
**A pure heart and complete devotion -
Bhagavata Mela Nataka Mahotsav, Melattur**

MADHAVI PURANAM

The countryside makes a lovely sight as one approaches Melattur from Tanjavur and it adds to the charm of the dusty and sleepy village of Melattur. The village wore a festive look with a variety of *utsavas* taking place in the local temples, the month being of *vaisaka*. The veda pundits going around the village in groups reciting the ritual texts and the chariot festival processions suffused the atmosphere with devotion. It is here that Sri Lakshmi Narasimha Jayanti Bhagavata Mela Natya Nataka Sangam, established in the year 1938, organized its yearly Bhagavata Mela Nataka Mahotsav for the 70th consecutive year from 19-27 May, 2010 as a part of Narasimha Jayanti Vasantotsava celebrations. A tall order by all means!

The tradition of Bhagavata Mela which dates back to roughly 300 years was nourished through the patronage of the Nayaka rulers and later the Maratha rulers and then sustained by local efforts after them. The tradition flourished in Saliyamangalam, Melattur, Tepperumannalur, Oothukadu and Soolamangalam where observing the Narasimha Jayanti by staging the Prahlada story was prevalent. Now the Bhagavata Mela tradition is mainly seen in the first three of the above mentioned centres. The Melattur tradition was strengthened by Venkatrama Sastri (1743-1809 AD) through his twelve plays after whom the tradition was kept alive by Venkatramanayya and Venkatrama Josyar and then by Natesa Iyer followed by his disciple Kinchin Kothandarama Iyer. From 1936, for a few years, prominent persons like Ramani Iyer, Gopala Iyer, Subramaniya Iyer and Balu Bhagavata continued the tradition in Melattur after which V Ganesa Iyer and his family members emerged as a major group which continued the tradition of staging the Bhagavata Mela natakams and preserved and strengthened the tradition to the current level. S. Natarajan, grandson of V Ganesa Iyer and son of G Swaminathan, has been acting in the Bhagavata Mela natakams since 1954 and has steered the group, Sri Lakshmi Narasimha Jayanti Bhagavata Mela Natya Nataka Sangam, which is considered to be doing a fine job amongst all the prevalent groups of Bhagavata Mela in Melattur and other villages. The other group of Melattur is the Bhagavata Mela Natya Vidya Sangam also known as the Mali group. The Bhagavata Mela tradition has continued in Melattur as traditional theatre with devotion being the central ingredient and has always been a thrilling combination of carnatic music, dance and drama dedicated to the presiding deity of Melattur village.

The festival began with the Mangala Isai - nadaswaram by Thirukarukavoor brothers, Sri T K Ramanan and Sri T K Saravanan. Padma Subrahmanyam, Vyjayanthimala Bali, Chitra Visweswaran, Sudharani Raghupaty, BM Sundaram, Pappu Venugopala Rao and also many dance students and enthusiasts were present to witness the Prahlada Charitam on the inaugural day. As is well known, this natakam is never staged outside Melattur and on no occasion other than the Narasimha swami jayanti. The intense drama of the growing disenchantment of Hiranyakasipu with



A scene from Prahlada Charitam

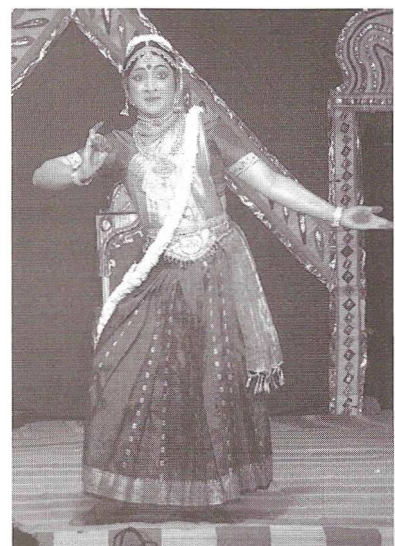
Prahlada's faith in Lord Vishnu, Leelavati being torn between her son and her husband, her agony as Prahlada is punished are presented through beautifully etched out characters and sequences of

dance and drama. The pravesa of Hiranyakasipu and that of Leelavati behind the curtain make an impact. The finale of the natakam which is an intense drama, unfolds with the dialogue between Narasimha on the stage and Hiranyakasipu below the stage on the street leading to the temple. The characters challenging each other interspersed with subtle philosophy of Vedanta and devotion keeps the spectators who are standing on the either side of the lane, spellbound. It is interesting to watch Narasimha, played by S Venkatasubramanian, son of R Sundaram, a founder dancer of the group, restrained by a couple of people holding on to the rope tied around him. Hiranyakasipu when in a state of intense emotion tries to climb up the stage to challenge Narasimha and is restrained by the group members. The spectators who watch the natakam every year do so in a state of devotion where as spectators new to this form watch in awe as the characters appear in a state of trance, on and off, during the course of the last scene of Prahlada Charitam. It is difficult to comprehend which of the unfolding action is drama and which is the surreal and trance. However one cannot but marvel at the devotional component woven into the entire presentation.

