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Performing the “True Story” - Ritual dance of the Tamil country

The Bhagavatha tradition traces its origin to the Sri Vaishnava cult. Achyutappa Nayaka a feudatory ruler under the Vijayanagara Empire ruled Tanjore between 1590-1617 CE. It was during Achyutappa's time that Bhagavatas from Krishna district, West Godhavari regions of Andhra migrated into the Tamil country. Achyutappa made large endowments as Brahmadeya settlements to these families near the river delta of Kaveri. These villages had other trading and cultivating castes inhabiting them already, now with the addition of Brahmin artistes, it aimed at being self-sustained art hubs. Melattur, Saliyamangalam, Needamangalam, Ottukkadu, Tepperuma Nallur are all situated in the river valley and were given to Bhagavatas.

The most prominent among these today is of course, Melattur. Previously called Unnatapuri, during Achyutappa's time it was

renamed Achyutapuri. The Bhagavatha tradition performs mela natakas based on mythological stories. These natakas are all in the literary style of yakshagana, a combination of music, poetry and dialogues

Myth-Ritual- performance

Myths are a set of cultural beliefs that are governed by man's need to find some social order. Western scholarship has approached mythology as “fables” or stories that have been “invented” within a cultural group to validate its beliefs. But, current academic interest is beginning to understand myth from the viewpoint of it being a “reality”, a sacred history that makes it relevant to the concepts of primordial revelation. It essentially recounts, through narratives the deeds of the supernatural beings as exemplary examples for human life.

The process of initiation of people in

retelling or reenacting these myths through performance is a process of handing a "secret" which has magical and prophetic powers. As Willard Trask says, "myth is why man is a mortal, sexed, organised society, obliged to work and to live according to certain rules". Ritual's association with myth is in practice. In the heart of ritual practices therefore lies the drishti or vision of a supernatural or higher consciousness. Through ritual, man transcends the sphere of mere knowledge and moves to the realm of ecstasy.

Bhagavata mela- Performative and prognostic

In the Bhagavatamela nataka tradition the performative elements in the play are used to reiterate the myth of Lord Nrusimha's victory over the ego of the powerful demon King Hiranyakasipu. This myth is considered "a true story".

Certain archaic ritual symbols are kept intact. All characters don dramatic makeup for each role, including men donning female roles in female costumes. Sri. S. Natarajan, the prime mover of the Bhagavatamela nataka tradition for the past several decades, dons the roles of Lilavati, Chandramati etc. His expertise and mastery are matched equally by his single-minded devotion. Watching his Lilavati pravesham (entrance) one immediately reposes into captured moments of classicalized gestures and nuanced footwork combined with the resonant Atana of "Vacheeniduko Lilavati ramani..." His mukhaja abhinaya, especially his exploitation of shoka (pathos) juxtaposed against the heroic strenuousity of the male characters, brings a tragic grandeur to the natakas.

The two other main characters of Prahlada Charitram are Hiranyakasipu and Lord Nrusimha. Hiranya is given the dress and ornaments of a King. Not just any king,

but a headgear that resembles the Tanjore Maratta Kings with the bejeweled bun and white feathers. The fact that the older myth of Lord Nrusimha's story translates in ritual performance among the natives of Tanjore as a local legend and the use the ornamentations of a King in whose time the present literature material used for the play, were written, goes to prove the importance of context of socio cultural ethos in ritual performance. Lord Nrusimha's character of course wears a ritual mask. Again, created using the craftsmanship of Tanjore cut mirror and gold foilage work, it represents the local artistry. Kept in pooja all year long, the performer when wearing the mask, instantly elevates from being himself to becoming the "other", gaining super consciousness.

Hiranya, the demon King too, is possessed by this super consciousness. Sri. S Kumar who plays an electrifying and stunning Hiranya brings out the character with so many shades. His quivering lips, angry eyes combined with coquettish smiles and strenuous footwork is a portrayal of Hiranya not as a single shaded rakshasha but as a man caught in a storm of emotions of love, hatred, paternal affection, revenge, despair and fear.

