

P. Thilagavathi

First Female Kattaikkuttu artist

First woman co-founder & director of a Kattaikkuttu theatre company.

Katradi Lead Facilitator (contractual); Co-artistic Director of Lorry Lolakku - Mobile Theatre for Social Justice

Co-founder, Manager, Artistic Director of Sri Krishna Kattaikkuttu Kuzhu

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Background

Kattaikkuttu is a traditional all-night form of Tamil (Southern Indian) theatre, which has been the exclusive domain of male performers only. Thilagavathi trained under Perungattur Rajagopalan at the Kattaikkuttu Gurukulam, a unique theatre school founded by him and his wife Hanne M. De Bruin in Kanchipuram District. In 2010, Thilagavathi graduated from the Kattaikkuttu Gurukulam as the first-ever female Kattaikkuttu performer. Since then she has broken many stereotypes in her personal and professional life.

Awards

Sangeet Natak Academy

Bismillah Khan Yuva Puraskar

First Kattaikkuttu artist to receive the highest Indian National award for young artists

Ramachandra Kavirayar Award & Bheeshmani Award

From Kalai Ilaikiya Valarchi Arakattalai, Chennai for Kattaikkuttu

Marapukalaiyin Aaniver Award

From Loyal Shri Shakti Awards

Career Milestones

Founder & Director

2024 - Present | Munnétram Initiative

A landmark project training 60 rural children in Kattaikkuttu across 3 villages, reviving intergenerational transmission of the art form..

Founder & Director

2014 - Present | Sri Krishna Kattaikkuttu Company

One of the highest-paid Kattaikkuttu companies, with highly acclaimed performances & a fan base across Tamilnadu.

Facilitator

2015 - Present | Wind Dancers Trust

Joined as a design team member and contributed to the Katradi program - for empathy-based social transformation

Director

2018 - 2024 | Katradi After-school centre

Wanting to give other children from marginalised communities the opportunities she had, she started the Katradi After-school centre at Kalavai Kootroad village serving children from scheduled castes and tribes.

Artistic Training

- Theatre workshop and a 3-month residency at Theatre du Soleil, with renowned director, Arianne Mouchkin.
- Theatre workshop with Mangai, Chennai Theatre and Script-writing workshop at the Alliance Francaise, Chennai.
- Contemporary dance workshops by K.S. Deepak, Attakkalari, Bangalore & Mira Rau, Bangalore.
- Story-telling and Theatre workshop with Craig Jenkins Dance workshops (Bharatanatyam, African dance, choreography) by Chennai- based dancer Sangeeta Isvaran.
- Carnatic vocal classes as part of the outreach program of Kalakshetra, Chennai.
- Acrobatics and juggling, clowning, and pantomime by Katja Groll, Stefania Mariano, and Dominique Huber from the Dimitri Scuola, Switzerland.
- Voice training by opera singer Liesbeth Riemersma, Netherlands.
- Photography workshop by Marinde Hurenkamp, Netherlands.
- Acting by Netherlands-based actress José Kuijpers.
- Workshop on expressing the basic facial emotions of Kutiyattam (the only surviving Sanskrit theatre tradition from Kerala) with Kutiyattam artiste, Kapila Nagavallikkunnel.
- Training in Basic Finance, Arts Management, Communication, History of World Theatre.
- Graduated from Kattaikkuttu Gurukulam as the first female Kattaikkuttu performer ever with a major in acting/singing and a minor in mukavinai (a musical instrument that forms part of the Kattaikkuttu ensemble).



Performances

Thilagavathi has performed since the age of 11, first with her father's company and later with the Kattaikkuttu Gurukulam in her youth. She is a prolific performer with more than 3,000 performances to her credit and is currently a highly sought-after performer along with her group Sri Krishna Kattakkuttu Company at traditional village festivals. She adapts to both urban and rural platforms with ease and takes special pleasure in performing for and teaching in marginalized communities, performing in orphanages, shelter homes, and institutions for the differently-abled. She has performed and taught at many other venues, both national and international.

Kuttu Repertoire

ALL-NIGHT PERFORMANCES:

- Vilvalaippu (Bending of the Bow)
- Rajasuyagam (Funeral for King Pandu)
- Pakadai Thukil (Dice and Disrobing)
- Kuravanchi (Draupadi as the Kuravanji gypsy)
- Abhimanyu (Killing of young Abhimanyu)
- Thiripurakali (Tagore's famous play on the Goddess)
- Karna Moksham (The Death and Liberation of Karna)
- Thakkayagam (The Yaga of Daksha)
- Veriyattam (Sacrifice Play)
- Subadhra's Marriage

- Sainthavan Karvabangam
- Aravan Kalapali
- Maliravanan

SHORT PLAYS:

- Rama Ravana
- Maya Kuthirai (The Magic Horse)
- Parakadal (The Milky Ocean)
- Vilaiyattin Vilaivu (Children's fight)
- Azhiya Sothu (Education is wealth)
- Ulagam Ullangaiyil (Mobile phone)

* All full-night performances can be done as short plays as well.