The team of singers consists of the Thiruvayyaru brothers Narasimhan and Venkatesan who have been singing with this group since 1984, their sons Manjunath and Gopinath respectively who have been singing for the past 4 years and Prabhakaran (Natarajan's cousin). All of them make an excellent team along with the veteran Andankovil Durai who has been playing the violin for the past 50 years for the group, Sriram on mrudangam, Gokul on flute and Kannan who plays the suddha maddalam for Prhalada Charitam every year. The dialogue in Telugu is rendered clearly with conviction though the actors are Tamilians and do not understand much of Telugu. S Natarajan as Leelavati is exquisite and a complete natural and S Kumar as Hiranyakasipu is regal and both the brothers infuse their characters with their expertise and experience. One can see all the elements of drama- the dialogue, song, music, dance, mime, costumes and above all devotion which make a heady mix and the resultant involvement of the spectator and the devotion evoked in them make it a complete theatre.

Harischandra was presented in two parts on 22 and 23 May. Once again the brothers S Natarajan and S Kumar excelled in their roles as Chandramati and Harischandra. When this writer enquired from Kumar if the playing of his characters is a cake walk for him as he has been doing it since 1978, he informed that the audience is very discerning and that one cannot afford to take the performance lightly. He also recounted as to how he was not accepted easily both by the group and the village folk when he was ordained to play the Hiranyakasipu which his famed father G Swarninathan used to play with elan and that it is only with the divine grace of Lord Narasimha that he has grown to portray such a variety of roles skilfully. Natarajan recounts that in his early years of performance he was motivated by the fame earned as an actor and how it became worship to him in due course of time. He is now penning a book titled, 'Mystic experiences with Bhagavata Mela'. N Srikanth, in the first part of Harishchandra, made a lovely and graceful Chandramati and Vijay Madhavan excelled as the Matanga kanya.

N Srikanth, a student of Padma Subrahmanyam, brings in a neat Bharatanatyam technique to the dance aspect of the natakam and so does Vijay Madhavan, a disciple of Chitra Visweswaran who is quite a talented actor and imparts spontaneity to his characters. It's interesting to note that Natarajan and Kumar's technique of dancing is quite different from that of the youngsters. The veterans R Varadarajan and M R Krishnamurthy still don various roles. Youngsters like Talin who is the current Prahlada, Aniruddha alias Prasanna, Natarajan's nephew, a talented youngster who has been ordained to take over Natarajan's role of Leelavati, Natarajan's grandson Druva and nephews Sai Ajay and Lakshmikant are being groomed by Priyamvada, Natarajan's daughter. Natarajan's another brother Neelakandan alias Subhash is also adept at donning various roles. Almost every male member of Natarajan's family is trained to take up some role or other!



N Srikanth as Chandramati

In the workshop on Bhagavata Mela from 19-21 May, the salient features of the Bhagavata Mela dance technique came up for discussion and the view that the Bharatanatyam technique is predominant in the dance technique of the younger generation was debated. Natarajan explained that the foot work is like Bharatanatyam but the presentation is quite different. There is also an abundance of hastas which are quite different in usage in Bharatanatyam. However no clear answers emerged. Most of the young artists of Natarajan's troupe are trained by Padma Subramanyam, Chitra Visweswaran and Priyamvada in the Bhagavatamela style. A point to be noted is that even in the earlier days the Bharatanatyam nattuvanars/ exponents were associated with the Bhagavatamela tradition the prominent being Natesa Iyer, E. Krishna Iyer, Kittappa Pillai and B Herambanathan. Scholar B M Sundaram informs that most of the Bhagavata Mela exponents through generations have been trained by the descendants of the Tanjore Quartet. It would be a worthy academic exercise to undertake a detailed study of the dance technique in Bhagavata Mela and the changes that have come about over a period of time, if any, and evaluate how the changes in the dance technique have altered the character of Bhagavata Mela. Whatever is the dance technique, the commitment and devotion to participate in the natakams as a form of worship is deeply imbued in all the youngsters and the stalwarts alike in Natarajan's group. The workshop was conducted ably by N Srikanth and Aravind Ramadurai, a Bharatanatyam dancer and also a Chartered Accountant by qualification and profession, in the presence of Natarajan and Padma Subrahmanyam who offered valuable inputs to the students attending the workshop.

It is indeed commendable of both Natarajan and the youngsters that the next generation of Bhagavata Mela artists is well trained and dedicated to carry the tradition further. To further his efforts in this direction Natarajan has identified boys from the Veda Pathashala which was established in 1990 and plans to train them in the Bhagavata Mela tradition. Natarajan who foots the entire cost of hosting the festival every year with partial support from the Sangeet Natak Akademi and some other sponsors, is looking for a modest 15 lakhs to complete the construction of the Bhagavatamela Vidyalaya and to set up a fund to carry on the festival every year. Natarajan is very clear that Bhagavata Mela cannot provide the actors with livelihood, it has to remain in the realm of worship and devotion and he does not expect the next generation to bear the financial responsibility. Natarajan also plans to have a library and is looking for a suitable place for the archives of Bagatvata Mela which he has painstakingly built up over decades. He has also obtained all the twelve of Venkatrama Sastri's plays from various sources. Kanakangi Srinivasa Josyulu, a descendent of Venkatrama Sastry has helped him correct the scripts. Natarajan now plans to return to Melattur from Dubai where he works and devote all his time to the Bhagavata Mela. Kumar also echoes his brother's thoughts and plans to return to Melattur eventually.

