considered. The Diaspora communities of the Tamils all over the world show interest to learn and perform kuthu as a kind of establishment of their cultural identity in alien land.

IV. CONCLUSION

Societies practice the traditional forms in a number of ways with the changes occurring in societies. It is evident from the very ancient period. For instance Kuravai kuthhth is known from ancient times but still it survives in aural form; some of the Tamil cinema songs use Kuravai sound to highlight the village locations. The main issue is to safeguard the kuthu forms as it is believed to perform in the traditional way. In the popular Tamil film Sankamam and Karakaaddakkaran the heroes are Kuthu artists and they strive hard to practice Kuthu. The situation is suitable for all kuthu practices similar to this. Survival is another major issue because of the ideological changes that happened due to colonialism, globalization and other factors influencing the practices. And another important fact in Sri Lanka is that thirty years of war immensely impacted on those kinds of practices. But

the forms function in another way as cultural resistance, and deal with psychological problems and so on.

Intangible cultural heritage can be abundant, reinvent, alter, or manipulate for commercial interest while still being safeguarded. Figuring of the convention is not to safeguard such measures by the government of marginalizing minority culture that it is seen as threatening or contrary to the state majority. Kuthu is intangible cultural heritage, nostalgic memory, vehicle for psychological difficulties, a chance to revisit the past. It should be maintained embracing the changing dynamic nature.

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