

# Blend of bhakti and aesthetics

**F**ROM THANJAVUR, the seat of culture, have emerged the Bhagavata mela natakams, a grand oral tradition representing the concept of theatre as envisaged by sage Bharata and has remained Sanskrit in tradition and performance. This annual feast of music and dance happening in Saliyamangalam and Melattur still reflects the renewed enthusiasm of not only the votaries of this art but also of the local population and outsiders who revel in the ecstatic experience of this ancient tradition upheld by male dancers, soaked in Bhakti.

In the past, Bhagavata Mela Natakams were enacted in five or six villages, which included Melattur, Saliyamangalam, Utthukkadu, Soolamangalam, Tepperumanallur and Nallur. At present only Melattur (consisting of two groups) and Saliyamangalam are conducting this festival in a prominent way around the time of Sri Nrisimha Jayanthi. Kuchipudi is the base of the dance format of the Bhagavata Mela Natakams, enriched by the techniques of Bharatanatyam. Natarajan, head of the SLNJ Bhagavata Mela Natya Nataka Sangam, a devoted votary of this art form, who adorns the key women characters in the different plays has added a new dimension to the art. His own training with stalwarts of yesteryear like his father Swaminatha Iyer, grand father Ganesa Iyer, Balu Bhagavatar, doyen of this art, and from Natyacharya Thanjavur K. P.

*The Bhagavatamela festival held in the villages of Thanjavur during Nrisimha Jayanti has kept a 500-year old tradition alive.*

*NANDINI RAMANI records her experience at this year's celebration.*

Kittappa Pillai who composed specially for him the five jati patterns known as the Melattur Jatis, have all made his performances and the productions in general, rich with aesthetic appeal, and refined with experience.

They create an indelible impression in the minds of the audience. People throng to see this outstanding artiste, especially in the role of Chandramathi in Harischandra. One actually finds the audience being moved to tears. "Tears must be in the eyes of the beholder" — this defines the basic need of Natyadharmi and it finds its best expression in a tiny village of Thanjavur, and in front of the temple of Lord Lakshmi Narasimha.

Natarajan is a vital link between the past and the present, and carries the great responsibility of continuing this tradition with immense efforts. Natarajan by himself has evolved from his varied experiences, a matchless style.

He has a team of young, dedicated male dancers who provide excellent support for this group. Srikanth, Vijay Madhavan,

Arvind and Aniruddh, all of whom displayed sincerity, are trained in different current dance traditions. It was heartening to see them come together in Thanjavur. However, it is time that Natarajan gives them a deep orientation about the art, in order to preserve the original trend and methodology of this austere form.

As such, all these dancers have incorporated their chosen techniques into the stream so much so that it resembles the contemporary dance performance one witnesses in the Chennai sabhas. Arvind, who this writer has observed over the years, can probably be said to be shaping up in the footsteps of Natarajan.

For the preservation and propagation of this ancient operatic dance tradition in its chaste form, the crucial requisite is to mould these younger artists under the watchful eye of Natarajan. The week-long celebration includes a couple of other art forms like Harikatha, Carnatic music recitals and Bharatanatyam performances to give some respite to the actors in between the plays, each of which

extends up to dawn.

The aghara where the make-shift stage is set is supposed to maintain its austerity by allowing only male dancers to climb the platform, for purposes of sanctity, a practice of the past. A compromise seems to have been made on this, considering the number of female dancers from Chennai being invited for this occasion, although it is done to entertain the local population.

Natarajan, in the role of Chandramathi, went into emotional upsurges during sorrowful depictions on hearing the death of Lohitaksha.

The most striking was his portrayal of Chandramathi's plight doing the domestic chores after being sold as a servant by Harischandra on the streets of Kashi. "Intipani" (Nadanamakriya), "Inta Proddayane" (Sama-denoting the scenes of evening ablutions, etc. and awaiting the return of Lohitaksha), "Chinni Baala" (Kurinji-lamentation) and earlier

"Poyi rara" (Anandabhairavi) will haunt the memories of the viewers, for their excellence in musical and interpretative aspects.

The present day dancers have a lot to learn by seeing the approach of Natarajan — in the way he dwells on the nuances, the detailed portrayal of the varied gesticulations, and above all the note of propriety (Aucitya) with which he handles all of these — to gain a knowledge on the aspects of improvisation. It is all Natyadharmi, in essence and excellence, without any elaborate scenic arrangements. The other crucial aspect in this area, especially



**Natarajan... a lesson in abhinaya.**

for verses or the linking prose-sections, Natarajan's technique is masterly and again there is a lesson for dancers in gesticulation for a verse without resorting to verbatim translation. Natarajan's depiction of "Medapai" (Kanada-Chandramathi in a reminiscent mood) came out beautifully, more

with the singing of Venkatesan of Thiruviyaru Brothers (Narasimhan and Venkatesan), who aptly filled up the void created by the veteran Veeraghavan. Narasimhan's Mukhari ("leppamuna") at the lamentation of Harischandra on his own plight as the butcher, enhanced the performance of Kumar, younger brother of Natarajan, who is a lively actor, representing the tradition in its original texture. Young Prabhakar, sang with feeling and is being roped into the line under the guidance of the Thiruvaiyaru Brothers who have been regularly accompanying Natarajan's group. However, the absence of Tirukkargavur Srinivasaraghavan was felt.

A huge void has been created by the passing away last year of Krishnamurthi Sastriyal, the senior most artiste of this group, who made the scene reverential with his presence as the Granthika or the reader of the textual portions in the plays with expertise.

At Saliyamangalam, bhakti and ritualistic importance dominate with very simple dance structure. Prahlada Charita (discussed at length in this column last year) is received with utmost reverence and austerity. The plays of this village penned by Panchapagesa

Bhagavatar differ sometimes in lyrical contents from those of Melattur and are more Sanskrit based, enhancing the dignity of the presentation through deliverance of dialogue in Sanskrit.

Apart from Prahlada Charita, the other plays are almost extinct in this village, mainly due to paucity of actors who have migrated to different places. Srinivasan, veteran of this artistic lineage, lives in Chennai, but visits the village to enact the traditional role of his family, that of Lord Narasimha. Age has not deterred his enthusiasm for this art. However, he feels sad that the younger members of this village do not come forward to learn under him and help in carrying on the mission.

Rukmini Kalyana Nataka, seen at this venue, is Telugu and Tamil oriented, as composed by the author in order to reach the learned and layman alike. As in other plays, the Purvaranga, sung by Srinivasan Ramdas had different Tala structures. C. S. M. Subrahmanyam as Rukmini successfully tackled the challenge of having to act without much support from co-actors who lacked training. His depiction of Dasavatara in "Hari Hari Emandune" and the varnam format interspersed with theernanams, Geththu and Poyyadavus in the Daru piece extolling the virtues of Lord Narayana were lively and revealed the skill and devotion of this spirited dancer.

This troupe had a vibrant orchestra consisting of accompanists, S. Natarajan (violin), Dakshinamurti (flute) and Tiruvallaputhur Chendil Kumar (mridangam) who deserve special mention.