

The image features two women in traditional Indian attire, likely sarees, with elaborate jewelry and floral headpieces. They are both holding and reading books. The woman on the left is in the foreground, looking down at her book. The woman on the right is in the background, also looking at her book. The background is a warm, orange-toned setting, possibly a library or a study area.

PRODUCTION

GRANT

PROPOSAL

27 May 2021

Tamilarasi (26 yrs) | Venda (23) | Bharathi (20) | Mahalakshmi (25) | Srimathy (21)

Who we are

We are five professional women Kattaikkuttu performers, who have trained and studied at the Kattaikkuttu Gurukulam - the residential theatre school of the Kattaikkuttu Sangam - for 7 to 10 years. Now we live with our families in different villages in the Tiruvannamalai and Vellore Districts of Tamil Nadu.

Four of us are married; three of us have one or two children; two of us have completed higher education; two of us are still studying; one of us has worked as a Kattaikkuttu teacher at the Gurukulam for 7 years.

All of us possess additional skills, including tailoring and costume design, make-up, massage, basic video editing, teaching Kattaikkuttu and English language skills.

All of us are determined to continue our career in Kattaikkuttu as professional women performers. All of us want to be sources of inspiration for other young women like us showing them that this is possible and a valid option.

Please find below the details of our Proposal, Budget and our individual CVs.

கட்டைக்கூத்து

What is Kattaikkuttu?

Kattaikkuttu or Therukoothu is a traditional, Tamil-language based ensemble theatre that uses acting, singing and music, dance and an elaborate way of costuming and facial make-up. *Kattai* are the wooden ornaments that the theatre's important (male) characters wear.

Kuttu means theatre.

A village performance usually starts at 10 PM and goes on until the next morning 6 AM.

Until recently Kattaikkuttu was performed by men only. They played both male and female roles, as well as the role of Kattiyakkaran or Clown. With the foundation of the Kattaikkuttu Gurukulam (2002-2020) this has changed.

Now we perform both female and male roles. All five of us have been members of the first-ever mixed gender Kattaikkuttu company, the Kattaikkuttu Young Professionals.

Srimathy as Dharmaraja in P. Rajagopal's play *Abhimanyu*.





Mahalakshmi as Narada in *Rajasuyayagam* during an all-night village performance.

We have performed in numerous productions, both all-night performances commissioned and paid for by rural spectators and innovative productions of the Kattaikkuttu Gurukulam for urban cultural festivals. The latter include *Karnatic Kattaikkuttu*, a collaborative production featuring Kattaikkuttu theatre and Karnatic concert music.

Karnatic Kattaikkuttu was conceptualized by P. Rajagopal, TM Krishna, Sangeetha Sivakumar and Hanne M. de Bruin. S. Tamilarasi made the choreography that is part of the production. The production featured at the Serendipity Festival in Goa, Kochi Biennale and was performed in Bangalore, Mumbai and Chennai, in addition to the Annual Performing Arts Festival of the Kattaikkuttu Sangam in 2018 in Punjarasantankal Village. For further details and links to visuals of this production, please see the [essay](#) by Hanne M. de Bruin published in *The Drama Review* Fall 2019.



Tamilarasi as Draupadi in *Karnatic Kattaikkuttu*.

Concerns as practitioners

As young women who have trained in and performed Kattaikkuttu, we have all experienced opposition and obstacles – from close and further away family members and from society. We have been told at different stages in our lives that we cannot continue performing.

We want to eliminate the barriers that prevent other (rural) girls and women from performing Kattaikkuttu. The stigma and shame we face as women performers in Kattaikkuttu is two-fold and concerns both **gender** and the **theatre** (Kattaikkuttu) itself.

Gender: Rural girls are not supposed to be actresses and show themselves in public, in particular not when they have come of age (this was the first barrier we had to overcome). Being on the rural stage – together with boys/men -- is considered “asingam”, that is inappropriate or even “dirty”, and may spoil your marriage prospects.

Theatre itself: Even though Kattaikkuttu is a complex form of theatre, it is criticized as a theatre of the lower castes and the poor. People from the urban upper classes/castes believe, therefore, that Kattaikkuttu must be a theatre of poor quality. Perhaps they have never seen an all-night Kattaikkuttu performance and do not know what skills and training is needed to make such long performances a success.

Interest as practitioners

As professional women performers who all have performed multiple roles (both female and male) in all-night rural and shorter urban performances, we feel we should have the same right as boys/men to perform Kattaikkuttu, that is to have our voices heard and to be visible on the stage in a dignified manner.