Extracts of Reviews

- V.Neelakandan, Kunkumam magazine, 1 Feb 2016

"Under the glare of the lights, 1,000s of people and seated around, with impressive costume, Dushasana springs into the center stage... The body language is entirely masculine but the voice is feminine... At the age of 11, Thilagavathi donned the male character's Kattai costume... [and today] she says, "My dream is to be a Kuttu actor and director like my guru."

- Special Feature, Dinathanthi, Kudumba Malar, 24 Jan 2016

"The best performer of the Mahabharatham character Draupadi is Thilagavathi. More than the dance and the singing, the emotional delineation of the character was impressive."

- Anbu Velayudham, Jananam [Magazine], Dec 11 2015

Thilaga along with other graduates studying in Cheyyar Taluk started the Sri Krishna Kattaikkuttu Company... A Founder-Member of this company, she explains, "People do not understand what is Kattaikkuttu... Masilamani Thangavel was the first to write the lyrics and script. Even now that is what we use... All of us [from the Sri Krishna Kattaikkuttu Company] learned this art form from Thiru Rajagopal in Kanchipuram, at the Kattaikkuttu Gurukulam."

- Lakshmi Subramanian, The Week [Magazine], Dec 6, 2015

"Her eyes display a range of emotions – valor, hatred, love, grief, and despair... She reappears a few minutes later speaking to the children about the dangers of sexual harassment... She says, "My relatives and neighbors have always bad mouthed my parents for letting me perform Koothu. But my parents had confidence in me. They believed I would bring them respect." ... Along with her colleagues at Wind Dancers, Thilaga has created several compositions and has choreographed theatre plays to give voice to the underprivileged. She spent 3 days dancing in an open lorry recreating the history of old Madras."

Work Experience

Kattaikkuttu artists are from backward and scheduled castes in Tamil nadu and as such have never been supported in urban spaces. Highly popular in rural villages, a few performers like Thilagavathi and others have taken it through collaborative works to national and international stages.

- 2020-21 Kattaikkuttu plays for COVID awareness : "Yaar andha neja yaman?"
- 2019 Collaborative performance Churning Waters with Australian Aborigine theatre, Bharatanatyam and Kattaikkuttu
- 2019 Performances at Kalakshetra Foundation, Chennai and Bharatiya Vidhya Bhavana, Chennai as a part of Sambhavami Yuge Yuge, music composed by Lalgudi Krishnan and Lalgudi Viji, choreographed by Sangeeta Isvaran
- 2016 Performed Pathra Pravesham for Natya Darshan in Bharathiya Vidya Bhavan Chennai.
- 2016 Performed Siriyamma Siri for Aseema trust in Malaysia.
- 2016 3 Performances for Iyal Isai Nataka Manram [the Tamilnadu State Government branch for Culture]
- 2016 Performances at the institution of Vidhyasagar for differently-abled children
- 2016 Performances for the SOS Orphan Village Mother's Day
- 2015 Performance of 'Nanga Ready', a performance created about transgender issues by Director Mangai, Chennai
- 2015 Co-choreographer in the creation of 'Lorry Lolaakku', an Indo-French production creating performances on top of a lorry celebrating the local histories of the kuppam-s or fishing villages along the coastline of Chennai for the celebration of Madras Week
- 2015 Performance at IIT, Madras
- 2014 Performance at Rukmini Devi Natyakshetra, Mogapair
- 2013 Performance for the NGO Pudiyador for communities in Vanandurai, Urur Kuppam, Ramapuram, Chennai
- 2012 Performing for the National School of Drama, Kuttu Festival at Kattaikkuttu Gurukulam, Kanchipuram
- 2010 Performance of Subhadra's Marriage, Kalakshetra, Chennai

- 2010 Performance at the Elliot's Beach, Chennai, on the invitation of the Commissioner of Department of Art and Culture, Tamil Nadu Government
- 2009 Performance for Nalanda Way, Chennai
- 2009 Special program for the Indo-Dutch Business Circle Chennai
- 2009 Special program for Elsevier International Publishing Company, Chennai
- 2009 Special programme for IGAR, Kalpakkam
- 2008 Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan Programme of the Tamil Nadu Government
- 2007 Rabindra Utsav, Kolkata
- 2006 Prithvi Theatre Festival, Mumbai
- 2005 Rangayana Festival, Mysore

