

Moving depiction of biography

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THEATRE

TANGUTURI PRAKASAM Pantulu, the first Chief Minister of the Andhra State at the time of re-organisation of States on linguistic basis, was the most revered leader and is still cherished for his selfless service.

To rewind his story and present it in a concise form of a biographical stage play is not an easy task. Yet, Moulali Nagabhushana Sarma, former head of the Theatre Department of Osmania University and a playwright, ventured to present Prakasam's tumultuous life from his childhood till his death in 1957.

Sarma says that he tried to dwell more on the human aspect of the leader in his play. The focus was on the dramatic episodes relating to the leader's tryst with destiny. Sarma wrote the play a year ago, but it saw the light only last week, when noted theatrical unit, Rasaranjani, staged the production at Rayudra Bharati, commemorating the leader's 120th birth anniversary.

The production had in its cast nearly 50 artistes. Obviously, it needed a lot of co-ordination and team work.

The unit also sought the services of the professional Surabhi theatre group for technical and artistic assistance. Child artistes belonging to Surabhi were also featured. This was a big exercise and the play was staged on three consecutive nights.

The theme has been culled out of Prakasam's autobiography, "Naa Jeevitha Yatra". The role of the teenage Prakasam was played by

Hema Manasa while N Jagga Rao figured as the youthful Prakasam, till he completed law in London. Veteran theatre personality, Chatla Sriramulu played the leader's crucial political part.

The play opened with a glimpse of an elderly Prakasam (Chatla) addressing a crowd (offstage), announcing his decision to join politics, relinquishing his highly remunerative legal profession. As Prakasam goes back into his past, the scene was frozen and a flashback of his childhood show. A projection on a small screen gave the time and the location of the acts. The poverty-ridden family with Prakasam's mother Subbamma (Burra Subrahmanyam), a widow, trying to get her children educated with her small earnings, opened this part.

The scenes depicted Prakasam's childhood, his penchant for stage plays and some adventures. His brilliance in studies, always standing first in his class was narrated through the character of a teacher and Prakasam's mentor, Hanumantha Rao Naidu. Prakasam's theatrical skills are depicted in a back stage scene showing him play the role of Abhimanyu in a Mahabharata play. The manner in which Abhimanyu is cornered and killed by the Kauravas in Padmayubani, is suggestive of what really happened to Prakasam during the twilight of his political career when some of his own colleagues ditched him.

The important episodes included the way Prakasam's teacher Hanumantha Rao Naidu treated him like his son, Prakasam's shift from Ongole to Rajahmundry where he

became the youngest Chairman of the Municipality, his urge to study law, the death of his mother, the successful efforts to go to London to study law and how on his return the local orthodoxy try to outcaste him. The call of Lala Lalpath Rai urging him to join the main stream of freedom fighters, Simon's visit and more importantly the way Prakasam bared his chest during the gun fire of British police during an agitation, an act which earned him the title of 'Andhra Kesari', are all depicted.

The second part is all political drama, commencing with Prakasam being elected as the Premier of the composite Madras State between 1946 and '47. The play brought to the fore a number of erstwhile political leaders including Rajaji (Mutnuri Kameswara Rao), Kamaraja Nadar (T. V. Saryanarayana), Konda Venkatappayya (M. Anjaneyulu), Tenneti Viswanatham (V. S. Prakasa Rao), V. V. Giri (Garimella Hanamurthy), N. G. Ranga (N. L. Narasinga Rao), Pattabhi (Goparaju Ramana) and others, in the political drama surrounding Prakasam almost till his death. The letters that were exchanged between Mahatma Gandhi and Prakasam with the former appreciating Prakasam's initiative to introduce Gram Swaraj system as envisaged by Mahatma, were also part of this drama.

The last scenes showed Prakasam's dispute with Rajaji over some disturbing issues, his attempt to abolish Zamindari system, his dispute with Andhra leaders like Pattabhi and his struggle to get Chennaitnam into the proposed formation of

Andhra State during its reorganisation. The play ended with his death in 1957, showing him symbolically walking up the Himalayas, with the help of suggestive back projection effects.

Sarma was also the director of the production and tried his best to shed the possible documentary touch. All the sequences were impressively dramatised and the experienced artistes gave neat performances. Among them, Burra Subrahmanyam stole the limelight playing the role of Prakasam's mother, depicting aptly the concern of a mother for the welfare of her children, not to forget the scenes of her death. With a paltry sum, she saved and handed over to her son before she died, Prakasam launched a paper 'Swarajya'. All the sequences were movingly presented.

Chatla Sriramulu as the elderly Prakasam put in his best efforts to live the role. Duggirala Someswara Rao, Nadiminti Jagga Rao, Kramadhathi Venkateswara Sarma as poet Chilakamarthi also impressed. Surabhi Shyamala appeared as Tanguturi Suryakumari, Prakasam's niece. All these roles were brief but effective. The director succeeded in projecting various angles of Prakasam's personality, as the man who lived for the country and died for it. Music score was limited to a couple of verses and songs, including 'Maa Telugu Talliki', rendered by the artiste in Suryakumari's role.

The play will be staged again in September, on three consecutive evenings.

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