



Towards Modern Tamil Theatre: Exploring the Theatrical Legacy of Sankaradas Swamigal

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Open Access

Manuscript ID: BIJ-2026-JAN-009

Subject: English

Received : 06.12.2025

Accepted : 18.12.2025

Published : 31.01.2026

DOI:10.64938/bijri.v10n2.26.Jan009

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Abstract

Tamil theatrical history can be classified before and after Sankaradas Swamigal. With his entry to the Tamil stage in 1891, he fundamentally reshaped conventional theatrical traditions and pioneered modernising them. This paper examines the pivotal role of Sankaradas Swamigal in transforming Tamil theatre from its traditional forms to modern theatrical expression. Through an analysis of his theatrical innovations, musical contributions, and novel staging techniques, this paper demonstrates how Swamigal served as a bridge between classical theatrical traditions and modern theatre. It also explores his significant approach of blending 'high' and 'low' culture, integrating folk music with classical elements, and shifting Tamil drama towards the ordinary plebs. This paper traces his contributions particularly and studies the modernisation of Tamil drama, examining how his work created a paradigm shift in Tamil theatrical tradition.

Keywords: drama, performing arts, Sankaradas Swamigal, Tamil modern theatre

Tamil theatre owes much of its modern form, content and techniques to the revolutionary dramatist Sankaradas Swamigal. He not only tweaked the theatrical tradition but also reshaped it by making it more relevant to the ordinary people. As a master alchemist, he brought together diverse elements like classic and folk forms, poetic verses and prose dialogues, antique myths and modern sociality and breathed fresh air into the Tamil stage. Through an analysis of his innovative theatrical practices, this paper analyses how Swamigal serves as a bridge between Tamil theatre's classical roots to the contemporary forms. Mainly, the paper explores his approach of blending 'high' and 'low' culture, integrating folk music with classical elements, and his conscious shifting of the Tamil dramatic art

towards the ordinary plebs and how all these elements led to a paradigm shift in Tamil theatrical tradition.

Genesis and Evolution of Tamil Drama

Dramatic art in Tamil is as antique as its language. Its ancient roots extend back to the earliest grammatical treatises like *Tolkappiyam*, the foundational Tamil grammatical treatise. It refers to the word 'Natakam' (Drama in Tamil) and provides its classifications as *koothu* and *aadal*. The text also establishes fundamental principles for drama and emphasises that the dramatic performance should delight both the visual and auditory senses. References to performance artists like "Viraliyar, Panar, Porunar and Koothar" also find a place in the text. Drama flourished during the Sangam Age, with texts such as



Paripaadal, *Kalithogai*, and *Ainkurunooru* enriching performance traditions. Tamil scholar K. Sivathambi notes that drama during this period was classified as ritual-based and agriculture-based. Various dramatic treatises, including *Agathiyam*, *Isai Nunukkam*, *Indira Kaliyam*, *Guna Nool*, *Kootha Nool*, *Sayandham*, and *Thaalavagaiyothu* established principles for dramatic art over the centuries. However, many of these critical texts have been lost.

The medieval period witnessed significant challenges to the performing arts. As Buddhists and Jainists were not great supporters of theatrical performances, there was a lull in theatre's development. However, the Bhakti movement, which followed, revived dramatic interest. Saivite and Vaishnavite texts incorporated performance cultures that emerged and introduced divinity into theatrical narratives. This period also saw the development of patronage systems where artists depended on rajas and temples for livelihood. It is to be noted that the political instability in Tamil Nadu during this era affected theatrical development. The absence of stable kingdoms led to frequent changes in cultural patronages. Different rulers held varying views on performing arts - while Buddhists opposed them, the Bhakti movement showed interest, when Kalabhras were against them, Cholas revived them. This medieval period, spanning from the post-Sangam age to the 17th century, is often termed as what Ravindranathan et al. (2016) calls, the "dark period of Drama".

The 18th century marked a decisive shift in performing arts. Forms like *pallu*, *kuravanchi*, and *nondi* emerged as people's literature and introduced new sensibilities. These can be considered as 'minor literature' that deals with the lives and experiences of marginalised communities. For instance, *pallu* addressed the lives of pallars, *kuravanchi* focused on kuravars, and *nondi* dealt with thieves – all from the marginalized communities. Another interesting development during this period was that the language of theatre became more accessible and less classical, which brought theatre closer to ordinary people. Soon, musical plays or *keerthanais* gradually emerged, which explains the increased musicality on the Tamil stage during this period.