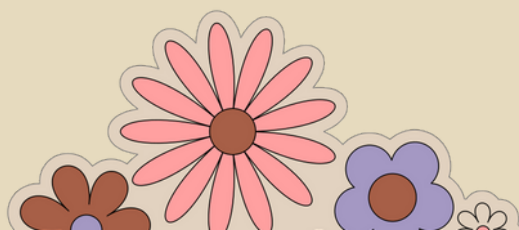
International Experience

- 2017 Performances at schools and theatre in Aubervilliers with Association Les Poussieres
- 2015 Performance of 'Siriyamma Siri', at the Kuala Lumpur International Festival, a production of The Aseema Trust showcasing the folk arts of southern India
- 2015 Participant in an Artistic Exchange program between the Wind Dancers Trust and the Association Les Poussieres, in Aubervilliers, France
- 2010 Indo-French Production 'Mayakkam-Oxymore' combining live and digital arts performed at Festival Les Bains Numeriques, Enghien-Les-Bains, France and in Chennai, Bangalore, Hyderabad, and Mumbai as part of Bonjour India – the Festival of France in India. This Indo-French co-production combined live and digital arts and was performed in
- 2008 Participant in Get In!, a young people's led international theatre event organized by the Arts Council of England, and in Contacting the World 2008, an international youth theatre festival organized by Contact Theatre; both events took place in Liverpool, UK

Teaching Experience

Thilagavathi has been teaching kuttu since 2010 both in Tamilnadu and outside. She worked as an Assistant teacher at the Kattaikkuttu Gurukulam till 2013. She then joined the NGO Pudiyador in April, 2013 as a Kattaikkuttu teacher and office staff. She has also created many innovative kuttu modules in the domain of education, empowerment, gender equality and social justice.

- 2020-21 COVID-19 relief work with Wind Dancers Trust – Katradi, including distribution of 2,000 ration kits to poverty-stricken families, sourcing stipends for rural artists without work, running de-facto tuition centers for children with no access to mobile devices and online education, free food kitchen.
- 2021 Created COVID-19 Vaccine awareness performances to combat vaccine hesitancy in over 21 villages and running vaccine camps with govt. authorities. Totally 8 villages were brought to 90+% of vaccination.
- 2018 Understanding composting, plastic waste reuse, recycle: Conservation and
- 2016 Training in kuttu and kuttu make-up for renowned poet and actor Snehan for the forthcoming film, Bommi Veeran
- 2016 Facilitator of a unique curriculum to help children be critical thinkers and look at the past question their history for Dakshinachitra Museum, Chennai
- 2015 – 2016 Collaboration between the NGOs Wind Dancers and Schools of Equality to create and facilitate a unique series of classes talking about gender stereotypes, equality, and social justice using the arts in 4 schools in Chennai and 1 in Pollachi. Creating a unique performance at each school.
- 2015 Facilitator to create a performance with children at AIR kuppam Government School, Chennai
- 2015 Kuttu workshop at American International School, Chennai
- 2015 Kuttu workshop at S.S.Jain College, Chennai
- 2014 – 2015 Facilitator at Bridging the Gaps Youth Camps, using art and sport to bridge the gaps of gender, poverty, caste and economic status.
- 2014 – 2015 Teaching kuttu at Child Children's Home 5 afterschool programs of the NGO Pudiyador across Chennai. The classes were designed to reduce aggression, build confidence, self-expression, and positive social skills
- 2014 – 2015 Teaching kuttu at Vaanavil, Nagapattinam, a shelter home. The classes were designed to build confidence, self-expression, and positive social skills
- 2014 Creating a performance with 9th Std students of Harishri Vidhyalaya Matriculation School, Chennai on the theme of Child Labour focusing on the children exploited in the fireworks industry
- 2013 – 2015 Teaching kuttu for underprivileged children at 5 afterschool programs of the NGO Pudiyador across Chennai. The classes were designed to build confidence, self-expression, and positive social skills
- 2013 Global Girls Workshop, Kattaikkuttu Sangam, Kanchipuram
- 2012 Assistant Facilitator with Hand-in-Hand Bridge School for underprivileged children creating a performance on the theme of Gandhi and Ahimsa [non-violence] for The Aseema Trust
- 2012 Shell Company Corporate Workshop (2 workshops in August and December), Chennai
- 2010 – 2013 Assistant teacher in Kattaikkuttu Gurukulam





