

KOOTHU-P-PATTARAI

ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE



As I climbed up those narrow stairs that led to the second floor of the building “Koothambalam”, my mind was getting filled with a collage of diverse images - artistes, colourful lights, bright make up, set properties etc. When we opened the door that led to the air conditioned hall-cum-theatre, a shrill cry welcomed us. As our eyes accustomed to the diffused lights of the seating area and the darkness filled stage area, we could see some 5-6 young actors sitting on the floor, each holding a printed book in their hands. We were told that they were rehearsing the scenes of the play ‘Padukalam’. One actor who appeared to be the lead character took off in a high pitched voice followed by others. The way the other artistes took over in a fluidic manner, their subtle body language and the seriousness with which they went about their rehearsal, it dawned on me that “Koothu-p-pattarai” was not just another place of traditional folk arts or another of those Tamil theatre/stage groups of Chennai who most often rely on feathery comedies.

While the rehearsal continued, we were taken to the residence office of the founder of the theatre group. For first timers – Padma Shri. Na Muthuswamy (founder of Koothu-p-pattarai) or “ayyaa” as the students call him – would easily pass off as one of those retired military officers. He greeted us ‘Namaskaram Vaanga ukkarunga’ in a firm tone that you normally don’t associate with an octogenarian. We knew instantly we were in for an interesting meeting ahead.

Born in a village called Punjai near Thanjavur, Muthuswamy’s initial years were that of a typical village boy. The seeds of theatre were probably sown there, as young Muthuswamy showed interests in singing & nadhaswaram very early in his life. After his schooling, Muthuswamy went on to take up a day job at TAFE, Chennai in the late 1950s. He also started writing short stories that most often reflected

the innocent, simple life style of the villages. The metamorphosis from a story writer to a stage playwright happened in the 1960s. He also evolved a style that was unique using allegory, a non-linear narrative & creating a visual impact on stage. His play “Kaalam kaalamaga” considered as the ‘first modern play in Tamil stage’ gave him prominence.

It was sometime in the early 1970s that Muthuswamy first watched a performance of ‘theru-k-koothu’. He was taken in by the style of the art form and was convinced that theru-k-koothu, the traditional folk form would form the bedrock for his future forays into stage/theatre. What followed was years of intense study of the theru-k-koothu format and armed with those learning, Muthuswamy shaped the concepts of theatre, training and playwright for Koothu-p-pattarai.

Around 1976, Muthuswamy started working with people interested in literature & theatre like Crea Ramakrishnan, ‘Pragnai’ Rangarajan to work towards reviving traditional folk performing art forms and to also create a platform to train actors. These efforts led to the founding of Koothu-p-pattarai in 1977

THE MAIN CHALLENGES THAT MUTHUSWAMY FACED WERE

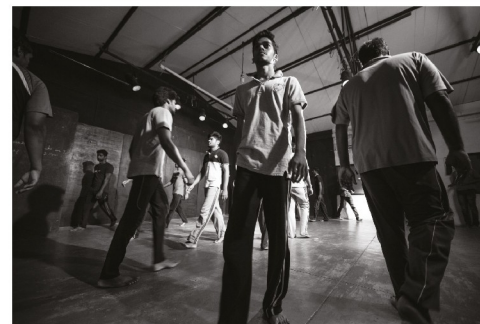
- To create acceptance of theru-k-koothu in the then conservative cultural landscape of Chennai
- Mobilisation of financial resources to revive theru-k-koothu
- Mobilisation of expertise to revive theru-k-koothu

I was mildly shocked when Muthuswamy shared that in the late 1970s, the eminent theru-k-koothu exponent P K Sambandam Thambiran was driving an auto in Chennai to earn his livelihood. Muthuswamy & friends pledged financial support to PK Sambandam Thambiran and pushed him to get back to his village and learn whatever he could of theru-k-koothu from



