Finding ecological citizenship inside the archives of pain: Famine Folklore

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With the disturbing reports appearing recently in the newspapers that signs of disastrous famines are visible in western Orissa, Rajasthan and Gujarat my thoughts wander back to my fieldwork days encountering famine folklore. In the year 1989, Shivaji Rao, a wandering puppeteer and a consummate artist of highest order reintroduced me to the intricacies of haunting tale of Nallathangal, an example of Tamil famine folklore. According to Shivaji Rao there existed a folk belief that conducting shadow theatre performance of famine stricken Nallathangal killing her seven children and committing suicide would move the hearts of cruel gods and bring rain and the belief acted as a reminder to the incurable wound in the peasant consciousness. With the fading of this folk belief in the changing times the incurable wound in the peasant consciousness. With the fading of this folk belief in the changing times the incurable wound in the peasant consciousness.

Here, I must admit my extreme unease with the subject itself, as I have never been able to see the mad moments of Nallathangal drowning her seven children one after another. Shivaji Rao would make fun of my inability to watch his puppets perform the gory acts in extreme details and advise me that a citizen should have the artistic courage to see death, decay and decadence. As a performer, his goals were to fix the divine responsibility of bringing rain on the citizens of a sick society that produced Nallathangal and constituted his audience. With a godly vengeance, his puppets would make everyone weep inconsolably. Shivaji Rao himself was living in extreme poverty and as a proud artist he made everyone weep inconsolably. Shivaji Rao himself was living in extreme poverty and as a proud artist he made everyone weep inconsolably. Shivaji Rao himself was living in extreme poverty and as a proud artist he made everyone weep inconsolably.

In the year 1991, I had the opportunity to run into Shivaji Rao when he was performing an episode from Ramayana, ‘abduction of Sita’ on the exhibition grounds in Tirunelveli. This time he compared Sita, the daughter of earth with Nallathangal, the daughter of famine and concluded that together they stand a symbol of endless suffering. Sita, the daughter of bountiful, had to ask her mother earth, Bhoomadevi to swallow her was an act of suicide similar to that of Nallathangal. Mother Sita or sister Nallathangal, women are inherently and intimately connected to nature and their suffering is a metaphor for deep rooted deterioration of natural resources and cultural values, he would muse. Shivaji Rao had an intimate knowledge of the entire Deccan plateau, a landscape he wandered throughout his nomadic performing life.

Following the discussion we had, he asked me to travel with him to the native village of Nallathangal, Vathrayiruppu, a small village in south Tamil Nadu. Situated in the district of Virudhunagar, Vathrayiruppu has a small folk shrine for Nallathangal. The seven children of Nallathangal are also deified and worshipped in the shrine. Bushes surround the ancient well where Nallathangal is believed to have drowned her children. The wicked sister-in-law Moolialankari also has a statute in her honour on which the villagers spit, urinate and defecate religiously. The cloths of shadow puppet performances, Uccikudumi and Uluvaithalayalan execute a scathing scatological attack on Moolit alankari tagging along the village practices. Shivaji Rao took me to the river Arjuna, which had gone completely dry for decades in the vicinity of Vathrayiruppu. According to Shivaji Rao, several small rivers like Arjuna had gone completely dry throughout Deccan plateau as water harvesting and conservation techniques have been totally forgotten over the years. He recalled that during his childhood days there existed a practice named Kudi maramathu (literal translation would be – community repair) in which all the villagers participated. Immediately after the post harvest festival of Pongal every year (in the month of January) the villagers from Vathrayiruppu and its surroundings used to go the nearby Western Ghats and cleared the ways of small rivers as part of their Kudi maramathu undertaking. Discontinuity with such practices could have resulted in monsoon waters from the Western Ghats being wasted into the Arabian Sea instead of flowing into the mainland of Tamil Nadu. Dried up Deccan plateau is always a potential site for famines.