Influences from other languages, too, enriched Tamil drama. For instance, musical genres like *vilasa* plays and *yakshaganas* developed alongside Western influences that introduced structural elements and prose to Tamil theatre. The Parsi theatre of the 1870s also contributed to Tamil dramatic development. Shakespeare and other prominent Western dramatists adapted to the Tamil stage. Pammal Sambandam, a contemporary of Swamigal, is known for his Shakespearean adaptations. He brought changes to stage setup, dramatic structure, and acting methods. In 1891, he formed an amateur theatre group called *Sukuna Vilasa Sabha* and enacted various performances.

Sankaradas Swamigal: Scripting Modern Tamil Theatre

The year 1891 is a watershed moment in Tamil theatre history. The release of Sundaranar's *Mononmaniam* and the launch of Pammal Sambandhanar's theatre group *Sukuna Vilasa Sabha* occurred in the same year when Swamigal entered the stage as an actor. Later, these three would be venerated as the triumvirates of modern Tamil theatre. Particularly, Swamigal's contribution garbed Tamil theatre in its modern attire by making it relevant to ordinary folks which earned him the title 'the father of modern Tamil drama'. His approach was fundamentally different from his contemporaries. Differentiating between Pammal's and Swamigal's approach, Shanmugasundaram writes in his essay (2023), "Pammal Sambandhanar's plays catered only to the town, but Swamigal's went beyond it and reached the villages".

Swamigal's original name was Sankaran, and he was given nicknames like 'Ramayana Pulavar' and 'head-master of Tamil drama', crediting his contributions to Tamil drama. He learned classical Tamil from the famous Pazhani Dhandapani, who significantly influenced Swamigal's musicality. By age sixteen, he could compose Venbas, Kalithurai, and other musical songs. He entered the Tamil stage in 1891, joining the sabha of Ramudu Iyer and Kalyanarama Iyer, where he performed roles including Iraniyan, Ravanana, Yemadharma, and Saneesvaran. In 1910, he established his own organisation - 'Samarasa Sanmarga Nataka Sabha'. He also initiated the Boys Company, which was



comprised of young boys, and later launched 'Sree Thathuva Meenalosini Vidhuva Bala Sabha' in 1918. The popular TKS Brothers belonged to this organisation and later produced popular productions.

Swamigal wrote over sixty-eight plays, though only seventeen remain available today. His prominent works include *Valli Thirumanam*, *Pavalakkodi*, *Sathiyavan Savithri*, *Kovalan*, *Pragaladhan*, *Gnanasoundari*, *Nallathangaal*, *Mayanakaandam*, *Bamavijayam*, *Alli Sarithiram*, and *Abimanyu Sundari*. Professor S. Ulaganathan, as quoted in Ramasamy's *Sankaradas Swamigal: Monograph in Tamil* (2002), distinguishes Swamigal's plays into the following categories: puranic plays, literary plays, history plays, religious plays, creative plays and translated plays. These performances typically began at night and continued until dawn. For the Tamil stage, he also adapted Shakespeare's works, including *Romeo and Juliet*, *Cymbeline*, and *The Merchant of Venice*. On a serious note, he never wanted his plays to be printed and emphasised on their nature as live performance art.

His plays follow a simple structure: exposition, contradiction, climax, and resolution. *Valli Thirumanam* focuses on the marriage between Lord Murugan and Valli, a woman from the Vedar community, which is considered a lower caste. Swamigal stressed the importance of divine love transcending caste boundaries, advocating that god sees no caste distinctions in love and devotion. This play showcased the possibility of an inter-caste marriage through a religious narrative. *Harichandra Mayana Kaandam* focuses on the puranic story of Harichandra, the king who speaks only the truth. *Alli Arjuna* explores a branching story from the Mahabharata centred on Arjuna, who married many women, including Alli, a queen from southern Madurai. His other plays, *Pavalakodi* and *Abhimanyu Sundari*, are also drawn from sources from Mahabharata. He also staged *Gnana Soundari*, a Christian devotional play which demonstrating his inclusive approach to religious themes.