Venda as Lakshmana in P. Rajagopal's innovative production *RamaRavana*





Bharathi as Krishna in Draupadi Kuravanchi

Kattaikkuttu is labeled a “folk” theatre, while Karnatic music and Bharata Natyam are considered “classical” – labels that imply “low” and “high” forms of art. The lack of appreciation for Kattaikkuttu as a theatre in its own right – beautiful and powerful – reflects on the Kattaikkuttu performers, and on women performers in particular. Therefore, many parents do not want their sons or daughters to become professional Kattaikkuttu performers.



We want to investigate and address the concerns and social barriers that prevent girls/women from being professional performers through our art practice and through the quality of our performances. We also want to use our arts practice to lessen the stigma for the next generation of rural girls by empowering them through targeted arts training.

We hope that the proposed production can be an eye-opener for teenage girls (and boys). We also hope it can be a starting point to open up a wider discussion - through workshops and through actual embodied arts work that can help people to imagine these problems in and through performing a character.

Gendered violence on the stage: Duhsasana tries to grab Draupadi (Tamiliarasi) by the hair



Details of the production

Disrobing of Draupadi, Music Akademi, Chennai

Where

We plan to come together as a group in a safe environment – the facilities of the *Kattaikkuttu Sangam* in Punjarasantankal Village.

We need to create access to child care in order to be able to focus on our work (this is not always possible at our rural home with extended families to look after).

In between on location sessions and during lock downs because of the Covid-19 pandemic we plan to work from home.





Image: Discussion as part of cultural exchange between Global Girls (Chicago, USA) and Kattaikkuttu Girls (India).

We will start with organizing a series of *residencies* of 3 to 5 days where all five of us can work together to identify problems, chalk out the direction to go and brainstorm about the shape and content of the production. In between these residencies we plan to work on it individually at our own places. As part of these residencies plan to *invite women performers from other performing arts forms*. We would like them to share their experiences and help us figure out what they and we face and why.

We see the following steps:

1. Identify and analyze the social and political barriers that prevent women from becoming professional Kattaikkuttu performers – both prior to and after marriage (coming of age and finishing the 12th standard are the first two barriers; marriage is the last barrier all five of us have faced or are facing that prevents us from continuing our arts practice in public and with the consent of our families).
2. Develop a production that will visualize these barriers and explore the reasons for them through Kattaikkuttu; by being on the stage ourselves we will be a role model for other girls/young women. We need to develop a script and decide on which characters will be in the production.
3. Use the production to open up a wider discussion, e.g., by organizing a series of workshops/seminar where people – including teenage girls – can experience the power of Kattaikkuttu and how this art form can empower you as a woman to make your own choices.



We will use Kattaikkuttu as a resource as all of us are extremely familiar with this way of making theatre. At this moment in time, we are not able to give you the exact details of the production; these will perspire through our work together as well as through our individual inputs – the production may be a synthesis of our individual work or a collage of individual pieces within a larger frame.





We also may use other performance elements that we have become familiar with during our training at the Gurukulam (e.g., acrobatics). We will use Kattaikkuttu's traditional repertoire – and look at the role of women characters therein and their relations to male characters. Furthermore, we think we might use the role of the Kattiyakkaran (Clown) to build bridges between the traditional stories and actual reality. The Clown can comment on complex gender relationships in a way that is less threatening and that can make people laugh and reflect. So far, only very few women have acted a comic character. An additional aim is to look at/develop comedy from a women's perspective and to use this to probe gender relationships. Comedy can also expose and/or make fun of power relationships that otherwise are not visible.

Proposed collaborations

We plan to interact with women performers from other Tamil performance traditions, in particular Karnatic music (Karnatic vocalist Sangeeta Sivakumar) and Bharata Natyam (dancer Sangeeta Iswaran). Additionally, we plan to invite at least one facilitator (Dr. Maitri Gopalakrishna), who is an certified counsellor and drama therapist. All three these persons we know already through previous work at the Gurukulam. Lastly, we may ask our Guru P. Rajagopal (“Taatha”) to help us with the development of the script, in particular the composition of new songs.



Mahalakshmi as Doctor in P. Rajagopal's play for children
Mayakkutirai.

Reason why

Because we strongly believe that all art forms count equally and should be inclusive and accessible to all.



Deliverables

1. Video-clips/photo report of the “making of” – after every residency
2. Progress report, including initial ideas for script and cast
3. Actual production – video report
4. Workshop plan for teenage girls based on the production; ideally, we would like to run one such workshop provided we can find funding