After our visits to Vathrayiruppu I did not have any chance to meet with Shivaji Rao till 1992. Meanwhile I educated myself with the textual histories of Nallathangal story, a trajectory that spotted sensitive minds tackling injuries of mass psyche. My speculation would be that Nallathangal story must have emerged as a narrative scream in the history of Deccan plateau after the Madras famine in 1876. David Arnold’s well-researched essay Famine in Peasant Consciousness and Peasant Action: Madras 1876-8 (see Subaltern Studies volume III) does not refer to Nallathangal at all. Sa. Su. Sankaralingan, author of musical drama of Nallathangal, in his introduction written in 1932 contests the notion of attributing mythical authorship of Pukalenti Pulaver to this tale also. For Sankaralingan the tale was of recent origin.
and it propagated a moral code for behaviour of chaste women subjected to extreme conditions. In 1936 P.Sambanda Mudaliar wrote a stage play and movie script on Nallathangal. Another version of the play written by Mayilam A. Va. Duraisamy Mudaliar in 1937 was published in 1964. The excerpts of Nallathangal shadow puppet theatre performance published in M.Ramaswamy's excellent thesis on the subject also have minor variations. In all these versions, the story begins with Nallathangal being given away in marriage to King of Kasi and moves forward with famine striking kingdom of Kasi, the king giving away all his wealth and food to his subjects, the king sending his wife, Nallathangal and their seven children to her brother's house, on their way Nallathangal escaping the attacks of robbers and rapists, she reaching her brother's household in absolute destitute conditions, in the absence of her brother Moolialankari, her sister-in-law refusing to feed Nallathangal and her children, unable to bear hunger and humiliations Nallathangal killing all her seven children and committing suicide and ends with Nallathangal's husband and brother punishing Moolialankari and resurrecting Nallathangal and her children.

For Shivaji Rao transposing the site of famine from Deccan plateau to the kingdom Kasi is a corruption in literate texts in contrast to the purity of oral texts. In 1992 I caught him boarding a town bus with a bagful of puppets slung on his shoulder and again travelled with him to a village called Vasudevanallur to see him perform Nallathangal. While discussing the published versions of Nallathangal he never showed any signs of annoyance but when he performed the puppet clowns had a heyday of beating up all the literate authors. Great ventriloquist he was, he imitated my voice and manners of speaking for the beaten up literate authors. In a freshly construed scene Moolialankari complains of deceitful headache and the puppet clowns offer to massage her hips. For that Moolialankari furiously asks: Will you massage hips if it pains in the head? The clowns reply: If the famine of Dhakshina bharatam (Deccan plateau) can be called the famine of Kasi kingdom then, head can be transposed as hips and so massaging hips must cure the head also. Throughout the performance Shivaji Rao kept on referring to our discussion and the clowns subjected a scholar puppet to meanest scatological humiliation possible. After the performance, with the gate collection of thirty-three rupees Shivaji Rao insisted on buying me a meal at the village hotel.

Reflecting now, I am inclined to think that oral traditions have a way of communicating and perpetuating sense of immediacy and urgency and Shivaji Rao was attempting to draw my attention to the lack of it in literate traditions. The here and now proposition for famine has other implications as well. The subject position one is forced to take or the citizenship inside these oral archives of pain is not one of rights and entitlements but of ethical responsibility and legitimate action. No one can escape famine, if there is one. Environmental refugees we are, we the city dwellers tend to think we are at a safe distance from famines and other disasters for which famines stand as metaphor of. The ecological truth is that nobody flees. Perhaps there is a way out if we study our oral traditions closely and listen to what Amartya Sen, the analyst of Bengal famine, proposes.

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HOMAGE

Loss is ours: A tribute to a doyen

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Professor K.S.Haridasa Bhat, Founder-Director of the Regional Resources Centre for Folk Performing Arts (RRC) at Udupi, Karnataka, passed away on August 20, 2000 after a brief illness. In the sudden demise of Professor Bhat, the Karnataka State and the innumerable persons who knew him as his students, friends, admirers, scholars in the literary and folklore fields, have lost a devoted teacher, a dynamic achiever, a renowned educationist, a gifted innovator, a noted litterateur, a versatile columnist, an able administrator, and above all a great humanist. He was mostly responsible for transforming a moderately active pilgrim centre like his hometown Udupi into a bustling centre of cultural and literary activities. He devoted his lifetime to the task of building up men and institutions of repute. The Rashttrakavi Govinda Pai Samshodhana Kendra, the Yakshagana Kendra and the Regional Resources Centre at Udupi which have won national and international recognition are standing monuments to the creative and innovative facet of his talent. Biographies, travelogues, essays and articles, which flowed out of his pen, have enriched the coastal Kannada literature. As a veritable humanist he could respond with great sensitivity and affection to the needs of his fellow men, young and old. He was strict yet sympathetic, commanding yet friendly, eminent yet simple and serious yet witty. The void his departure has created can never be filled. But the great institutions, which he built, will serve to remind posterity of the lasting contribution he made to the enrichment of the life of his fellows. Of all the honours and awards showered on him during his life-time and also posthumously the Vishwa Manava award presented to him by the Dejagow Trust of Mysore and the Loka-Mitra title awarded to him by the citizens of Udupi describe him fully in single phrases. He was a Vishwa Manava and Loka Mitra in the real sense! He was indeed a great bridge-builder between humans and cultures.