Blending 'High' and 'Low' Culture: Bringing Stage to Society

During Swamigal's period, a rigid hierarchy existed between artistic forms - classical arts were revered

as sophisticated cultural expressions and folk arts were dismissed as inferior entertainment. Theatre artists faced social stigma and were derogatorily called '*koothadigal*' - a pejorative term derived from *koothu* that reflected society's contempt for popular performance. Sankaradas Swamigal inverted this cultural hierarchy by deliberately erasing the artificial boundaries between high and low art by integrating classical literature with folk narratives and created a new theatrical language. He achieved this synthesis without completely abandoning traditional dramatic principles. Instead, he created a new theatrical language that honored classical forms while making them accessible to common people. His success stemmed from his mixing of 'high' and 'low' culture and the blending of 'classic' and 'folk' elements. This approach allowed him to maintain the literary and artistic integrity expected of classical drama while also incorporating elements that resonated with popular audiences.

His 'modern' treatment of classical dramatic forms demonstrates his skill in adapting high literature for popular consumption. His rendition of the famous Tamil epic *Silappadikaram* provides an excellent example. The epic tells the story of Tamil couple Kovalan and Kannagi, who move to Madurai after Kovalan loses his fortune and character, seeking to start a new life. When Kovalan attempts to sell one of Kannagi's anklets, he is falsely accused of stealing the queen's anklet and is executed. In Ilango Adigal's original epic, the goldsmith who frames Kovalan provides extensive explanation to prove Kovalan's guilt, while Kovalan remains passive. Swamigal recognized that this approach would not work effectively on stage. He modified this scene by making Kovalan speak and tell his own story. This change transformed the narrative from literature meant for a selected few into theatre accessible to common people. He localized the story and made it more relevant to contemporary audiences. However, his adaptation was not entirely from Ilango Adigal's epic but based on a local folk narrative titled *Kovalan Chetti Kathai*. Shanmugasundaram in his essay (2023) documents Swamigal's defence of his adaptation of the folk narrative over Ilango's classical epic: "I presented what lived among the people as *ammanai*. The common folk could not connect



with Ilango's elevated epic as naturally as they did with *ammanai*. True theatrical progress comes only through serving the people's understanding."

Despite drawing plots from ancient stories, Swamigal revitalized them with fresh language and contemporary songs. In his essay (2023) "Iru Ulaga Nadaga Medhaigal", Padhmanabhan writes that Swamigal gave "a contemporary touch to the puranic stories" and moved "towards people's literature". His approach involved incorporating vernacular languages into drama and he also included local proverbs and idioms into his plays which facilitated the shift towards people's theatre. This approach introduced "a new sensibility" into Tamil drama, making theatre relevant to ordinary folks. His incorporation of folk tales represents a significant aspect of his cultural blending. He staged folk narratives such as *Nallathangal Kathai*, which tells the tragic story of a woman who, due to poverty and her sister-in-law's cruelty, killed her children by throwing them into a well before committing suicide herself. Her brother Nallathambi, unable to bear her death, also died in the same well. His *Kovalan Sarithiram* was also taken from folk tale sources which shows his commitment to bringing popular narratives to the theatrical stage. These folk elements provided emotional resonance that connected with audiences' lived experiences. As K.A. Gunasekaran notes as quoted in Shanmugasundaram's essay (2023) that Swamigal serves as "a bridge between the traditional koothu plays and modern plays of Tamil Nadu". This bridging function allowed him to preserve valuable traditional elements while creating new theatrical possibilities.

Swamigal wanted to convey a social message through his theatrical works. He chose his plays carefully to address social issues and often portrayed the sufferings of women through puranic characters. He created strong female characters in works like *Abimanyu Sundari* and *Alli Arjuna*. His *Valli Thirumanam* addressed caste issues by depicting a Lord Murugan marrying a lower caste Valli. This approach pioneered reformation plays in Tamil, which were later developed by the Dravidian Movement in its theatrical endeavors.

Musicality, Prose Dialogues and Theatrical Innovations

Music played a crucial role in Swamigal's theatrical productions. While incorporating traditional performance elements, he prioritised music. Tamil critic and writer A. Ramasamy in his book (2002) credits Arunachala Kavirayar and Gopala Krishna Barathiyar for influencing the musical knowledge of Swamigal. The dialogues in his plays were often metrical and written based on both classical and Tamil folk music. Tamil scholar Arivudainambi in his book *Tamizhagathil Therukoothu* (1986) credits the musicality of *therukoothu* as the prototype of Swamigal's plays. His approach represented a mixture of folk and classical music that enabled him to bring the puranas to the streets, more appealingly. Folk music forms, including *nondi*, *sindhu*, *kummi*, *kilikkanni*, *themmangu* and *oppari* provided a local energy to his theatre alongside classical ragas and compositions.

