

The Saliyamangalam Plays

Text and Photographs

by

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From the time it attained common recognition some 30 years ago, it has generally been held that the tradition of staging the sacred Bhagavata Mela plays, which are structured in the strict classical Bharata Natyam mould, is confined to only one place—the village of Melatur in the Tanjavur district. So much so, that, in some quarters, the tradition itself has come to be known as that of the Melatur Plays. That is because the foremost authorities and scholars in the field have continually harped on the Melatur theme, and others have found no reason to question this. Then, the leading master in the style, Balu Bhagavatar, now over 90 years of age, belongs to Melatur, and that has certainly lent an added lustre and stature to the place. The correct picture, however, has emerged only during the last five years or so, which discloses that the Bhagavata Mela practice well survives in two other villages as well—Saliyamangalam and Teperumanallur. The present article pertains to the tradition as it obtains in Saliyamangalam.

It may be recalled that the Bhagavata Mela Nataka art came into being about 400 years ago, under the patronage of the Telugu Nayak rulers of Tanjavur. The tradition took root in six villages, all in the district of Tanjavur—Melatur, Soolamangalam, Saliyamangalam, Oothakadu, Nallur and Teperumanallur and at each of these places the plays, written especially for the art, were staged once every year, on the occasion of Narasimha Jayanti, which is observed in May or June. None of the villages has maintained an unbroken tradition of presenting the plays, there having been both sporadic spurts of activity as well as long years of neglect. In recent times, the villages of Melatur, Saliyamangalam and Teperumanallur are known to have regularly offered the *Nataka-s*, as part of ordained worship, for around 40 years.

It is generally believed that the Bhagavata Mela tradition was initiated by Achyutappa Nayak, 1572—1614 A.D., who gifted a village to certain Brahmin families for the avowed purpose of promoting art and learning in general and the dance-drama tradition of the Bhagavatars in particular and that this village, then named after its benefactor, Achyutapuram, later came to be called Melatur. However, the people of Saliyamangalam maintain that Melatur was originally known as Unnatapuram and that it is their village that constitutes the endowment made by Achyutappa and which originally enjoyed the appellation Achyutapuram. To substantiate the claim, they refer to the invocatory song, handed down to them through several generations and sung even today at the local temple at the commencement of any event of marked religious significance. The song includes the telling words: *Achyutapuramuna Saliyamangala agraharamuna sutinampunanu.*

Saliyamangalam lies 15 kms. to the east of Tanjavur, on the Nagore line. The local temple is dedicated to Lord Srinivasa and his consorts Sridevi and Bhodevi, and this is the focal point of the celebrations. It is said that the inhabitants fled the place when it was attacked by Hyder Ali and his minions,

but, before leaving the village, they dislodged the idols from the temple and secreted them in a well, concealed inside the temple tank. Not very long ago, the idols were discovered, by accident, whereupon they were retrieved and reinstated in the temple.

It is commonly held that the plays enacted in Bhagavata Mela, in all the six village, are by Venkatarama Sastri of Melatur. But this theory has now been discarded. In Saliyamangalam, for example, the plays are by Bharatam Panchanatha Bhagavatar, who lived long before Venkatarama Sastri, and there are other authors to whom the plays are ascribed in the other villages. Five dance-dramas are attributed to Panchanatha Bhagavatar: *Prahlada Charitram*, *Rukmini Kalyanam*, *Sita Kalyanam*, *Rukmangda* and *Vipranarayana*. These are in Telugu—as indeed all Bhagavata Mela plays are—and they were composed at the time of Vijayaraghava of Tanjavur's Nayak dynasty. It is claimed that for a long time all the five plays were performed annually. However, while the other five villages followed the custom of staging the Bhagavata Mela plays only at the time of Narasimha Jayanti, at Saliyamangalam there were two occasions in the year for the presentation, Narasimha Jayanti and Rama Navami. Three of the plays were common to the two festivals while *Rukmini Kalyanam* used to be performed on Narasimha Jayanti and *Sita Kalyanam* on Rama Navami. From the time the three idols were taken away from the village, the staging of the plays on Rama Navami was discontinued. For many years now, for want of a sufficient number of participants as well as of funds, only two plays, *Prahlada Charitram* and *Rukmini Kalyanam*, are presented at the time of Narasimha Jayanti.

The festival being in honour of Narasimha, it is understandable that the leading play in the tradition, in all the villages, is *Prahlada Charitram*, and it is with this that the festival opens. In the climactic sequence of the play, a performer wearing a mask of Narasimha makes his appearance, and after confronting the atheist father of Prahlada, Hiranyakashipu, delivers an impassioned harangue during the course of which he works himself up to a pitch of uncontrollable frenzy, and invariably collapses. He is then accorded a lot of importance, with song and *arati*, or an offering of sacred light and incense, after which the play comes to a close. The mask of Narasimha in each village is a special one, and regular worship is offered to it by devotees. It is kept in the temple, where it is displayed prominently, except in the case of Saliyamangalam where it is part of the household shrine of a Bhagavatar and is offered adoration along with the idols of Rama, Sita and Lakshmana.

