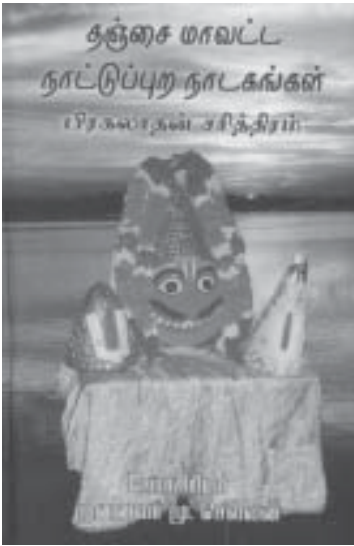


*Thanjai Mavatta Naattupura Nadagam - Prahaladha  
Charithiram by M. Chellan,  
Thanjavur : Girija Pathipagam, 2000, 248, Rs.60*

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S.SRINIVASAN



The folklore of Thanjai in connection with the 'Koothu' performance of "Prahlada Charithram" as "Irania Nadakam" is critically examined and analyzed in this book. The author's childhood experiences in 'Koothu' and the transformation of his lifestyle from a rural one to an urban one in Chennai, and the moulding of the mind to urban folklore traditions have been interestingly cited in the preface itself. Old Madras city and the Moor Market complex with its 'Allikulam' can be dramatically visualized when one reads about the ballads and dialects spoken by local peddlers and hawkers during their course of business, as given in the Preface to the book. The dialogue between the characters of an Iranian 'Kadai' in the local slang provokes the

reader's interest to find out more about the epic.

Thanjavur is a very fertile belt in Tamil Nadu, famous for various performances, both classical and folk. The Cauvery delta housing various communities has a diversified style of performance arts. Being the seat of classical music, dance and drama, Thanjavur plays a vital role in the development of Telugu, Marathi, Sanskrit and Tamil literature and drama also. Various plays such as Harischandra, Manu Neethi Cholan Kadai, Mohini Rukmangatha Charithram, Thiru Thondar Puranam, Prahalatha Charithram, etc. have become part and parcel of annual festivals and rituals in this belt. In this work, the author discusses in detail the 'Iranian Nadakam', that is Prahalada Charithram, its performance and the role it plays in the social set-up among the various communities.

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The author gives a detailed introduction to Iranian 'Kadai', referring to previous source books like the Bhagavata Puranam, the body of Sangam literature and the hymns by the Allwar saints, and then moves on to earlier plays written in various languages available in the Thanjavur Sarasvathi Mahal Library. Though Venkatramana Sastri's plays and the Bhagavata Mela of Melattur, Salyamangalam, and Theperumal Nallur identified by the author as folk performance, are widely popular, the author deals only with the places where Iranian Kadai is performed in the 'Koothu' style in Tamil.

The author describes the epic-length narrative enacted as 'Koothu' during June/July month in this area, where the whole performance is done by the local people of the villages who are not professional actors and the performance is supplemented with allied rituals. The book shows how this unique performance is carried out in not less than ten centers in and around Thanjavur district, with every village having its own unique and individual touch. A unique blend of the Puranic Iranian 'Kadai', with the local deity of the Mariamman temple, and performed by different communities like Kallars, Moopanars, Naidus, and Sourashtas, makes it even more interesting.

The book further explains the depiction of characters in duo in places like Archuthipapattu and Narthevan Kudikadu, where the performance is unique. The author identifies at least two main versions of the script used to perform the 'koothu' — the Vinaytheertha Pillai script and the Pudevai Saram Somasundara Mudhaliyar script

The legend tells the tale of the demon king Hiranya Kashipu, who wants to revenge the gods for the slaying of his brother Hiranyaksha by Varaha Moorthy, the incarnation of Vishnu. Hiranya Kashipu gains supreme powers from penance and begins to terrorise earth. . Narada rescues Leelavathi, demon's wife, from Indra who has captured her to destroy her womb, and he tells her the values of Narayana Manthra. Prahalada listens to the whole manthra in the womb, and becomes a prodigal devotee of Sriman Narayana and refuses to accept the supremacy of his father, even though he is under the strict teachings of his guru Chandamaruthar. King Hiranya Kashipu tries to punish his son by various means — pushes him off a cliff, throws him into a fire, summons Mallars to destroy Prahaladha but all in vain, since he is saved by the supreme Vishnu at all times. Leelavathi pleads for her son's life but the demon does not heed her. Finally, Hiranya decides to find out from his son where this Sriman Narayana resides. Prahalada explains that he is omnipresent. To disprove his words, the demon breaks open a pillar, but from within it Narasimha Moorthy emerges and destroys the demon, and crowns Prahalada. The book clearly analyzes how the Puranic legend is molded into the folk arena and becomes a part of the annual ritualistic celebrations among communities in the Thanjavur District.

The book traces the origin of this tradition in Telugu to the period of the Nayaks, from which it has been developed into the scripts of other languages in Thanjavur. Although there is reason to believe that there were

Tamil scripts existing prior to the Telugu scripts, it has to be established. The author also observes the sculptural support to this epic and the play enactment that is available in the durbar hall of the Thanjavur palace, which stands as testimony to how highly the Nayaks valued the play.

A clear tabulation of the Iranian's sentences enacted in different villages gives a thorough picture of the variation in performance from one place to another. The author also presents the play with supportive verses and dialects from the scripts. A relative study of the verses of other languages also supports the author.

The social set-up mentioned in the Purana blends with the social set-up that existed during the period when the script was coined, and the contribution of society to where the play is enacted creates uniqueness and diversification in the performance. The instances where the consent of Leelavathy is sought to educate Prahallada, the students' pranks and mischief, and the strict guru Chandamarudhar's reactions, the discussion of solutions between the demon king and his ministers, all give a clear social picture that is relevant to the period of the play and the period of performance.

In the last chapter, the author explains how the stage is formed and instances where the entire village forms the stage. The reactions of the audience during the performance and the participation of the audience in the rituals related to the performance are clearly depicted. The audience experiences being a part of the show itself, and it blends with the atmosphere and reacts accordingly. The villagers also have the custom of becoming performers in the show as a ritual offering so that they can get solutions for their difficulties. The whole performance is considered sacred and divine and the entire activity is a form of worship. The author has enlisted an elaborate bibliography of primary and secondary information sources, which shall enable any researcher to get into the subject easily.

The annexure in the book are also important for future research. The tabulations of source persons, their age, address and occupation will enable researchers to reach the particular person easily. The invitation notice and illustration also helps one to probe further. A part of the play's dialogue also makes the book interesting. The Modi scripts mentioning the grants and other matters relating to Iranian Nadagam are also very informative.

The book is the first complete book on this subject and will serve as a good guide for future students and researchers in this area.

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