

MELATTUR MAGIC

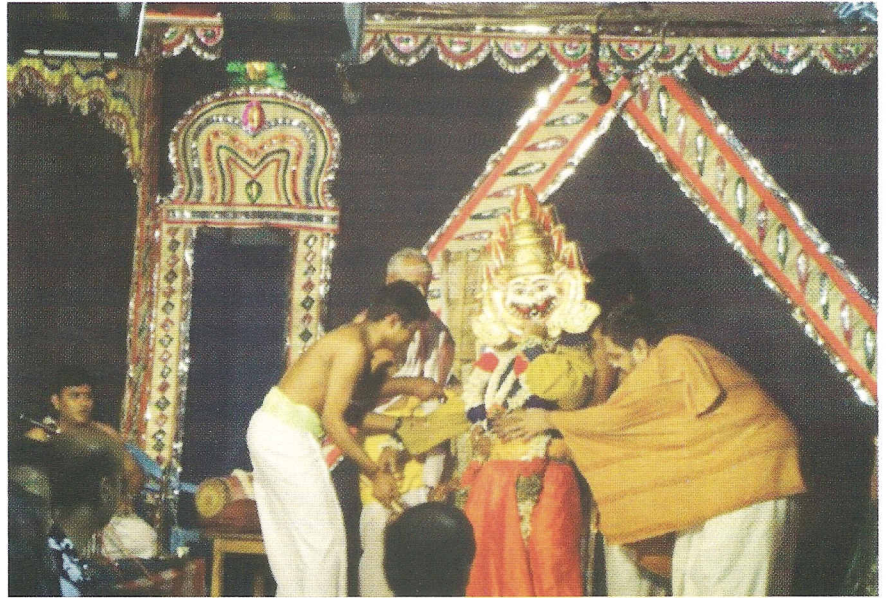
ABHAI's summer workshop

As the train slowly chugged into Tanjavur station, the sleepy eyed girls and boys hurriedly got up and out of the train, to be welcomed with eco-friendly banners of bamboo and cane – 'Melattur Bhagavata Mela Natya Nataka Sangam Welcomes You'. The reception committee were all dressed in white dhoti-kurta, their forehead adorned with ash and kumkum glistening in the morning sun.

We had gone to Melattur to attend ABHAI's (Association of Bharatanatyam Artists of India) summer workshop. There were groups from Bangalore, Chennai and Mumbai and a lone girl from Kerala too. We were all bundled into vans and cars for a bumpy 20 km ride to Melattur. The vans blaring loud devotional songs meandered their way through the narrow roads, stopping often on the sides to let a bus or van pass. Skirting the road on both sides were green fields gently swaying in the early morning cool breeze, the hills rising majestically in the background. The setting was perfect.

After a 45-minute ride, we entered a small village with the signboard

Chitra, Vyjayantimala, Padma and Sudharani



A scene from *Prahlada Charitram*

– 'Melattur'. There was a sense of awe as we stepped on to the sacred ground which had been the seat of Bhagavata Mela dance-dramas for the past 70 years. Veteran S. Natarajan, President of the Sangam, traditionally dressed in a panchakaccham and his wife in a madisaar, welcomed us and escorted us for coffee. The plan for the day was given by N. Srikanth, senior dancer and Bhagavata Mela artist for over 35 years who was also the coordinator of the ABHAI workshop.

After a quick bath and breakfast all of us assembled at the Sri Lakshmi Narasimha Swamy Temple where the idol of Mahalakshmi was being consecrated. The rituals over, ABHAI President Dr. Padma Subrahmanya welcomed all

the participants to the camp and explained the role of daru-s in the Bhagavata Mela natya natakam-s. Natarajan gave a brief explanation about the two daru-s we were going to be taught.

The first class began at the temple. It was an extract from the Bhagavata Mela natakam *Sati Savitri* – a stotra daru on goddess Savitri in Saveri raga set to Adi tala. This daru, like the other bhagavata mela pieces, was composed by Melattur Venkatarama Sastri about 267 years ago. The class then moved out of the temple to the terrace of Natarajan's house where arrangements had been made to continue for the next four days.

Savitri sings *Nera nammitini neevay gatiyani* (Always I believe in You who are my sole protector). As Srikanth started demonstrating, the entire group fell into a hushed silence. We were transported back