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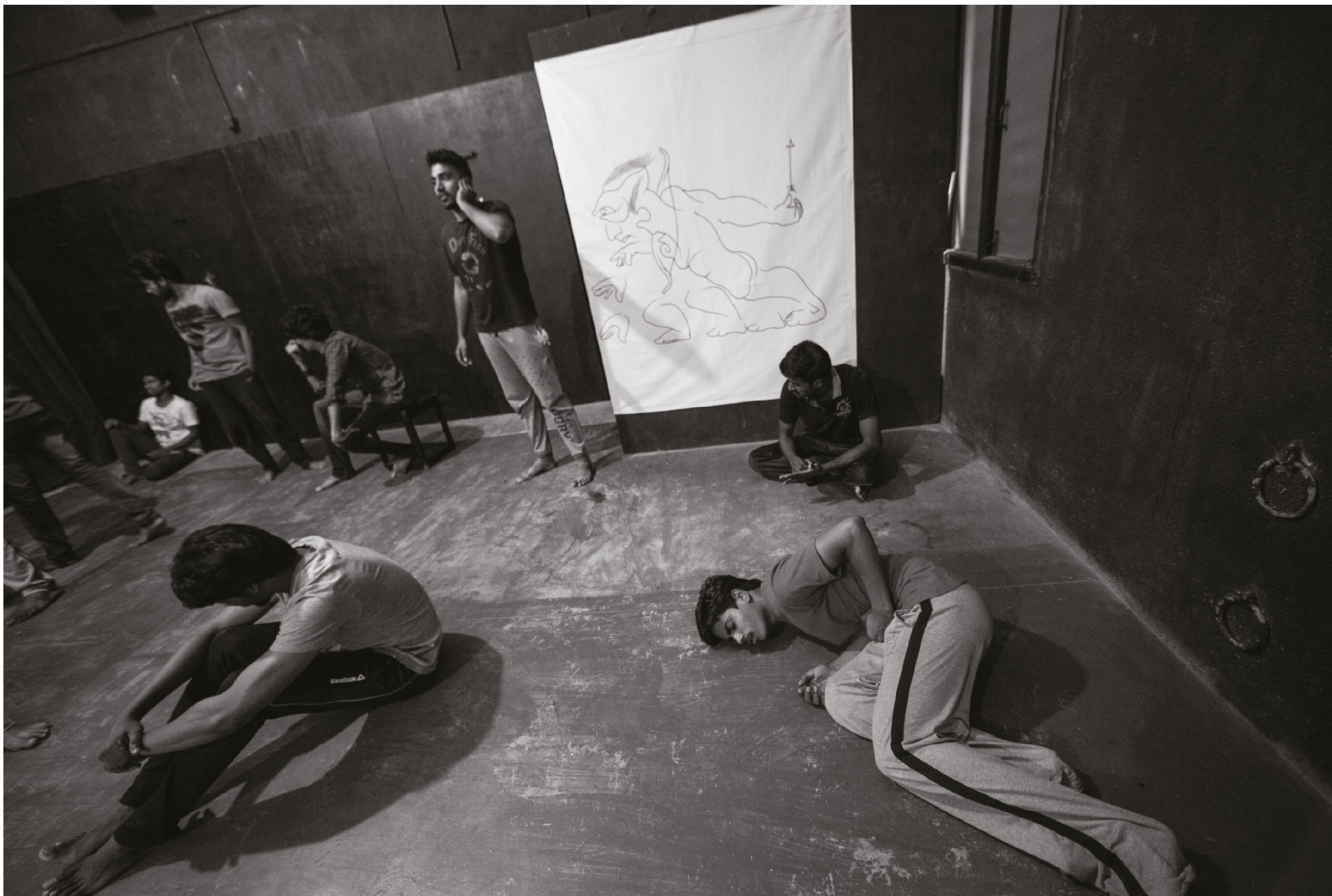
his father Kalaimamani Purisai Kannappa Thambiran. Considering the very meagre earnings that Muthuswamy and his friends themselves made, this was one amazing gesture by them. If today theru-k-koothu stands revived and enjoys recognition in the classical environment of Chennai & Kalaimamani Purisai Kannappa



Sambandam Thambiran is seen as its leading exponent, Koothu-p-pattarai had a role to play in it. To me, this stood out as one of Koothu-p-pattarai’s greatest contributions.

Inspired by the theru-k-koothu format, Koothu-p-pattarai started evolving its own style of theatre – one that combined tradition with the modern, one that had influence of both Indian and foreign, one that not just focussed on literary contents but also on choreography and movement, one that blended physicality with powerful ideas.

From a group of like minded people, Koothu-p-pattarai evolved into a public Trust. Koothu-p-pattarai started getting grants from The Ford Foundation and support from Max Mueller Bhavan, Alliance Francaise and Lalit Kala Academi. Muthuswamy attributes part of Koothu-p-pattarai’s growth to the immense support he received from these organisations. Koothu-p-pattarai is also supported through grants from the Ministry of Culture, Government of India.



Koothu-p-pattarai has the distinction of being one of the five theatre groups recognised worldwide under the UNESCO-Aschberg Bursary programme. Koothu-p-pattarai has over 75 theatre productions to its credit, innumerable stage plays and also serves as an interactive centre for theatre personalities from across the world.

In its quest for constant exploration, Koothu-p-pattarai also revived the usage of some folk instruments like the Parai, Thudumbu (a percussion instrument used by Nilgiri tribes) and Peenachi (a pipe

instrument of the Irula tribe). Devarattam, Thappattam gained popularity through the efforts of Koothu-p-pattarai. Koothu-p-pattarai regularly conducts theatre workshops for students & corporate in addition to training NGOs.

In the late 2000s, Koothu-p-pattarai started offering 3 month acting training courses which focussed on wholesome development – flexibility training, workouts for stamina development, voice throw, trust building etc. Some prominent Tamil film personalities – Vijay Sethupathy, Vimal, Pasupathy,

Vinodhini and Kalaivani – had their training in acting at Koothu-p-pattarai. Today, many aspiring artistes see the training course of Koothu-p-pattarai as a springboard to their success in the cinema industry.

A lot of awards came in Muthuswamy's way – Sangeet Natak Akademi Award, Podhigai Award for theatre, TN Government's award and finally the Padma Shri. But the artiste in Na. Muthuswamy has sustained his hunger in exploring new things & pushing boundaries. Challenges as in 'low audience turnout' bothers him,



and he is quick to answer that the urge to visit theatre to watch a play is not there in people. He feels that theatre is still not considered an art form, but looked at for mere entertainment value.

When asked who would take the organisation Koothu-p-pattarai forward, he shot back "time will identify someone & throw him in". To me, this summed up Koothu-p-pattarai and the man behind it. An eclectic mix of Experimentalism & Pragmatism!

In relentlessly pursuing a journey spanning 30 years dotted with identification, preservation & revival of various art forms, in developing a unique style of theatre presentation, in sustaining contemporary professional Tamil theatre, Koothu-p-pattarai's contribution to the Arts & Culture landscape of Chennai is enormous to say the least. Koothu-p-pattarai is a true Champion of Chennai.