

by 200 years. The intensity of the lyrics and the power of abhinaya on the dancer's face – pleading, staving, cajoling, appealing, demanding, and ultimately surrendering, all with one glance – would have made a rock melt!

Interesting facts about the usage of certain mudra-s unique to the Bhagavata Mela tradition were explained. We were made to understand that elaboration of an idea or sanchari was not restricted to one storyline alone, but encompassed a whole range of episodes and incidents from different bhagavata-s and purana-s. This means that neither the Bhagavata Mela artist nor the vocalist perform the lines to a set number of times. The line is repeated several times and ultimately ends when the artist begins the 'tattu mettu'. The arudi-s (finish) for the tattu mettu are also unique.

The Mahotsavam was inaugurated the same evening with a galaxy of dancers present. It was a dream come true for many of us to see some of the all time greats in the field of Bharatanatyam – Vyjayantimala Bali, Padma Subrahmanyam, Sudharani Raghupathy, and Chitra Visweswaran – together adorning the stage. After a brief inaugural speech, the much awaited *Prahlada Charitram* commenced. The crowd sat in awed silence as the drama unfolded for a full seven hours. Yes, seven hours of passionate performances by the dedicated group. 11-year old Tahlin from Bangalore as Prahlada impressed with his impeccable performance, araimandi and superb diction. Veterans like Natarajan, Kumar, and Ganesan, and the younger group led by N. Srikanth, Vijay Madhavan, Aravind, Sairam Santhanam and Venkat bowled us over with their single minded devotion. Finally when Narasimha emerged from

between the pillars, the crowd rose involuntarily with folded hands and bowed heads. What a night it was. Truly unforgettable!

Next day the workshop was scheduled for the afternoon. Each participant was asked to work and elaborate on the line taught the day before. Many interesting ideas came to the fore and all these were amalgamated into the song. It was a fantastic exercise in creativity that made the participants sit up and think.

The same evening we watched the dance-drama *Bhakta Sakha Vitthala* by Nrithyodaya, Mumbai – students of Dr. Jayashree Rajagopal. It was a riveting presentation of popular Marathi abhang-s which had the audience clapping and singing along, asking for more. The stories of Sant Gnaneswar, Namdev, Janabai, Chokki Mela, Eknath, Sakkubai and Tukaram came alive in a crisp and vivid manner.

Visit to heritage sites

On the third day, the ABHAI group

set out on a trip to heritage sites in Tanjavur, with president Dr. Padma Subrahmanyam as the guide. The first stop was the Brihadeeswara temple. Padma talked to us about each and every sculpture, carving, the architectural splendour and history of the Big Temple. Special darsan was arranged for us and special poojas were performed at the sanctum for Lord Brihadeeswara on behalf of the dance fraternity.

The next stop was at the Museum. The photographs of four great scholars responsible for the discovery of the rare sculptures and paintings were displayed – Prof. Nilakanta Sastri the pioneer of south Indian history, S. Paramasivan archaeological chemist, K.R. Srinivasan responsible for the archaeological conservation of the temple, and S.K. Govindasamy who discovered the Chola paintings and brought them to light.

Fibreglass replicas of the karana-s in the temple tower were displayed and Padma explained in great detail the way she had gone about unearthing

Inside the house of the Tanjavur Quartet