Touch and feel

Tamil dancer uses a medium against sexual abuse of children

SHIMI SUBRAMANIAN

The two-room anganwadi near Kattankulathur, on the outskirts of Chennai, is brimming with excitement. Young boys and girls wait for the characters of the Mahabharata to come alive before them. Soon, P. Thilagavathi, a young woman playing the character of Draupadi, appears on stage. Her eyes display a range of emotions—valour, hatred, love, grief and despair—as Draupadi disguises herself as a tribal woman and walks into Duryodhana's palace to stop him from conducting the funeral rites of the Pandavas. If she can never capture the character of Draupadi, appears

make the audience feel as if the real Draupadi had come down to their village. As Thilagavathi leaves the stage, the audience stays captivated. She reappears a few minutes later, speaking to the children about the dangers of sexual harassment and how to differentiate between a good touch and a bad touch. The children listen in rapt attention as she tells them how to handle a stranger or

Right move: Thilagavathi in the katti koothu costume. Wooden ornaments and elaborate makeup distinguish katti koothu from other theatre genres

ularly known, is a katti koothu dancer and social worker. A class 10 dropout, she belongs to a backward village called Seemalam in Kanchipuram, and her compositions are inspired by women and children and the difficulties they face. In the last six years, she has visited more than 100 schools and slums to meet the poor and disadvantaged children and has taught them about cleanliness and hygiene. Her primary concern, however, has been preventing sexual abuse of children.

Thilaga learned katti koothu from her father, Palani Pandu. Every night, Palani and his four brothers would set out with big bags of makeup sets and colourful costumes to narrate the stories of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana in nearby villages. As the cast for katti koothu was entirely male, Thilaga was not allowed to learn the art and perform it. However, when Palani learnt about her dream of mastering katti koothu, he took her wherever he went to perform. But her joy was short-lived as she had to stop performing once she hit puberty. She was forced to stay back because of social pressure.

It was a period of agony for her. She would cry seeing her father and uncles go out to perform every night. Once they returned, she would touch and feel the kattaisaamam (wooden ornaments for katti koothu). After a while, Thilaga managed to persuade Palani and her mother, Farimala, to let her perform again. "My relatives and neighbours had always badmouthed my parents for letting me perform koothu. But my parents had confidence in me. They believed that I would bring them respect."

She spent eight years learning the nuances of katti koothu from him. Thilaga now works for WindDancer Trust, an organisation launched by classical dancer Sangeeta Iwaran, which specialises in teaching children through folk arts. She is also part of an all-woman troupe called Sri Krishna Katti Koothu Kuzhu.

Apart from regular students, Thilaga works with differently-abled children, too. "It is not easy to get along with them. The autistic children are always a challenge," she says. Once at a special school in Chennai, one child hit her and another came limping to kiss her. But now, the 40 children at that school know what happiness is and what sorrow means. "They now know when to laugh and when to cry. They have learnt facial expressions through koothu," says Thilaga. "I feel very satisfied that koothu has helped transform the lives of these children."

Along with her colleagues at WindDancer, Thilaga has created several compositions and has choreographed street plays to give voice to the underprivileged, especially street children and sex workers. In August, during the 365th Madras Day celebrations, which commemorate the founding of the city, she spent three days dancing in an open lorry, recreating the history of old Madras.

With WindDancer, Thilaga has taken katti koothu to France, Malaysia, the UAE and the United States. Once at Paris airport, customs officers mistook her makeup powder for drugs. "They did not understand what I said. I opened the makeup kit, mixed it with water and applied it on my face," she says.

Although Thilaga is famous for playing the role of Draupadi, the character she loves the most is Duryodhana. "This character has all the reney," says Thilaga, who is now the sole



LINKS

[TEDx Talk: How dying art forms are mobilizing social transformation ;](#)

[The Journey of Thilgavathi P | A Rising Star in the Kattaikkuttu World | Hindu Tamil Thisai](#)

[Jaya TV Interview](#)

[Overcome Gender Stereotypes, Achieve Success |](#)

[Kattai Koothu Thilagavathi in Josh Talks Tamil Katradi; Pudiyador Charitable Trust](#)

[Kattaikkuttu Sangam](#)

[Kattaikkuttu Young Professional Company](#)

[Mayakkam Oxymer: Bonjour India Festival](#)

[Kattaikuttu for COVID vaccination awareness](#)

Clockwise From Top Left:

- Thilagavathi as Duryodhana, a male character from Mahabharata
- From The Week, dated December 2015
- Thilagavathi performing in Lorry Lolakku
- Street performance for Churning Waters with Australian Aborigines at Mettumulluvadi
- Lorry Lolakku with fellow artists
- Theatre performance for Churning Waters at Auroville, Pondicherry