It is usually during the prolonged post-performance prognostic session, the actor who IS the Lord at that time, would give prophetic announcements such as who will play the character of Prahlada etc. I have had the fortune of seeing three Prahlada-s in my years of visit, each young lad (currently played by talented Dhruva) playing the character for at least three to four years. Each of them shone like a fresh pearl, timid and shy and yet with tremendous determination, consumed in Bhakti bhava with their eyes fixated only upon the temple site ahead of them.

The unhurried pace at which the Bhagavatamela natakas gradually unfold,

scene after scene, helps the characters blossom and last in the minds of the spectators. This in itself, contributes greatly towards reaching the aesthetic pleasure – Rasaanubhava . The non- parochial generosity of the patrons and participants in continuing a tradition of natakas in Telugu, is a reiteration of the multicultural canvas that the Tamil country arts, inherently have, through centuries.



Purva Ranga- revival

Sri Natarajan has introduced with great vision, elaborate ritual performance (dance) for the purva ranga or pre-drama narrative, propitiation of deities in the natakas. Accompanied by todaya mangalam, sherva and sabda sollu this is a space to showcase the Bhagavata's mastery over nrta. Some of the senior dancers such as N. Srikanth, Aravind, Vijay and others create sparkling imagery with their footwork and laya patterns laced with utmost devotion to craft.

The musical ensemble is called the "melam", a term used especially from the Nayak period. It is the spine of this ritual tradition, one must say. They invoke the yakshagana natakas in the form of daru-s, churnika-s, vrttam-s, samvadam-s, prapti, geya vachanam-s etc. The Thiruvaiyaru brothers: Sri Narasimhan and Sri Venkatraman hold the coveted honour of invoking divination, capacitated by Venkatrama Sastri's genius composition.

Samvada- for primordial revelations

I wish to describe the unfolding of a crucial climax scene in the Prahlada Charitra nataka in conclusion, to demonstrate how, mythology is not just semantic value but a living, thriving evocation of primordial revelations through "true stories" within a society and its ritual practices.

Music combined with dance and enactment, the early morning atmosphere when samvada will be enacted, everyone gathering with folded hands in reverence around the arena to witness the "actual" fight between Hiranya and Nrusimha , the mask of Lord Sri Nrusimha, the pooja done to Him before they begin this long one hour fight, the wailing plea of child Prahlada, add to the frenzy, expectation and anticipation of the final moment of divination.

This collective conscience, I believe largely attributes towards entertainment moving into the realm of elevation. If entertainment as Colridge said is "willing suspension of disbelief" then this performance of elevation is "willing participation in a belief". At this point, the lines between performer and audiences are blurring. We are witnesses to the acrimonious dialogue exchange between God and man. Between good and evil. Between ego and super-ego . We are rooting for the super ego to teach a fitting lesson to the ego. The dialogues of the demon king, is a shocking reminder to us, of how we too maybe at times a travesty of Hiranya with our own swelling egos. The nataka now moves into the realm of personal relevance to each person who is watching. And they think; is God going to banish me? Am I going to be torn apart with his bare nails? No, Hiranya is my alter ego. He is inviting the wrath of God and thereby his end. But I must understand a lesson through his example. In Hiranya's death lies the purging of my arrogance and misdeed.

Hiranya would rant, scream, his ego swelling, before Nrusimha appears from the pillar, revealing his half human and half Lion persona. Shocked, he would praise Prahlada as "Bhakta sironmani" for helping bring the elusive Vishnu, through his pure devotion. Hiranya then, would circle and swing, his frenzied movements causing him vertigo, his full lunged laughter soaring his super conscience. Similarly, Sri. Venkata Subrahmanyan who dons the role of the Lord, would even while wearing the mask start to feel the power. Bhagavatas would recite prayers as he wears it. The mood would be heightened with music, chanting, bells and heavy drumming. A man who was fasting all day long, waiting for this moment, upon physical contact with the mask, instantly would start to groan like a Lion. He IS Nrusimha, seething with rage upon seeing Hiranya. His dialogues punctuated with thumping of his feet, loud groans and impatient anger. In turn, the valourous King would provoke him with insinuations, but not disrespect. He would mock him for appearing in a grotesque form. He would laugh, thump the stage with his sword and charge towards the Lord saying "raavaiya" meaning "c'mon I say, come and have a dual with me". This would go on until the moment it dawns on Hiranya that this Nrusimha form is a perfect one taken to circumvent his vicious boon. From that moment on, there is an apparent shift in theatrical paradigm where the Lord shows Hiranya how defeatist his boons were. The samvada ends with the symbolic surrendering of Hiranya's sword. The performer who plays Hiranya would go completely unconscious from that moment, marking the death of the demon.

