

Nurturing a rare art form

“I ASKED the musicians to sing and danced to the entire libretto in a single session for my troupe. That was the only way I could communicate the bhava, not in teaching sessions,” laughs S. Natarajan, president of the Sri Lakshminarasimha Jayanti Bhagavatamela Natyanataka Sangam, Melattur. He was referring to “Kamsa Vadham”, which was staged in Chennai this month, at the Anantha Padmanabhaswami temple. Usually this all-male genre is confined to the Thanjavur village where it has been nourished through five centuries.

Natarajan’s teaching methods are as singular as his commitment to the preservation of the art of his native village. Why else would a mechanical engineer, making a good living in Dubai, return every summer to conduct the Bhagavatamela festival in Melattur? Raising the required funds (Rs.3 lakh) is year-round labour for him. One third comes through sponsors and a grant (Rs.25,000, Sangeet Natak Akademi).

The rest is Natarajan’s contribution. “I don’t take a fee from my students of Bharatanatyam. Every May, they provide the needed sum. Their cheques are made out in the name of the Bhagavatamela Trust.” Supportive wife Anuradha will tell you that her husband spends every spare moment on festival planning and organisation, leaving her in



charge of home and raising daughters Priya, Swarna and Lakshmi, who have come to share his mela passion. Trained in the dance, they assist in costume design, make-up, and in grooming young actors. Natarajan’s four brothers are actively involved in the endeavour, with Kumar making a magnificent male protagonist

To watch S. Natarajan in “Prahlada Charitram” is an amazing experience. A profile of the self-taught artiste, who’s the driving force behind the Bhagavata Mela, held annually in Melattur.

— heroic (Harischandra) or demonic (Hiranyakasipu, Kamsa).

History records the grant of land and gifts by Achyutappa Nayaka, the 16th Century ruler of Thanjavur, to immigrant Telugu brahmin families for propagating the mela tradition. Today, this specialised blend of drama, music and dance, survives only in three villages. The biggest festival is at Melattur, with librettos by Venkatrama Sastri, whose “Prahlada Charitram” is a marvel of its kind. Its all-night performance on Narasimha Jayanti is at the Varadaraja temple. Just before dawn, the actor wearing the ancient lion mask, appears in a state of enraged trance to destroy evil. An act of ritual worship, this play is never performed elsewhere.

Only a few of Sastri’s 12 operas were alive in



performance when little Natarajan started out in the role of Vinayaka, graduating in due course to lead female characters. Since taking charge of the festival in 1985, a major task has been the search for missing scripts. “That’s a story by itself,” he recalls ruefully. “They were discovered in Chennai (Kalakshetra), at the AIR in Vijayawada, or an Oothukadu family settled in Tiruchi. “Dhruva Charitram” had no climax. We had to fill in with verses from the bhajana paddhati in a Harikatha pathasala in Andhra. We plan to stage it next year.”

To watch Natarajan make his “tiraiseelai” entrance as Lilavati in “Prahlada Charitram” is to wonder at his command over footwork, at the plethora of eye movements. You are more amazed to know that he is almost self taught.

Melattur boasted of natyacharyas such as Balu Bhagavatar and Bharatam Natesa Iyer. The former trained the new group of performers who decided to re-start the staging of “Prahlada Charitram” at the Varadaraja shrine on Narasimha Jayanti, after having run successful parallel shows of other plays before the Ganesha temple. (The festival had fallen on lean days and discontinued in the 1930s). “Prahlada was no problem, any grandma in Melattur knew every song, jati and mudra in it. Balu Bhagavatar taught a few like Harischandra, Markandeya Charitram and Rukmini Kalyanam.” The rest were choreographed by Natarajan over the years.

The troupe was faithful to the raga mentioned in the script, but the music had to be recreated in the same

style as Prahlada, with Tyagaraja’s compositions as models. Remarkably fitting, as Tyagaraja in nearby Tiruvaiyaru had been inspired to compose his own operas (Prahlada Bhakti Vijayam, Nauka Charitram) modelled on his senior contemporary’s work!

Natarajan does not belong to the original Telugu Bhagavatamela clan. But his background fostered bhakti for Narasimha, and a missionary zeal for the art. Hadn’t grandfather Ganesa Iyer once gladly sold some land to raise money for the festival? Wasn’t father Swaminathan splendid in the “raja part” lead, continuing to act even after the loss of voice to throat cancer, with son Kumar for “playback” speaking? With his leg injury, Kumar is now as undeterred by the doctor’s ban on dancing. Natarajan continues despite a heart problem.

Anxieties concern the future. “Who can bear festival costs after I retire next year? I plan to settle in Thanjavur and train some 12 boys to carry on. I have bought land in Melattur but how to construct a building for classes, rehearsals, green room facilities, a research centre and library for the books and cassettes I have collected,” he asks.

Surely, the answer lies with Lakshmi Narasimhaswami? ■

Pic. by K. Gajendran

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