Reflecting on the changes brought about by him over a period of time Natarajan reminisced that in 1965 when the Melattur group of Bhagavata Mela split, teaching was casual. He has brought in more structured learning and he plans to improve upon the pedagogy by having structured courses at his Bhagavata Mela Vidyalaya in Melattur. Natarajan has refined the stage decoration, stopped the usage of front curtain as drawing the curtains between the scenes delayed the natakams. He got all the important people who sat on the stage, as was the practice then, leaving little place for the performers, to get down and sit amongst the spectators. A praiseworthy aspect is the beautiful management of the not so 'state of art' sound system whereby the singers and accompanists create a perfectly balanced presentation along with the actors making the Bhagavata Mela natakam not only a breathtaking visual but also a treat to the ears. However, the glitzy decorations on the backdrop are an eyesore and can be done away with.

The Harihara Leela Vilasam on the 25 May was a much shorter natakam, of about two hours duration, wherein Shiva grants Chandasura the boon to reduce anybody to ashes just by placing a hand on other's head. Shiva then runs for his life as Chandasura chases him to use the boon on him and then Mohini entices the rakshasa and tricks him to place his palm on his own head and get reduced to ashes. The natakam also presents the birth of Hari Hara Putran (Sastha). Once again Natarajan as Chandasura and Kumar as Shiva are delightful. However the high point of this natakam is the exquisite portrayal of Mohini by Aravind, a student of Malathi Dominic. He has

mastered the nuances of female impersonation from Natarajan and his abhinaya does not fall into the Bharatanatyam style and is spontaneous. However, his nrnta is executed in a neat technique of Bharatanatyam. He is a delight to watch and a fitting successor to Natarajan's art of female impersonation.

The intervening days, 20, 21 and 24 May when the Bhagavata Mela natakams were not scheduled for performance saw various Bharatanatyam presentations. Jayashree Rajagopal and Nrithyodaya artistes of Mumbai presented Bhakta Sakha Vittala, an interesting and well choreographed presentation of Marati abhangs on Varkari Saints. Members of ABHAI (Association of Bharata Natyam Artistes of India, Chennai), attending the workshop on Bhagavata Mela presented Bharatanatyam. The solo items presented by various dancers were well appreciated by the spectators. One also got to witness the Bharatanrtya style propounded by Padma Subrahmanyam which was well presented by Gayatri Kannan and others. N Srikanth, Roja Kannan and Priya Murle excelled in their presentation Bharatam-Bharathy-Bhaaratam. Deepika Vaidyanathan, Karpaga Veena and Dhanalakshmi, disciples of Swarnamalya Ganesh exhibited good training and Deepika came across as a dancer with potential to excel. Kiran Rajagopalan from the USA gave a good account of his Bharatanatyam training.



Aravind Ramadurai as Mohini



Vijay Madhavan as Kurathi

Valli Thirumanam presented on 26 May is the story of Valli, the daughter of Nambi Rajan and her love for Lord Murugan. The natakam is in Tamil and the script is by Shankardas Swami. Aravind as Valli was impressive but the show was stolen by Vijay Madhavan who played Kurathi, the gypsy soothsayer. Vijay Madhavan did an excellent job as the impish, vivacious and a little foolish Kurati and was applauded by the spectators who enjoyed the entire drama with many dialogues in a lighter vein. The street was fully packed with spectators indicating the popularity of the natakam which is as compulsory a feature as the Prahlada Charitam every year. After the conclusion of every natkam it's a tradition for all the artists to offer obeisance at the Varadaraja temple and then go around the village streets to the temple of Swaminatha, the

family deity of Natarajan. The concluding day of the festival featured Sri Anjaneya Aradhana and other concluding rituals and also the naama sankeertan by Udayalur Balarama Bhagavata. Natarajan's trance during the rituals before Prahlada Natakam and after the Valli Thirumanam, the Narasimha character addressing the problems of devotees in a trance after the Prahlada Charitam, the chariot festival of Narasimhaswami with his consorts, the nama sankirtana are all an innate part of the Melattur Bhagavata Mela, bringing art, ritual, worship and the underlying devotion together into a lasting tradition in Melattur.

"One needs a pure heart and as long as devotion is the mainstay of Bhagavata Mela, the tradition will never die!" says Natarajan. Well said! When it comes to devotion, Bhagavata Mela propounds the very best of human values and universal spiritual truths and Sri Lakshmi Narasimha Jayanti Bhagavata Mela Natya Nataka Sangam and its members exhibit every bit of the devotion emanating from a pure heart. One hopes that God's will manifests in the form of support from the Governments of both Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh negotiating the paradox who does the form belong to? Andhra, as the natakams are in Telugu? Or Tamil Nadu, as the practitioners are Tarnilians and it is performed in Tamil Nadu?