

Water woes take centre stage in new play

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CHENNAI: Water has been linked with human habitation from the dawn of history, with most ancient civilisations coming up along the banks of rivers. But rapid urbanisation threatens to break these bonds by heralding the death knell of many water resources. In his new play, 'Neer Nadodikal' (nomads of water), S Murugaboopathy explores this age-old relationship by taking a look at water disasters in Tamil Nadu, including the 2015 floods in Chennai.

In one striking scene, water takes the form of human beings and inundates villages, washing away everything including the art and literature of the villagers. However, the possessions lost during the floods return later as characters, images, music, myths and rituals, linking them to the contemporary world.

With a strong script written by theatre artist Murugaboopathy, 'Neer Nadodikal', which was staged at Loyola College on January 6, portrays the divide between ancient and contemporary societies. It also brings out the mythological connection between women and water and depicts how unplanned development has eroded our water resources.

"In ancient times, people preserved water bodies. They grew trees around ponds, lakes and rivers which were regarded as 'deivam' (god) within whose spirit they placed their lives. This is what protected our water sources for long but this has changed now due to rapid urbanisation. My play examines these issues in depth," said Murugaboopathy, founder and director of Manalmagudi Theatre Land.

The Kovilpatti-based theatre group goes off the beaten path by continuously experimenting with theatrical content in the form

of text, music, and visuals. It portrays subaltern rituals and traditions of the state in the backdrop of contemporary politics to explore a new language of theatre.

The play addresses environmental issues too including the proliferation of plastic waste. "As the nomads start life afresh, food, wrapped in polythene, comes searching for homes. Polythene bags turn into a part of the human body and the world turns into a polythene man who is wreaking havoc in the name of civilisation," he said.

The deadly face of war has also been introduced in a contemporary context. Time and again, war has turned people into nomads, bringing death and destruction in its wake. In one scene, mothers look at the clothes left behind by their lost ones and call out to them in grief. "Through these clothes, they look back at relationships that have been torn apart and express their agony over how war has disturbed the harmony of life. Turning a lullaby into a song of resistance, one woman stands alone until seven others come from different directions to join her and lead the masses in revolt," he said.

After receiving formal training in theatre from the Pondicherry and Tamil Universities, Murugaboopathy moved to his hometown of Kovilpatti in Thoothukudi district in search of the original sources and roots of theatre. His other notable productions include "Vanathaathi", "Koondhal Nagaram", "Uthiramugamoodi", "Semmoothai", "Kathaivanam", "Kuttrum Pattriya Udai", "Mirugavidushagam", "Soorpanangu" and "Kuhaimaravasigal".