Before the presentation of *Prahlada Charitram* on the opening night at Saliyamangalam, images of the presiding deity Lord Srinivasa along with those of Sridevi and Bhoodevi are carried in procession around the village and then deposited on an altar which faces the stage specially erected for the event. Songs in praise of the deity called *tattuchutru* are sung by the Bhagavatars. *Arati* is offered to the deity by the performer privileged to take the role of Narasimha in the play.

The presentation begins with the Bhagavatars singing the *todayamangalam*, an invocation, as they proceed from the stage to where the deities rest, weaving a passage through the seated audience, and then return to the stage. This is



Every play opens with the appearance of a boy wearing the mask of Ganapati. An elder member of the group assists him in going through his paces.



Prahlada with his mother Lilavati in *Prahlada Charitram*.

followed by the dance of a small boy wearing the mask of Ganapati. As the play unfolds, each principal character is introduced after the singing of a *dwipada* or couplet, through which the appearance, attributes, temperament and so forth of the character are spelt out. Also, each character makes his or her appearance dancing to a *daru*, or song descriptive of the character. Most of the female characters adopt the *devadasi* mode in their costumes. The male characters wear pyjamas and knee-length coats or *dhoti*-s and some of them sport turbans.

In between sequences, the Bhagavatars sing songs to provide links to the story. A *sabdam*, which gives the kernel of the story, is offered before the commencement of the play proper and, while the Bhagavatars sing the lines, the *sutradhara*, or conductor renders *abhinaya* for them. Likewise, there are specially composed songs to preface key situations in the unfolding of a story, such as the *sthambha stotra* sung by Prahlada, just prior to the splitting of the *sthambha*, or pillar, and the emergence of Narasimha in *Prahlada Charitram*. These *sabdam*-s, *stotram*-s and the like, it is to be noted, are compositions outside the text of the play and are superb pieces, both poetically and musically, and constitute a feature exclusive to Saliyamangalam. Formerly, the main characters of the drama were portrayed by persons belonging to only certain families who had what may be called a hereditary right to the roles. The practice has now ceased, except in the case of Narasimha which role continues to be played only by individuals from a particular family.

On the day prior to Narasimha Jayanti, the *shakti* or 'energy' believed to be inherent in the mask of Narasimha is transferred temporarily, through certain ceremonies and rites, to holy water kept in a pot. The mask is then dislodged, washed and repainted. All this is done in secrecy, for great sanctity is attached to the proceedings. In the evening, elaborate rituals known as *pranapratishtha*, *sahasranamarchana* and *deeparadhana* are performed by a large gathering. The power of Narasimha is again transferred to the mask. No such practice is followed in any of the other villages.

The play begins at about 10 at night and Narasimha makes his appearance around 4.30 the following morning. It is ensured that the manifestation of Narasimha coincides, as advised in religious lore, with the time when it is neither night nor day. The makeshift stage erected for the play is quickly dismantled and two wooden cut-outs representing a pillar are planted in position. The man playing Narasimha, who is generally already in a state of semi-trance, is brought behind the pillar. At the appointed time and, to the accompaniment of clamorous music and chanting and fireworks, the pillar splits open and Narasimha emerges in all his glory and fury. Nothing of this kind is found in any of the other villages.

Another unusual feature in Saliyamangalam is that in *Rukmini Kalyanam*, when the presentation is over in the morning, two young boys, who are in no way connected with the play, are dressed up as Krishna and Rukmini and their marriage is performed. They are then taken in a procession round the village to the accompaniment of music and song. They are received at each house by the male members of the family who wash their feet as also those of the escorting Bhagavatars and then sprinkle the resultant water, considered holy, on themselves as well as on their family members. Women of the house offer candy, betel leaf, plantains and camphor to the two and also perform *arati*.

If the tradition of Bhagavata Mela today survives at Saliyamangalam, the credit for this is due, in no small measure, to D. Sethuramayyar who died about 25 years ago. He came of the line of Panchanatha Bhagavata, the author of the Saliyamangalam plays. A keen musician and scholar, Sethuramayyar composed about 100 *kirtanam*-s which carry his *mudra* 'Achyutapuram' and also wrote an abridged version of the *Ramayana* in Telugu. After him, the responsibility of continuing the Bhagavata Mela tradition is being shouldered by his sons S. Raghavan and S. Srinivasan, who play the part of Hiranyakashipu and his wife Lilavati respectively in *Prahlada Charitram*. S. Raghavan retired as a Station Superintendent in Southern Railway while S. Srinivasan is presently an Income Tax Officer in Cuddalore, near Madras. Which is just as well, for not even a single actor-dancer in Bhagavata Mela, in all the privileged villages, is or has been a professional artiste, a fact which endorses the claim that the art is performed not by way of entertainment but as a moral obligation hallowed by usage.