Then a pooja is done to Lord Sri Nrusimha and Prahlada. People follow the Bhagavatas in a procession through the streets. They approach Him with great faith and whisper their personal problems and worries. He spells a solution to

them, proffers vibhuti (ash). Some prophecies are remedial measures. Some are simply sooth saying, including sometimes symbolic foretelling of death and other fateful happenings. Other prophecies are even reprimanding in nature. In all, dance at this point is pure prognostication, deeply involving the performer and viewer as participants in a cultural belief.



The Bhagavata Mela Natakas have undergone a certain classicalization over the decades, but they have been able to remain relevant within the social fabric for an almost unbroken 400 years due to their non-displaced geography, community consciousness and perhaps even patriarchy. The historiography of Tamil country's dance must acknowledge the ardent efforts of Sri S Natarajan and his family. And of course the immediate society in which the nataka tradition remains, for it is preserving it as a strong part of their belief system. The jubilee celebrations must be a time for dance history world to pledge itself to the documentation

of these brilliant artistes, their ritual heritage and immeasurable contributions. On my part, I submit a set of photographs that I found while researching at the New York Public Library archives recently. They are of the grand masters of Bhagavata Mela in performance, including young Sri Natarajan and his father in the Hiranyakashipu get up etc.

- i) Although the yakshagana Bhagavata mela natakas were penned and performed even during the Nayak times, the current traditions and symbols adhered to, are evoked from the Maratta kings and their reign. This could be due to a combination of factors including Venkatarama Sastry's period being during the Maratta rule and also because the immediate cultural memory of the revivalists such as "Bharatam" Natesa Iyer and others were from the times of great music and dance masters such as Veerabhadrayya, Kasinathaiyya and others..
- ii) I must express here the efforts of Smt Priya Murali, daughter of Sri Natarajan in training the younger boys for their roles. The immaculate footwork, abhinaya and dialogue delivery of course, when subsumed in Bhakti, which these tender boys imbue through their ethos, makes one understand the power of mystique.
- iii) It is rather simpleton sometimes to expect this same feverish joy within the confines of an urban proscenium with clock time slots for performances.
- iv) The mythology of Prahlada Charitam does not have a samvada or acrimonious repartee between the Lord and Hiranyakashipu, but only an immediate killing of the demon king by the Lord after He tears out of a pillar. But, Venkatrama Sastry's

vivid creativity, envisioned the killing of Hiranya as not merely, the gory tearing of his person by the Lion-Man God, but a killing of his spirit, a crushing of his ego and striking in his heart a sense of defeat, fear and submission. This artistic liberty allows us to better comprehend the amnesty given to his soul in the utara section of this purana.

- v) "kondalu chendaadi pindi...pindi... gaavintunu badabaagni kanniiru paapakiidagina... mahinalla pootulu mattteebha mounaa..." "I can play with mountains as if they are toy balls, I can crush them, can a black buffalo become an elephant?..." These are some of the lines of Hiranya that show his inflated ego. Translations from "Dancing to play or pray" by Dr. M. S. Siva Raju; Kanishka Publishers, 2010.
- vi) The dialogues of Samvada written beautifully by Sri Venkatamma Sastry are noted for their dramatic theatricalization and anthropomorphic writing combined with Bhakti and music.
- vii) Historically speaking there were a few decades of a break due to falling patronage and fiscal constraints.
- viii) It was his grand father Sri V. Ganeshaiyer who worked tirelessly in reviving the Bhagavata mela nataka again in 1938 and his father Sri S Swaminathan who donned the principle characters of Hiranya, Harischandra etc who passed the mantel to Sri Natarajan. The collective contribution of his family, especially brothers, under his very able leadership and the dedicated participation of all the women of the family in this ritualistic tradition is a huge factor in the sustenance of this form. And we are indebted to him for that. ●



Ram Iyer
through the lens