This synthesis elevated folk music from its marginalized status and also made classical music accessible to common audiences. Through this theatrical alchemy, he dismantled the hierarchical distinctions that had previously separated elite and popular musical traditions. He was the one to bring musicians from behind screens in front of people's eyes by making them a visible part of the theatrical experience. He also introduced musical instruments like harmonium and mridangam to the Tamil stage. This musical tradition had considerable influence on later Tamil cinema as well. Performers like S.G. Kittappa, M.R. Govindasamy, and M.K. Thiyagaraja Bagavadhar gained fame in movies mainly due to this musical theatrical tradition established by Swamigal.

One of his significant contributions to Tamil theatre was the inclusion of prose dialogues alongside the poetic diction. His play *Nallathangal* provides clear examples of this approach:

Raman: Karuppa! Did you go to watch the koothu yesterday?

Karuppan: Anney! Why did you ask so?

Raman: Just to ask you. What else?

Karuppan: Did you milk the black cow?

Muthan: Anney! Anney! Come here...

Karuppan: Yenda! (Shanmugasundaram, 2023)

The direct everyday speech quoted above, got



included with high-flown poetic diction, creating a ripple effect in the play. Commenting of this integration of vernacular in Swamigal's theatre, K.A. Gunasekaran in his book *Tamil Nadagamum Sankaradas Swamigalum* (2022) observes, "this common language made him connect with the plebs easily". This also marked a significant departure from the hitherto exclusively poetic language in theatre. He also incorporated proverbs into his dialogues and made theatre more relatable to audiences. Several examples from his works remain in contemporary Tamil usage including: "Avaravar seydhā pāvam, avaravar vīṭṭil" (Each person's sins remain within their own house), "Kai nirayndha ponnayī kātṭilum kaṇ nirayndha kaṇavanē perīṭhu" (What is a handful of gold compared to a beloved husband?), "Pazham nāzhūvi pālil vizhundhadu, adhuvum nāzhūvi vāyil vizhundhadu" (The fruit that slipped into the milk has now found its way to the mouth). These proverbs provided cultural authenticity and made his dialogues more accessible to the common public.

Swamigal also transformed Tamil performing arts by moving performances from street settings to proper stages. He mounted a stage in agricultural lands, village grounds, and in small huts and enacted performances—making it truly a people's theatre. This accessibility underscores that theatrical performances reached rural communities and common people who had previously been excluded from it. Shanmugasundaram credits Swamigal for the contribution introducing a fixed back screen with different backdrops. This is considered to be a significant technical advancement in Tamil theatre. Such innovations not only enhanced visual appeal but also provided better storytelling opportunities through scenic design. He also improved makeup techniques and staging methods and raised the overall production quality of Tamil theatrical performances. Jester characters were introduced into his plays, which added comedic elements that enhanced the plays' popular appeal. These comic characters provided relief from serious dramatic content while offering opportunities for social commentary through humour.

Conclusion

Even today, Swamigal's plays continue to be staged in different parts of Tamilnadu, demonstrating their enduring appeal and relevance. His integration of classical and popular forms created theatrical works that transcend temporal boundaries and maintain cultural authenticity. Particularly, his contribution to Tamil theatre represents a watershed moment in the evolution of Tamil dramatic art. His achievement of erasing the line between 'high' and 'low' art created a new theatrical paradigm that successfully bridged classical Tamil traditions with modern theatre. His innovations in three key areas - blending classical and folk elements, integrating music with prose dialogue, and democratising theatrical presentation, fundamentally transformed Tamil theatre. These contributions allow us to understand Tamil theatrical history before and after Swamigal. His legacy demonstrates that cultural innovation does not need to abandon tradition but can revitalise it through creative adaptation. His success in making classical literature accessible to common people, alongside maintaining artistic integrity provides a model for cultural preservation and evolution. With the continuing relevance and influence of his works on subsequent Tamil theatrical expressions, Swamigal is rightly being called as the true 'father of modern Tamil theatre'.

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